

Josip Broz Tito - Personal Experiences

The sixth EUSTORY History Competition in Serbia - *MEETING THE PAST 2009/2010* was launched in October 2010. under the topic "Josip Broz Tito - Personal Experiences". While choosing the topic, organizer of EUSTORY competition in Serbia - The Association for Social History-EUROCLIO - was led by the idea that the year 2010 is the 30th anniversary of the death of Josip Broz, former president of SFR Yugoslavia. Therefore we made this historical event the key stone of this round of EUSTORY competition in Serbia, hoping it will enable us to check what young generations, born long after Tito's time, think about that period of our mutual past. We invited high school students, aged 15-19, to research and reflect on phenomenon of personality cult, the new type of political leadership that strongly influenced history of some European countries in the 20th century, among which was Yugoslavia as well. The task for the students was to find a person or persons who participated in some manifestation of personality cult of Josip Broz Tito, to interview them and to make a puzzle by putting those personal experiences into a broader context. We expected students to compare those impressions of ordinary people with the official image of marshal Tito, the one that was made at the highest level and spread downwards by means of propaganda, film, education... To what extent that image was accepted? Why was it so important to keep such an image? Can the traces of personality cult be seen nowadays?

Although we had 203 registered papers, we actually received only 51 contributions. Among the authors, there were 22 boys and 29 girls. They all came from 33 schools all over Serbia, and were mentored by 38 teachers. The most common topic students were dealing with was the manifestation of Tito's Baton or Youth Baton - mass public event in which young men and women took turns in carrying a specially designed baton, from one place to another across the country, carrying birthday wishes for "comrade Tito". Students were looking for the personality cult by analyzing memories and impressions of those who were carrying the baton as well as those who participated in The Youth Day Celebration, mass manifestation organized every year on May 25th as a celebration of Tito's birthday. Also, there were lot of manifestations organized in the days prior to the funeral and the funeral itself, so our students focused on individuals who participated in those events as well. As the final result, we received a lot of interesting personal experiences but, unfortunately, not much on the personality cult of Josip Broz Tito. Only few papers were really good research papers and fully met our expectations. Because of that and because such a small number of received papers, this year we awarded only four authors and commended seven more. These eleven students we invited to the award ceremony, that was held in The Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade, on May 29th.

EUSTORY History Competition in Serbia - MEETING THE PAST 2009/2010. Narrative Report on the Competition

We were very unpleasantly surprised by such a small number of papers. While analyzing the results we talked to teachers and to jury members, who this year, for the first time, had a chance to read and evaluate all papers. It turned out that young generation have very strong and, in great number of cases, very negative attitude towards Josip Broz Tito and the socialist period of our past. That attitude is not based on facts and knowledge, but on emotions and experiences of older generations, their parents, relatives and general public opinion. Instead of being critical - or, at least, try to be critical - towards the phenomenon of personality cult, our young authors simply transmitted the opinions of others. Apart from just a few exceptions, this stands for those who manage to finish their researches and submit the papers. According to teachers accounts, among the high school student population there is a great number of those who didn't want to deal with the topic at all, because they already "hate Tito". Although it wasn't expected at all, it seems that the topic, itself, was the reason for such a reduction in number and in quality of papers as well. Not because the topic and the task were too difficult or not well explained, but because students were biased and not interested.

Feeling quite defeated by all this, we decided to invite our awardees to think about the impacts that such situation might have for the future. On May 29th they spent the day in The Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade, trying to find the way to beat the stereotypes and prejudices in a society, especially among their peers. They concluded that knowledge and education should play the crucial role and they recognize museums as places where learning history is not only possible, but interesting as well. Our awardees prepared a short video and addressed it to their peers, sending them a very clear message: it is not possible to have an opinion about events and persons from the past, without knowing historical facts and data about them. That is why we have to learn and to know history. This video was shown to the public during the formal part of the award ceremony, in the afternoon at the same day. Our awardees also handed over to the Museum their papers as a gift and a sort of testimony on how the phenomenon of personality cult of Josip Broz Tito is viewed thirty years later.

Although this year's competition topic was not that interesting to the high school students, it was very interesting to the media. Both, ASH-EUROCLIO as the organizer and the Competition itself gained a lot of media attention. Starting from February 2010 we had the announcements and interviews on the Competition in different printing media (newspapers and weekly magazines); we were also guests in two radio shows on different radio stations, one of which was The Radio Belgrade 1. The Serbian Radio Television (RTS), the main media service in the country, prepared two contributions for its evening and morning news. One was broadcasted in April and the other in May. Together with another TV station, B92, they covered the award ceremony as well, interviewed some awardees and talked to the organizers and both broadcasted their material in their evening news on the same day.

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