Review

by **Prof. Dr. Panayot Karagyozov,**

Member of the Dissertation Committee of

Nedialko Radostinov Zhelev

" 20th Century Wars – Novelistic Interpretations in Post-1989 Slavic Literatures "

Candidate Information

Nedialko Zhelev is a graduate of the Faculty of Slavic Philology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," where he obtained a Master's degree in Slavic and Bulgarian Studies in 2018. During his studies, he specialized at the universities of Zagreb and Ljubljana, and as a full-time doctoral student (since 2019), he spent one semester in Croatia under the Erasmus program. Zhelev has participated in several international academic conferences and has three publications on the topic of his dissertation in peer-reviewed volumes.

Public Defense Procedure

The dissertation has been reviewed and recommended for public defense by the Department of Slavic Literatures at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." The attached documents required for initiating the procedure confirm that Nedialko Zhelev meets the scientometric criteria for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor." The dissertation, *"20th Century Wars – Novelistic Interpretations in Post-1989 Slavic Literatures,"* comprises 280 computer-typed pages, including a 10-page bibliography citing over a hundred sources in Bulgarian, English, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Polish, and German. The work consists of an introduction, four chapters (divided into multiple subchapters), a conclusion, and a bibliography. The accompanying 50-page abstract adequately and comprehensively reflects the content of the original dissertation.

Research Context

Wars have accompanied human civilization from its inception to the present day. The 17th century is traditionally considered the "century of wars" in Europe, with only seven years of peace. However, the bloodiest period in world history is undoubtedly the 20th century, during which all Slavic nations were involved in military conflicts to varying degrees. This century began with the Balkan Wars and the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and ended with the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1996), again in the same region. Military conflicts continue to this day, with the

ongoing war in Ukraine as a contemporary example. The 20th century is marked by significant geopolitical transformations—from the formation of ethnic and multiethnic state entities after World War I to the peaceful or violent dissolution of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia at the century's close. As at the beginning, so at the end of the 20th century, the Balkans remain Europe's "powder keg," periodically igniting latent ethnic and religious tensions. The gunshots of Gavrilo Princip and Ramiz Delalić (during a Serbian wedding) turned Sarajevo into a trigger-topos for a chain of bloodshed, much of which is the subject of the reviewed dissertation.

Focus and Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation examines the phenomenon of war and the literary interpretations of 20th-century military conflicts in South and West Slavic novels published after the pivotal year of 1989. Its empirical scope includes 24 novels by 21 authors, among them Olga Tokarczuk, Slavenka Drakulić, Alek Popov, and Zachary Karabashliev. The study presents a large-scale interdisciplinary analysis encompassing the causes, preparation, participants, institutions, course, and consequences of wars. Vuk Drašković, Olga Tokarczuk, and Zachary Karabashliev incorporate multiple wars into their works, while most authors focus on a single conflict. Alek Popov's novel *"The Palaveev Sisters in the Storm of History"* explores the partisan war in Bulgaria, expanding the scope beyond classical interstate conflicts.

Methodological Framework

The core of the dissertation consists of two theoretical and two analytical chapters. *"The Psychology of War"* examines extraliterary concepts of war, while *"War Writing"* outlines the methodological framework for literary analysis. The chapter *"Narrative Models"* provides a retrospective and analyzes the narrative techniques employed, while *"Thematic Dominants in War Novels"* interprets the content.

Description of the content

The first chapter, *"The Psychology of War,"* examines extraliterary concepts regarding the nature of war and the mechanisms of its occurrence. The dissertation traces the algorithm of war, beginning with the school system, which, through its established hierarchy and discipline, resembles military barracks. An intriguing perspective is the interpretation of war as a theatrical performance, where key elements such as the stage, backstage, actors, and audience emerge. In this *"war play,"* consisting of phases of preparation, action, climax, and epilogue, a small number of protagonists set an example for the masses, who follow and imitate them. Zhelev categorizes

the main protagonists as political leaders, ideologists, commanders-in-chief, and war heroes, while the masses include officers, soldiers, and civilians. The figure of the hero holds significant propagandistic importance. Zhelev emphasizes that parenthood ensures the reproduction of individuals, whereas heroism inscribes individuals into history. The dissertation highlights the paradox that *"committing atrocities is the only way to achieve immortality and attain the status of a hero."*

In the subchapter *"The Destruction of Evil: We – the Good, They – the Evil,"* the motivation of future war heroes for achieving *"self-perpetuation"* is further explored. The primary justification for this is the hyperbolization of the enemy's evil and the indulgence that *"the eradication of evil should be exempt from punishment."* The leader plays a crucial role, embodying the functions of scriptwriter, director, and actor – unifying the theatrical collective and inciting it against the opposing group. Zhelev aligns with Hanna Segal's view that *"Unstable leaders are the product of groups that have nurtured their delusions of grandeur and propelled them toward an ever-growing pursuit of omnipotence."* Particularly relevant to contemporary times is the subchapter *"Instilling Aggression or Other Methods of Manipulation,"* which unveils the invisible actors in the theater of war. It poses the question: *"Is aggression, inherent in every individual, the primary driver of war, or is its existence artificially imposed for manipulative purposes?"* – thus preparing the reader for the literary analysis in the dissertation. Zhelev notes that uniformity through military attire is preceded by the unification of consciousness within specific groups, sometimes entire nations. The strengthening of muscles is preceded by manipulative suggestions that a man's strength is fueled by the collective, and that native women (lovers, wives, mothers) can encourage men's participation in war, while foreign women serve as *"objects"* for proving masculinity – the most striking literary example being Slavenka Drakulić's novel *"As If I Am Not There."*

The chapter *"War Writing"* serves as the bridge between the theoretical framework of the study and the specific literary material. In it, Zhelev retrospectively examines the specifics and evolution of war narratives. Without arriving at a definitive definition, he presents various perspectives on the essence of war writing and what qualifies as *War Writing*. He discusses the balance between (auto)biographical and fictional elements in terms of authenticity and artistic value, questioning when and how a military event should be literarily recreated. Zhelev explores different approaches to processing war trauma through literary catharsis, concluding that *"the way a war is perceived determines the type of literature that will be written about it."* He highlights the

contemporary shift in focus from soldiers on the battlefield and military actions to indirect participants in war, such as women and children. With the increasing presence of female writers in the traditionally male-dominated field of war literature, non-witness narratives have become more prevalent.

In *"Key Characteristics of War Novels,"* Zhelev examines types of authors and works. Over time, the witness perspective has become dominant, with amateur writers debuting in this style, shaping two narrative models: historical and autobiographical. He succinctly differentiates them: *"While biographical war novels focus solely on the 'during' period, the historical type attempts to provide a broader perspective on the entire picture."*

The third chapter specifies and analyzes narrative types within the outlined historical and autobiographical models, demonstrating that they rarely appear in pure form. Instead, postmodern tendencies – hybridity, fragmentation, intertextuality, and even elements of fantasy – prevail in literary works after 1989. Narrative techniques intertwine epistolary, diary, childlike, and other perspectives. Zhelev notes that many authors employ multiple narrative approaches and categorizes the examined novels accordingly.

Historical and epic narration is illustrated through Vuk Drašković's novels *"Alexander of Yugoslavia"* (2018) and *"Both Grave and Slave"* (2020). Although their events are distant from contemporary times, they are directly linked to the late 20th century. Moreover, they were written and published about twenty years after the Yugoslav conflicts ended. These novels depict the failed ambitions of King Alexander and Marshal Tito to permanently unify their subjects, concluding: *"One buries the past, while the other carries the idea of a bright future."*

Zhelev classifies historiographical, diary, and witness narratives through the works of Bosnian authors Ivica Đikić (*"Beara: A Documentary Novel on the Genocide in Srebrenica,"* 2016) and Emir Suljagić (*"Postcard from the Grave,"* 2005), Serbian writer Jasmina Tešanović (*"Scorpions – The Design of Crime,"* 2009), and Croatian author Ratko Cvetnić (*"A Brief Excursion: Notes from the Croatian War of Independence,"* 1997). All four writers were direct witnesses to the fratricidal conflicts they depict in diary form. The first three novels focus on the Srebrenica massacre, while Cvetnić humorously recounts his experiences as a volunteer in the Serbian-Croatian war. Zhelev deliberately selects authors from three different ethnic backgrounds, united by their narrative form and detachment from their ethnic origins.

For *"Experimental Chronicle and Alternative Reality,"* Zhelev selects novels by West Slavic authors: *"Lala"* (2006) by Polish writer Jacek Dehnel, *"Europeana: A Brief History of the 20th Century"* (2001) by Czech writer Patrik Ouředník, and *"Ice"* (2007) by Polish writer Jacek Dukaj. These authors innovate war writing by offering unconventional alternative interpretations of 20th-century European wars, merging genealogical trees and family chronicles with historical cyclicality.

In *"Coming of Age or the Child's Encounter with War,"* Zhelev examines the severed connection between children and parents and the depiction of war tragedies through a child's perspective, using a mix of South and West Slavic novels: *"Hotel Tito"* (2010) by Croatian writer Ivana Simić Bodrožić, *"Yugoslavia, My Country"* (2012) by Slovenian writer Goran Vojnović, and *"Through the Cold Land"* (2009) by Czech writer Jáchym Topol. Like in the Andersen's tale *"The Emperor's New Clothes,"* children are the most perceptive of familial, ethnic, linguistic, and social issues.

"The Syndrome of the War Family" naturally transitions into *"War Seen from a Female Perspective,"* one of the dissertation's most compelling sections – not only because it discusses novels by the most renowned authors selected by Zhelev, but because these are books written by women, for women. Olga Tokarczuk's *"Primeval and Other Times"* (1996), Slavenka Drakulić's *"As If I Am Not There"* (1999), and Bianca Bellová's *"Mona"* (2019) offer a distinctly female (not merely maternal) perspective on war. They introduce female psychology, highlight the loss of identity caused by war, and explore the use of masks and makeup as a means of *"disarming"* the aggressor – or, as Zhelev formulates it, *"Playing with the enemy involves stripping them of their ability to humiliate."*

Zhelev's observations are original, noting that during war, astronomical time slows down, transforming into timelessness and a *"vacuum state."* He distinguishes between two novelistic perspectives: the hypothetical female and the real male.

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The final chapter, *Thematic Dominants in War Novels*, categorizes the previously analyzed novels based on their predominant themes. In the subsection *The Significance of the Leader – Mythologization and Demythologization of the Figure*, King Alexander is compared to General Boris Drangov from Zachary Karabashliev's novel *Rana* (2023). While these two leaders serve as

role models and objects of mythologization, in Alek Popov's *The Palaveev Sisters in the Storm of History* (2013), the leader and heroes are demythologized and deheroized, and the war novel genre itself is parodied. In *A Brief Excursion: Records from the Croatian War of Independence*, R. Cvetnić goes even further, subjecting South Slavic nationalists to irony.

War equalizes and transforms all involved into "damaged people." The trauma of war is difficult to overcome, and "its damage is so extensive that it marks more than one generation." Thus, both war and its traumas become cyclical. It is not people who choose war; rather, war drags both soldiers and civilians into its meat grinder. With each new turn, the spiral shaft of this grinder pulls in yet another lost generation. Zhelev concludes that "all war paths lead to the same place – the cemetery," and that "the absurdity of war lies in humanity's inability to prevent its recurrence."

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Criticism and Recommendations

The dissertation successfully integrates primary and secondary literature, contributing to its structural and analytical coherence. However, the lack of theoretical references in a significant portion of the third chapter is surprising and poses some questions. .

In terms of suggestions, I recommend the inclusion of Georgi Bardarov's novel *I Still Count the Days* (2016), which is set in the longest siege in modern military history that of Sarajevo (a 1,423-day blockade resulting in over 11,000 casualties).. The novel is particularly relevant because

the tragically murdered “Bosnian Romeo and Juliet" are not direct participants in the war but rather its innocent and senseless victims.

Contributions and Significance

. The phenomenon of war is thoroughly discussed from both theoretical and literary perspective. Nedyalko Zhelev has examined and presented, in an accessible manner, the the war studies of numerous psychologists, psychoanalysts, theorists, anthropologists, literary critics, and writersThe researcher provides essential contextual information about the analyzed novels, which he skillfully explores, compares, and categorizes. The transitions between chapters, subchapters, and paragraphs are smooth, and the well-integrated quotations contribute to the text’s overall coherence. A distinctive feature of the dissertation’s analytical approach is the placement of key arguments and observations at the beginning of each chapter or subchapter.Particularly impressive is the presentation of the "algorithm of war," which begins with the school system – whose hierarchical discipline resembles a military structure – and ends with the theater of war, likened to a traveling theatrical troupe where roles are clearly assigned and delineated. To the modestly outlined contributions in the dissertation’s conclusion, I would add the following:

- Zhelev provides a panoramic overview of 20th-century military conflicts, with a special focus on the participation of Slavic nations.
- A significant portion of the analyzed novels is dedicated to the wars in former Yugoslavia. Due to the short temporal distance between these fratricidal conflicts and their literary representation, many of the dissertation’s conclusions are pioneering.
- Through carefully selected novels, the researcher illuminates how unresolved ethnic and religious tensions in the Balkans cyclically escalate, culminating in the wars between Serbs and Croats, Slovenes, and Bosnians.
- Although the dissertation discusses novels about the Balkan Wars, World War I, and World War II, a substantial portion of Zhelev’s selected works depict the Yugoslav Wars of the late 20th century – an area with little to no prior scholarly attention, positioning the Bulgarian researcher among the pioneers in this field.
- From Homer’s *Iliad* to the present day, countless pages have been written about war. However, Zhelev’s study offers a fresh perspective: unlike classic war novelists such as E. M. Remarque, E. Hemingway, L. Stoyanov, and P. Voranc – whose works predominantly focus on combat and the personal experiences of direct participants – this dissertation shifts

the emphasis to those indirectly affected by war: medical personnel, children, wives, and mothers of soldiers.

- Among Zhelev's research findings is the established correlation between the timing of a military event and its literary representation. Notably, he observes that "In writing fiction about the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, one can trace several phases: from the initial 'silence' and lack of literary production […] through a diary-confessional format to novels incorporating elements of fiction."

Zhelev's dissertation shows that literature and literary studies can not only respond to contemporary issues but also anticipate the findings of political science and sociology—and even propose solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I affirm that the dissertation *20th Century Wars– Novelistic Interpretations in Post-1989 Slavic Literatures* possesses all the necessary qualities of a successful academic study. Thus, I will confidently vote in favor of granting a Doctoral degree to its author, Nedyalko Radostinov Zhelev.

Panayot Karagyozov

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