REVIEW

Dissertation for the degree of Doctor (PhD) in the field of higher education 2.1. Philology, Doctoral Program "Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia" /History of Slavic Literatures/
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
Faculty of Slavic Studies, Department of Slavic Literatures
on the subject:

"THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WARS – NOVEL INTERPRETATIONS IN SLAVIC LITERATURES AFTER 1989"

by the candidate **Nedyalko Radostinov Zhelev**

1. Details of the applicant

Nedyalko Radostinov Zhelev graduated from secondary school in Chirpan, where he studied English and German at an advanced level. From 2011 to 2016, he studied Slavic Studies at Sofia University. From 2016 to 2017, he participated in the Erasmus+ programme, first at the University of Zagreb and then at the University of Ljubljana, where he obtained certificates in Croatian and Slovenian.

In 2016, he graduated with a Master's degree in Slavic Studies (Serbian and Croatian language and literature) and Bulgarian Studies from the Faculty of Slavonic Philology, while also obtaining a diploma in Slovenian language and a theoretical course in the linguistic realities of Slovenia.

Since 2019, he has been a PhD candidate in the History of Slavic Literatures at the Faculty of Slavic Studies. From 2020 to 2021, he was a PhD candidate on the Erasmus+ programme at the University of Zagreb. From 2014 to 2017, he was a fellow at the Summer Seminar for Foreign Bulgarian and Slavic Studies at Sofia University's Faculty of Slavic Studies.

In 2024, he was appointed as a Career Development Specialist at the Faculty, where he has also been teaching History of Slavic Literatures and Slavic Literatures as a lecturer since the same year.

2. Details regarding the PhD programme

Nedyalko Zhelev has been a PhD candidate in the Department of Slavic Studies at Sofia University's Faculty of Slavic Studies since 2019. By Order No. RD-38-203/11.04.2025 of the Rector of Sofia University, the procedure for defending his dissertation, 'The Twentieth Century Wars: Novel Interpretations in Slavic Literatures after 1989', was initiated. The originality check of the dissertation found no evidence of unauthorised use of foreign texts, and the scientific supervisor, Associate Professor Dr Ani Burova, found no signs of plagiarism, giving grounds to admit the work to defence.

The same order by the Rector appointed me as a member of the Scientific Jury for the award of the scientific and educational degree of Doctor (PhD), and according to Sofia University regulations, I was appointed as one of the dissertation reviewers.

3. Details regarding the Dissertation and abstract

The 280-page dissertation, 'The Twentieth Century Wars: Novel Interpretations in Slavic Literatures after 1989', is equivalent to 397 standard pages. It is structured into four chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The extensive bibliography is divided into fiction literature and non-fiction literature and contains 150 sources in English, German, and several Slavic languages. The abstract accurately summarizes the thesis and provides an excellent overview of its main points.

The study focuses on war fiction in Slavic literatures, aiming to summarize the anthropological and artistic experiences of war and analyze similar processes and phenomena before, during, and after the two world wars. Numerous works of Slavic literatures were drawn upon in the course of the analysis, and the dissertation adopted a thematic approach to its research methodology. The thesis pays special attention to recurring phenomena, motifs and images in literature since 1989. Given the substantial amount of material under consideration, including the two Balkan Wars, the two World Wars, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the thesis primarily contributes by comparing a large body of narrative texts, significantly enriching the field of contemporary literary comparative studies.

In the introduction, the author presents the main objectives of his research, its methodology and scope. The author explains that the thematic approach was chosen to achieve the study's aims: analyzing military fiction to find answers about the reasons for interest in and choice of genres, building a profile of authors, and attempting to derive the aims behind the production of this type of literature. In relation to the task of comparing similar processes and phenomena in Slavic war literature, the analysis draws on texts from the Czech, Polish, Bulgarian and former Yugoslav literatures. These texts are analyzed comparatively using an interdisciplinary approach that combines the expertise of cultural studies, sociology and psychoanalysis.

The study exclusively considers works created after 1989. Of particular interest are the narrative models employed in this literature. The study focuses on works that interpret and make sense of the wars of the 20th century, as well as the relationship between author, creation and fact. The author hypothesises that new war fiction appearing after 1989 shows significant differences from previous works, particularly in its rejection of unambiguous ideological suggestions and reduction of political functions. The work of various post-Yugoslavian authors, including Vuk Drašković, Ivica Djikić, Emir Sulyagić, Jasmin Tesšanović, Ivana Simić Bodrožić, Slavenka Drakulić and Goran Vojnović, as well as Polish authors Jacek Dukaj, Olga Tokarczuk and Jacek Dehnel, and Czech authors Jaroslav Rudiš, Bianca Bellová and Patrick Ourednik, is used to demonstrate different narrative techniques. While not exhaustive, the dissertation provides a comprehensive and well-systematized analysis of 24 novels, offering a thorough overview of contemporary military fiction.

The first chapter, 'The Psychology of War', provides an introductory theoretical overview. It is divided into four subchapters which deal with the fear of death, heroic acts, the various manipulative strategies employed by ideologues of warfare and aggressive practices. The dissertation draws on numerous studies by psychoanalysts, cultural anthropologists and cultural studies scholars who have examined the effects of the two world wars on individuals. Interpretations of psychological experiences of war, trauma and bereavement aim to lay the groundwork for analytical observations of specific works of art.

The second chapter, 'Writing about War', focuses on the various narrative techniques used to describe war and is primarily theoretical in nature. Three subchapters

deal with personality and authorship (witnesses, journalists, correspondents, doctors, nurses and women's fiction), the main characteristics of war novels and their functions and purposes. As the author states, one of the objectives is to present the challenges of writing about war and to develop a profile of the writer while identifying the primary themes in fictional novels (p. 55).

Chapters three and four present the analytical work on prose about the war.

Chapter Three, 'Narrative Patterns', presents the major types of poetics in five subchapters: 1.) Historical and Epic Narrative; 2) Historiographical, Diarist and Testimonial Narrative; 3) Experimental Chronicling and Alternate Reality; 4) The child's view of war in coming-of-age fiction; and 5) The woman's view of war.

Even from the initial analyses in this chapter, it is evident how successfully they are placed in the context of the theorizations of the previous part of the thesis. The author provides detailed information about the content of the novelists' works, which is often overlooked by contemporary literary scholars. However, it is evident that the author is aware that the study's hypotheses are better argued in this way, which enriches the critical reception of foreign fiction and becomes a kind of catalyst for translated reception. This chapter reinforces the impression of the author's scholarly refinement and linguistic skill, further evident in the excellent translations of the included fiction excerpts. From an analytical perspective, the skill of interpretation and presentation of rich artistic material not yet translated in Bulgaria are valuable. Alongside Vuk Drašković, the chapter features the works of post-Yugoslav authors such as Ivica Djikić, Emir Sulyagić and Jasmin Tešanović, as well as the contributions of Czech writer Patrik Ouředník and his Polish counterparts Jacek Dukaj and Jacek Denel. Another valuable aspect of this chapter is its exploration of the child's perception of war and the role of the mother in such situations, as depicted in the novels of Jacim Topol, Ivana Šimić Bodrozic, and Goran Vojnović. This subchapter continues with the female perspective, presented through the novels of Olga Tokarczuk, Slavenka Drakulić and Bianka Belova.

Chapter Four is focused on the 'Dominant Themes in the Novels about War'. It presents the mythologizations and demythologizations of leadership, various manipulative strategies and the cyclical nature of military conflict throughout history and literature. Particular attention is given to comparing pre- and post-1989 war narrative models in light of the poetic shift that has occurred. In his analysis of certain thematic complexes, Nedyalko Zhelev revisits works discussed in the previous chapter while also introducing new ones, such as the Croatian works of Jurica Pavičić and Josip Mladić, as well as contemporary Bulgarian literature by authors like Zahari Karabashliev and Alek Popov. This broadens the scope of the comparative literary analysis.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research, reiterating the motivation behind the choice of topic and object of analysis: to identify the causes and mechanisms of war, ways of responding to and coping with traumatic experiences, and issues of responsibility and war crimes.

4. Scientific contributions of the dissertation

After providing a brief overview of the dissertation's content, we will move on to discussing the merits of the research.

Nedyalko Zhelev's dissertation, 'The Wars of the Twentieth Century: Novel Interpretations in Slavic Literatures after 1989', is undoubtedly an original scientific study with clearly identifiable merits. What is impressive in the context of contemporary dissertation research is not only the author's interest in this topical and complex issue,

which is also evident in similar contemporary works, but also the wide range of issues and the substantial amount of material analysed. The comparison between the two world wars and the wars that followed the collapse of the Yugoslav federation provides the author with a rich palette of possibilities, which he makes good use of. A variety of narrative choices, points of view and assessments are presented here. Interest in psychological and sociological analyses of military reality enriches the Slavic and Balkan experience by providing a comparative global perspective. In this way, the study deepens its literary profile on the one hand, and on the other hand provides numerous thematic, typological, and narrative examples from an interdisciplinary perspective.

An important contribution of the work is the fact that is offers diverse perspectives on the dramatic events of the wars. As the author points out, there are different narrative models, voices and strategies. This diversity is due to their formation in heterogeneous national, cultural and social environments, depending on the goals set. The notion of the war narrative deepens considerably when these are considered alongside the differences generated by generational literary choices. Regarding the selection of works, informed readers may question the omission of some notable post-1989 works on the war. The study might have been enriched by including or at least mentioning authors such as Dobrica Ćosić, Bora Ćosić, Vidosav Stevanović, Milenko Jergović, Drago Jančar and Dubravka Ugrešić. However, it should be reiterated that the dissertation is indeed very voluminous in its current form, and the author successfully fulfils the objectives of the study through the analysis of the readings. In this regard, a notable contribution of the dissertation is the inclusion of works presented to the Bulgarian audience for the first time. This adds new names to the already well-known and established ones, whose critical reception would provoke a translated reception.

In the thematic scope of the study, it is crucial to address the subject of Srebrenica, alongside the issues of genocide and war crimes, from both an artistic narrative perspective and personal testimony. In the context of the concentration camp experience of Bolshevik terror, the Holocaust, and the communist camps of the Cold War, including the debate on these new crimes against humanity in literary analyses, as well as in historical, political science, legal and cultural studies, is of significant value. This serves as a reminder of one of literature's fundamental functions: to preserve memory and uphold the sanctity of life, dignity, and the rights of the individual.

Another important merit of the study is the comparison of works from several Slavic and Balkan literatures, ranking the dissertation among contributions to comparative literary studies.

Based on these qualities, we can conclude that the PhD candidate has successfully achieved the objectives of the dissertation, producing a monograph that contributes to Slavic and Balkan studies.

5. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Following the successful defence of his M.A. thesis under the scientific guidance of Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov on 'Homoeroticism in the Slovenian Novel of the Late 20th and Early 21st Century' (2018), PhD canidate Nedyalko Zhelev has participated in 10 conferences, published 6 articles in scholarly collections and 2 articles in scholarly journals. He has also contributed to the compilation of the Faculty of Slavic Studies' traditional 'Slavic Readings' scholarly collection, as well as participating in 4 scholarly projects. On the topic of his dissertation, he has published four articles, thus fulfilling the formal requirements for the defence. I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize again the

contribution of his work on the Yugoslav genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the wars of the last century. His article "Srebrenica in the Post-Yugoslav Novel World" (in: Literary Sequences: Constructing and Deconstructing the Canon, Sofia: Kliment Ohridski, 2021, pp. 177–185). From a cultural and anthropological perspective, his article 'Man in Times of War in South Slavic Novels after 1989: Between Individual Choice and Intergenerational Repetition' (in Literary Sequences: Constructing and Deconstructing the Canon, Sofia: Kliment Ohridski, 2021, pp. 177–185) is notable. Polemics and Choices. T. 2. Literary Studies, Cultural Anthropology. Sofia: Kliment Ohridski, 2024, pp. 383–390. From the PhD candidate's publications and conference presentations since 2019, it is evident that he is actively developing in the field of comparative literary studies, demonstrating qualities of diligence in his scientific work. Additionally, he has demonstrated strong teamwork skills and successful pedagogical abilities, both as a visiting lecturer and as a contributor to the Summer Seminar for Foreign Bulgarian and Slavic Studies at the Faculty of Slavic Studies, Sofia University, from 2014 to 2017.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to express my positive evaluation of this dissertation, which is not only contributory in terms of the broad scope of artistic samples analyzed, but also in terms of its theoretical basis and multifaceted, multidisciplinary outlook. I believe that the dissertation, its abstract and the attached publications and data on the PhD candidate's scientific activity demonstrate qualities that meet the legal requirements for the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Based on the above, I confidently recommend that the Scientific Jury award the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) in the field of higher education 2.1, Philology, Doctoral Programme 'Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia'/History of Slavic Literatures/ to the candidate Nedyalko Radostinov Zhelev.

23.05.2025.
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