

WHOSE TRUTH?

Operation Storm and the Siege of Vukovar

A lesson plan using multi-perspective and critical thinking approaches to primary sources based on material from the CDRSEE's Joint History Project II

WHOSE TRUTH?

Operation 'Storm' and the Battle for Vukovar: discerning fact, opinion and points of view

Aims:

- To develop critical thinking skills to distinguish bias in reporting of events and presentation of documents
- To explore the complexities of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s
- To develop awareness about wars' impact on civilians on all sides and to build empathy and tolerance
- To develop independent research skills

Lesson length: 2 lessons of 60 minutes each, plus homework

Number of participants: 10-30

Age of participants: 16-18 (with some activities suitable for 14-16 year olds, at the discretion of the teacher).

Rationale:

These two particular events in the conflicts of the 1990s in Yugoslavia (Operation 'Storm' and the Battle for Vukovar) have been specifically chosen as a lens through which students in Europe, not necessarily familiar with the Yugoslav disintegration, can approach two relatively unknown events through multi-perspective methodologies. Other, more well-known incidents from the region during the 1990s may be referred to in the lessons, but these two lesser known events were selected due to their propensity for students to be approaching them for the first time, and thus with an unbiased opinion.

The lessons aim to not only provide primary sources to students for discussion, but will also require independent research of them – developing the skills to be able to ask relevant questions, find useful information, assess and evaluate it and utilise it in synthesis with other resources and discussions.

Throughout the group work, class work and discussions, the teacher should encourage the students to question each other and should work to elicit responses rather than simply telling the students about the issues. As much as possible the students should research and find their own answers, rather than the teacher giving them responses.

All instructions in the lesson plan are to the teacher, apart from the handouts. While each lesson is designed to last approximately 60 minutes, no timings are given for each activity, as each teacher and class is different. Each teacher may choose to spend as much time as they wish on each section, or to miss some activities out entirely, depending on the class topic (history, media studies, sociology etc). However, the sequence of activities is designed to build up concepts, introduce context, develop skills and then draw all of these together to apply them to two events, so it is not recommended to do the activities out of sequence.

LESSON 1

A. Lead in

1. Print (as many times as needed for your class size) and then cut out all of the following terms. Have some sticky tape or Blu-tack ready for this activity.

PROPAGANDA

FACT

PERSPECTIVE

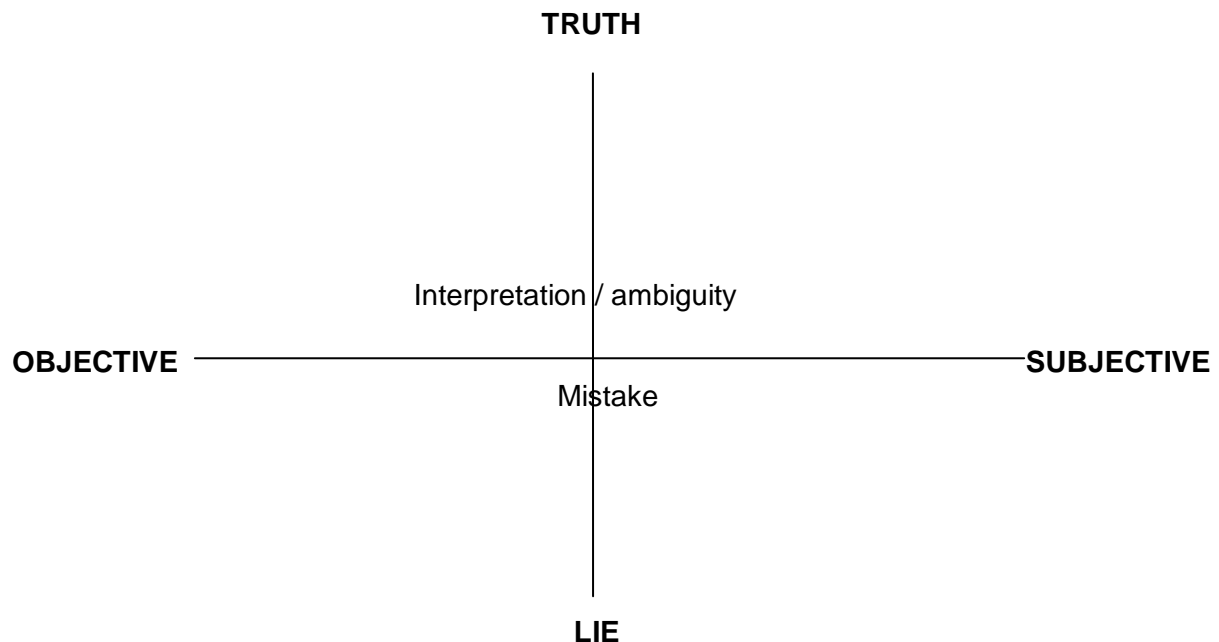
MISINFORMATION

FAKE NEWS

DISINFORMATION

OPINION

2. Divide the class into groups and hand out one of the words to each of the groups. Ask them to discuss the meaning and try to agree on a definition.
3. Draw the following matrix on the board (or have it prepared in a ppt to project onto the board)



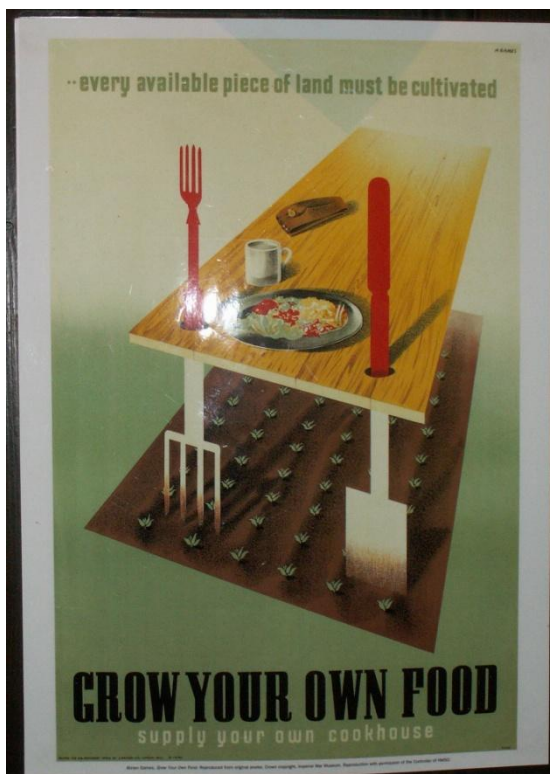
4. Ask one member of each group to come up to the board, carrying the cut-out word you have given them. Ask them to stick it on the board (giving them sticky tape) on the grid.
5. Once all of the words are on the grid, ask the students if they agree or disagree with the assessment of the other groups. Would they have stuck any of the words in a different place from the group that had discussed it? Elicit the differences between 'misinformation' and 'disinformation'. Elicit the difference between 'perspective' and 'opinion'. Ask them whether 'propaganda' is always something negative.

Make a note / take a picture of the board as it is (with all of the words stuck onto the grid) so that after the 2nd lesson, you can revisit it and see if anyone's ideas about these terms has changed.

If you need visual examples of 'positive propaganda', you can access the following images below at the links indicated (deliberately selected to not be only Yugoslav and also in languages that the students might not understand. They should be able to discern the meaning from the images alone).



Source: Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76514>
Accessed 22/08/18



Source: Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76518>
Accessed 22/08/18



Source: Public Domain,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/New_Greece.jpg
Accessed 22/08/18



Source: V. Kostić, propaganda poster for the construction of the highway Belgrade-Zagreb. Illustrated poster in colour, 35 x 50.5 cm, Muzej istorije Jugoslavije. Reproduced with permission on page 187 of *Teaching Contemporary Southeast European History. Source books for Teachers; Volume 1 'The Cold War' (1990-2008)* 2018. **Eds:** Budak, N. & Kalionski, A. **Series Editor:** Koulouri, C. Copyright, CDRSEE.

All JHP I and II materials are reproducible. Image is available for free download and use at

<http://cdrsee.org/publications/education/volume-1-cold-war-1944-1990>



Source: НБКМ [Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library], Гр VI 4387. Reproduced with permission on page 135 of *Teaching Contemporary Southeast European History. Source books for Teachers; Volume 1 'The Cold War' (1990-2008)* 2018.

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Source: Lithograph by Georgy Danchov (1876)

Reproduced with permission on page 104 of *Teaching Modern Southeast European History. Alternative Educational Materials: Workbook 2 'Nations and States in Southeast Europe' 2nd edition*, 2009.

Ed: Murgescu, M.L.

Series Editor: Koulouri, C.

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<http://cdrsee.org/publications/education/workbook-2-nations-and-states-southeast-europe>

Svi u borbu za slobodu

HRVATSKE!



Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Partizanski_plakat.jpg

By unknown, People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (1941-1945) (Croatian History Museum) [Public domain, Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Accessed 22/08/18

B. Development:

Focus on propaganda and introduction to geopolitical context:

Show the class the following images **WITHOUT** any translation. Can they identify flags and symbols (religious symbols, swastikas, SS logos, iron eagle, communist star etc)? Without knowing what the words say, can they understand the meaning of the posters and images? Who are the heroes, who are the 'bad guys', who are the victims? What is the purpose of each poster?



Source:

<https://www.aukcije.hr/prodaja/kolekcionarstvo/Militarija/Dokumenti-i-fotografije/277/oglas/NDH-PLAKAT-HRVATI-JAVLJAJTE-SE-U-DRAGOVOLJA%C4%8CKE-SS-POSTROJBE/3337835/>

Accessed 22/08/18

Translation: "Croats You report to the volunteer SS units"

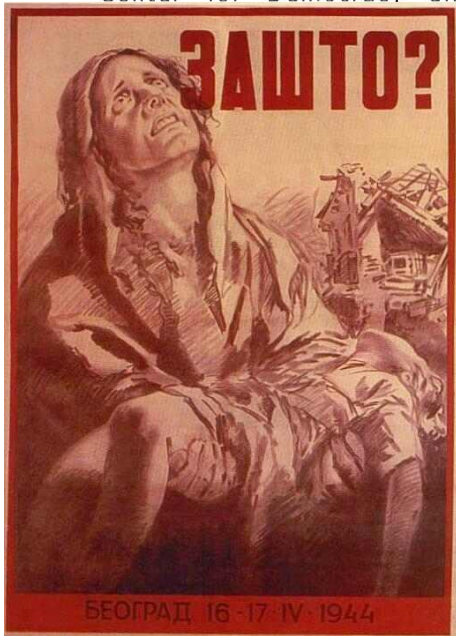


Source:

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/258816309814002770/>

Accessed 22/08/18

Translation: "All Serbs must die"



Source: Kostić, N. Nemački ratni plakat u Srbiji 1941-1944, Nova Pazova, Bonart, 2000, str. 66

(Reproduced with permission on page 120 of *Once upon a time....We lived together. Joint Work in a multiperspective approach 1900-1945.*

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<https://euroclio.eu/publication/once-upon-a-time-we-lived-together/>

Translation: “WHY? Belgrade April 16-17 1944” (days of intense allied bombing of Belgrade)



Source: Nikolić, P 37.

Reproduced with permission on page 44 of *Teaching Modern Southeast European History. Alternative Educational Materials: Workbook 4 ‘The Second World War’, 2nd edition, 2009*

Ed: Erdelja, K.

Series Editor: Koulouri, C.

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<http://cdrsee.org/publications/education/workbook-4-second-world-war>

Translation: “Serbia is part of the anti communistic front”



Source: Arhiva zemaljskog muzeja, Sarajevo

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<https://euroclio.eu/publication/once-upon-a-time-we-lived-together/>

Translation: "Liberator? NO, NEVER..."
(anti partisan poster from Serbia)

C: The geopolitical context:

Ask your students what they know about Yugoslavia. Ask them to either brainstorm in groups and then write the words, ideas, knowledge on the board, or it can be done all together as a class. Try to elicit as much information as possible and assist with the chronology if there is any confusion (using the 'Informational background for teachers' below) but try not to simply lecture them or provide them with all the facts. As they brainstorm, encourage them to discern the facts from the opinions and perspectives. (e.g. a child in the UK or France may well say "The Serbs attacked many people" as the media at the time was extremely anti-Serb, while a child from Greece may have heard versions that were more sympathetic to the Serbs etc etc...so try to assist the student in thinking about the fact that this might be only one side of the issue).

Include here a map of your choosing of Southeast Europe to project onto the board to show the geographical location of Yugoslavia and the current national boundaries, or the ethnic mix of Yugoslavia (to provide visual assistance to explain why the breakup was so complex, and provide a context to the reasons behind Operation Storm).

Some useful maps can be found at:

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/breakup-yugoslavia>

<https://vtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/UsefulNotes/Yugoslavia>

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yugoslav_ethnic_map_2.jpg

Informational background for Teachers:

Yugoslavia was created at the end of World War I when Croat, Slovenian, and Bosnian territories that had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire united with the Serbian Kingdom. The country broke up during World War II (during which the Serbs sided with the Allied forces, while the Croats aligned with the Axis powers) but was reunified at the end of the war under the lead of Josip Broz Tito, after his partisan forces took control / liberated the country. Although the state was organised along socialist ideals, Yugoslavia detached itself from the Soviet sphere of influence and moved away from the rigid, closed and centralised approach to communism that featured strongly in other Eastern European countries. It defined itself as 'Non-Aligned' (allied neither to the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, nor the US and NATO). It adapted the ideology of socialism to create a de-centralised state that was far more open and less repressive than other states in the Eastern Bloc at the time. The country comprised a mixture of ethnicities and religions, spread throughout the territory with intermarriage quite common and an integrated co-existence. Stability was maintained by a complex system of economic, agricultural, logistical and political interdependence between the various regions, the national language was Serbo-Croatian and citizens regarded themselves as 'Yugoslav' over and above their regional or religious identities. Nonetheless, the historical differences (stretching back to well before the World Wars) remained an undercurrent in politics and society.

After Tito's death in 1980, a series of crises – firstly economic, which led to political tensions, which led quickly to inter-ethnic (inter-religious) differences rising to the surface-spiralled into open conflict in the early 1990s. The old boundaries between what had been different states became battle lines. Serbs (mainly Orthodox Christian), Croats (mainly Catholic), Bosniaks (mainly Muslim), Albanians (mainly Muslim), Slovenians (mainly Catholic) and Macedonians (Christian and Muslim) and other groups had been intermixed throughout the territories of Yugoslavia and those who now found themselves in a minority in the area where they were

living, were increasingly aware of hostilities towards them, based not only on their ethnic self-definition, but also on religion. As a socialist state, religion had been either suppressed or ignored, so when ethnic tensions rose, the feeling of one's religious identity having been repressed became conflated with ethnic identity and nationalism. (*Please refer to the third map above to offer a visual representation of this to the students*). Each nation within Yugoslavia felt it had been deprived economically or politically. Conflicts from hundreds of years ago were revived as historical justifications for rising nationalism.

The start of open conflict came in 1991 which was triggered by the nationalistic Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic's notion that a nation of 'Greater Serbia' should be established to unite all of the areas in which Serbs were living (which included parts of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Slovenia). This led to a conflict between Serbia and Slovenia. Slovenia, had declared independence, and the Yugoslav People's Army (made up of soldiers from across the country, but dominated by Serbian commanders) was sent to prevent this break-away (on the grounds that it was the duty of the army to protect the unity of the Yugoslav state). Slovenian soldiers (and other non-Serbs) faced a dilemma – they were part of the Yugoslav army, but in an environment of heightened ethnic tension, were being asked to fight against Slovenians attempting to break away from what they saw as Serbian oppression. Meanwhile, Serbs living in Slovenia experienced similar impossible choices. Large numbers of Slovenes and other non-Serbs left the army which slowly transformed into a Serbian army.

Following Slovenia's break away in 1991, Croatia, led by a nationalist, Franjo Tudman, also began to not only attempt to secede, but also to impose control or expulsion of the large populations of Serbs within Croatia. The war for independence lasted from 1991-1995 and included Operation Storm (resulting in a mass exodus of over 200,000 Serbs from Croatia) and the siege and occupation of Vukovar.

The war in Croatia was a prelude to an expected and far more protracted and brutal conflict in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina. As a more ethnically mixed state of than Slovenia or Croatia, the issues of movements of populations, territory and political control were much more complex and long lasting. Both Serbia and Croatia played a role in the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which drew in interventions by the UN, NATO and the EU. The conflict was ended, (but not necessarily resolved) in 1995 with the Dayton Peace accord, which divided Bosnia-Herzegovina into federal cantons. The war claimed more than 100,000 lives, resulted in more than 2.2 million refugees (about half of the total population) and war crimes were perpetrated on all sides.

Clashes in Kosovo-an area claimed by the Serbs to be part of Serbia, and by Kosovars (ethnic Albanians and mainly Muslim) to be an independent state- starting in the mid 1990s intensified from 1998 with deadly clashes and resulted in NATO taking the side of the Kosovars -bombing Serbia, resulting in civilian casualties and Serb refugees from Kosovo. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, supported by the US government and the EU, but is not recognised by Serbia as an independent state.

In 2001, there were clashes and a narrowly avoided civil war in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and then in 2006, Serbia and Montenegro divided into two separate countries.

Bibliography:

-Teaching Contemporary Southeast European History. Source books for Teachers; Volume 2 'Wars, Divisions, Integration (1990-2008)',2016. Eds: Koulouri, C. & Repe, B. Series Editor: Koulouri, C. Copyright, CDRSEE.
-<https://history.state.gov/>

D. Linking reporting bias to the geopolitical context

Note: These sources are about the war in Bosnia & Herzegovina and the NATO intervention in Serbia. They have been deliberately chosen to **not** be specifically about Operation Storm or the Vukovar siege. The aim is for students to develop general skills of understanding media bias, reporter subjectivity, perspective etc, within the general Yugoslav conflict context, which they will then be expected to apply later on to the specific issues in Operation Storm and the Battle for Vukovar.

Please see Annex 1 containing the relevant sources and instructions for the students. Links to where all of these can be accessed online are provided, should you wish to display any of the images or texts on the board.

Annex 1 contains 4 sources in 4 separate handouts.

1. Divide the class into 4 groups and give each group 1 of the texts.

Group A: Text by a Slovenian author in Sarajevo

Group B: Text by a Red Cross employee about the war in Bosnia

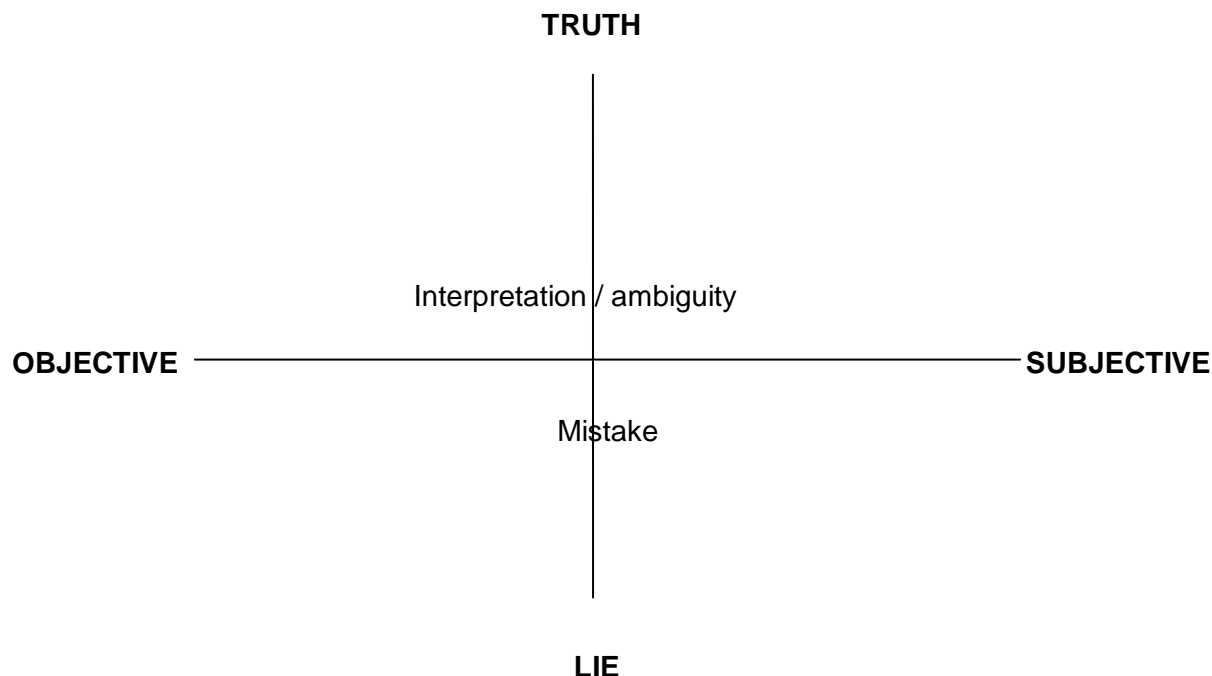
Group C: Report by an American CNN reporter in Sarajevo

Group D: Report by a Swiss Journalist and head of a Swiss Press club on the NATO bombing of Serbia

2. Ask them to look at the author and the nationality and profession of the author. Prior to reading the text, what can they predict / discern? Ask them if their ideas could be useful fore-knowledge, or assumptions (e.g. that a Slovenian journalist might be less independent than an American, that a Red Cross worker might be more sympathetic to all sides, that a Swiss person might be more neutral than others etc) Get them to challenge their own assumptions.

Challenge students to think about whether any reporting can be truly 'independent' and to try and discern whether the articles contain issues of perspective (that is, fact viewed from one standpoint or one particular time) or opinion (that is, an interpretation of the facts). Can any reporter ever see all sides at all times?

3. Tell each group to read the texts, following the instructions on their handouts.
4. While each group reads and discusses their texts, draw the grid on the board again.



5. Ask each group to present the text they have read and to locate it on the grid.

Facilitate any discussion around the issues that arise. Can a journalist ever be truly 'neutral'? SHOULD a journalist try to be neutral? What Does the writer have a point of view? Is there a particular issue that the writer is trying to promote?

6. If there is time, project the following quote on the board and ask students to discuss it (in groups) and also to consider it as they do the following homework:

“I was trained as a journalist to respect evidence [...] because journalism must hold the fort of truth until the historians arrive”.
Simon Jenkins

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/11/hollywood-history-churchill-getty-trust-fiction>

E: Homework

Handout for students (Annex 2)

(Student Handout 2)

Ask students to do some independent research about how the wars in Yugoslavia were reported in different newspapers in their country.

Give them all a copy of Student Handout 2 and ask them to keep notes on their research, bearing in mind the exercise on journalism they have just completed.

LESSON 2

A. Lead in:

Consolidation of knowledge of the geopolitical context

1. Put the grid on the board again.

2. Ask students what they found out about how the conflict of the 1990s were portrayed in their country in various media. As the students do so, try to facilitate and elicit key words that they found that indicate that the media or the government or the individual reporter had a bias or simply that a journalist wasn't in the right place at the right time and thus didn't get the whole story

B: Optional Activity:

('Smallville' activity) Annex 3

If the students are young (in the 14-15 range, rather than 18 year olds) and you feel that there needs to be more work on issues of perspective, please see Annex 3 and do the activity there.

C: Linking history to the recent past

1. Present the original propaganda posters (from lesson 1) and tell students where they are from along with the translations. Asks, "In the context of what you have researched about the wars of the 1990s, why did I give you these WWII propaganda posters?" Students should be able to link the animosities of the WWII past to the issues of the 1990s that they just researched and to figure out that the conflicts of the 1990s didn't appear out of nowhere, but were rather based on historical conflicts. If the students are struggling to make connections, try to facilitate the discussion by telling them that in WWII, Serbia and Croatia took different sides at the start of the war and try to get them to think about how historical conflicts still play a role in the mentality and thinking of their country today. (e.g. during the World Cup, UK and French football chants against the German team often refer to Hitler, tensions among different ethnic groups in France and Belgium refer back to a colonial past etc)

D: Operation Storm and the battle for Vukovar: putting skills into practice to discern fact from opinion in 2 specific events of the Yugoslav wars

1. Divide the class in half. (within each half, divide them into as many groups as needed)

Half A is given information on Operation Storm

Half B is given information on the Battle for Vukovar

Depending on your class's age and ability:
Either

OPTION 1: Give groups A all of the information (from all sides) on Operation Storm and groups B, all of the information (from all sides) on the Battle for Vukovar,

OR

OPTION 2: Within each section (A and B) give one group information from the Serb angle (A1, B1) and give the other information from the Croatian point of view (A2, B2).
Please see Annex 4:

2. Ask each group to look at the texts and photos, look at who wrote them and when and try to discern what actually happened. Can they identify bias, can they discern any clear statistics, can they figure out (if you have divided them according to the second option above) that they have been given information from only ONE side? Can they apply the skills they developed in lesson 1 to these new, unknown events?
3. IF you have selected **Option 1**, now mix up the groups so that 2 students who read ALL of the accounts of Operation Storm (Groups A) sit with 2 students who have read ALL of the accounts of the Vukovar siege (Groups B). Ask students to inform each other about their respective events and encourage 'active listening' among the students being presented to. Encourage them to ask questions and challenge any assumptions that the presenters may have taken on.

IF you have selected **Option 2**, now mix up the groups WITHIN each section (two students from A1 now sit with 2 students from A2, while students from B1, sit with students from B2). They present their texts and ideas and 'facts' to the others and discuss. They should rapidly figure out that they have been given information about the SAME events but from different points of view. As above, encourage 'active listening' and facilitate any discussions / arguments that may arise.

If there is time, Groups A1 and A2 present Operation Storm together to groups B1 and B2 and then groups B1 and B2 present the siege of Vukovar. Observe and ask students to comment about whether the groups 1 and 2 in either section can agree on any basic facts.

If you think it will be useful, ask the groups to place the reports / photos / sources on the grid.

If you think it will be useful, project one of the maps of the region from Lesson 1 and locate the two areas that the students will be reading about (it often helps to have a visual idea of where the places are).

NOTE: In some instances, both of the 'opposing groups' will have received the SAME information. Try to facilitate a discussion around 'confirmation bias' when they discover this. That is; the students who have been given other documents sympathetic to the Serb point of view, will probably find facts in the explanatory note that support their 'side', while the students given the Croatian point of view will find (in the SAME explanatory note) facts or ideas that support THEIR 'side'.

E. ROUND UP: discussion

- What can we learn from this about how to approach the news, information and issues today? Is it more or less difficult today (with social media and a huge range of media choice) to find out the 'truth'?
- What are the dangers of social media? What are the advantages?
- What can each of us do to prevent media manipulation?
- How can we become better media users (not just 'consumers') to guard against the spread of hate speech, rumours and disinformation?
- How can we develop empathy, tolerance and understanding for others by using the media critically?
- How can we overcome our own history to not forget the past, but somehow, move on from it?

F. Homework:

Annex 5, student handout 4