

DIANA BUDISAVLJEVIĆ INTO SCHOOLS: HISTORY TO THE MARGINS¹

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According to a claim made on the internet page narod.hr (it reproduces a part of a text by Andreja Černovec from the *Hrvatski tjednik* [*The Croatian Weekly*]; accessible at <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/uvrstenje-filma-dnevnik-diane-budisavljevic-u-skolski-kurikul-vise-drze-do-istine-jedne-redateljice-nego-povjesnicara>), the live-action documentary *The Diary of Diana Budisavljević*, directed by Dana Budisavljević (2019) has been introduced into the school curriculum (probably as part of the subject History!?), i.e., it has received the approval of the Croatian Ministry of Education and Culture for inclusion into the education curriculum. This is certainly an interesting, but also very unusual decision. Of course, you may ask yourselves why? First of all, several general remarks about the film and its main heroine, around whom the story revolves. In short, for those unfamiliar with the subject, this is a film about Diana Budisavljević, a Zagreb woman of Austrian heritage, married to surgeon Dr Julije Budisavljević, who near the end of 1941 decided to gather aid and provide care for Jewish and Orthodox women and children who were interned in the Loborgrad and Gornja Rijeka concentration camps. However, most of the film is devoted to the efforts to help children who had for the most part found themselves in the villages of Mlaka and Jablanac and the Stara Gradiška concentration camp after the German-Ustasha offensive in the Kozara region in mid-1942. The parents of these children perished in the mentioned offensive or were deported to forced labour in the Third Reich via the Stara Gradiška camp.

Reading the last few lines, you may ask yourself what is the problem? Those who are not familiar with the subject, ordinary filmgoers, will not see any. However, it does exist. As has been mentioned, the film covers one particularly shocking episode from Croatian World War II history, so the illogicalities and problems related to the decision to include the film in the school curriculum need to be highlighted. But first things first. The *Diary of Diana Budisavljević* (published 2003) served as the basis for the film. This is neither a primary nor a secondary, but a tertiary historical source. It is a source

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on par with memoirs, diaries, and recollections, which are immediately and inherently exposed to a subjective approach, personal experiences and ad hoc conclusions about other people, events, and views of certain situations. Diana's *Diary* does not avoid these shortcomings. Just for the sake of comparison, I shall mention some of her thoughts on people she intensely cooperated with during World War II in providing for the children. For example, she said that "nothing can be expected" of Julius Schmidlin, Jr, the permanent representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the Independent State of Croatia (ISC), but she later often collaborated with him and confirmed through her later entries in the *Diary* that her first impression of the man had been wrong. There are many reasons for this, but some other facts shed new light on this situation. Several months earlier, when visiting the Swiss consul in Zagreb, she had advocated the idea that the permanent ICRC representative in Zagreb (one of the leading candidates was precisely J. Schmidlin, a Swiss citizen) should be a person from Switzerland rather than a Swiss citizen living in Zagreb, which was the usual ICRC practice. But it was Schmidlin who suggested that Diana institutionalise her "private" initiative, i.e., to raise it to a higher level so that she could acquire humanitarian aid from abroad without hindrance, but she refused, fearing for her life.

Perhaps an even more striking example are Diana's writings about Archbishop Stepinac, which confirm that she drew conclusions in haste, and that her own experiences and impressions of an individual had an exceptional influence on how she saw them as a person. Thus, she concluded that the archbishop would be of no use, that he is reserved, uninterested, that he claimed that he had no influence on the Ustasha authorities, that she had come asking him "to save a people, and he is telling me about some apartment". But he eventually promised that he would take action, though this was followed by the comment: "Since I do not have much faith in this (...)". Confirmation that Budisavljević contradicts herself follows later, when she corrects this exceptionally negative image of the archbishop, writing in an entry on helping children dated 23 January 1943: "I ask the archbishop that he take care of the children in case of major evacuations. He accepts this immediately, without hesitation. There is no question of whether he will help; the only question is how to organise this assistance. The archbishop says that he will immediately send for Msgr. Jesih and consult him about the initiative. I was surprised by this unconditional readiness to help, especially when one takes into account the lack of interest among many former Orthodox for helping the children in any way." The mentioned statement confirms that the diary entries contain two contradictory images of Stepinac, with whom Budisavljević collaborated through the Zagreb Archdiocese's *Caritas* in order to help the children. Here one should recall that she had declined the mentioned Schmidlin's suggestion

to institutionalize her initiative, but she was aware of the suggestion's importance, and decided to use the Zagreb Archdiocese's *Caritas* as the institutional framework for acquiring aid. Also interesting are Diana's statements that all the gathered funds were given to the *Caritas*, which presented them as having been acquired via her *Initiative* rather than as *Caritas* funds. At the same time, the archbishop helped her "private" initiative—as Budisavljević notes in her *Diary*—by attempting to secure some sort of official protection for her apartment. Thus, the *Caritas* issued her a certificate that a part of her apartment, i.e., one room and an anteroom, are being used as an office for *Caritas* needs; it contained records on the children, which she personally maintained. The importance of this act is confirmed by a fact that anyone who read the diary would remember: Diana mentioned at least once that her husband tried to persuade her to stop the aid initiative, fearing that he and all her associates would be sent to the camps. Of course, to the relief of the children and all of us, she did not do this, but it is truly incomprehensible that a live-action documentary would show Diana Budisavljević as some kind of "Wonder-Woman" who saved more than 10,000 children in such a regime as the ISC alone, without anybody's help. Apart, of course, from good citizens who were against the ISC and recognized the criminal nature of the Ustasha regime. It is an indisputable fact that, in these difficult and exceptionally dangerous times, risking her life countless times, she achieved a lot, but she did not act alone in helping the children. Here one should mention Kamilo Brössler, head of the Associations (Social Welfare) Department of the Ministry of Associations, whom the Ustasha authorities later "rewarded" with a dismissal (he was employed at the Permanent Representation of the ICRC in Zagreb by J. Schmidlin at the latter's own expense). One should also mention the Croatian Red Cross, under whose auspices children were saved, and then colonized (fostered) in an organized manner through the Zagreb Archdiocese's *Caritas*, and with the immeasurable support of Archbishop Stepinac. The diary entries of Diana Budisavljević contain plenty of direct and indirect data, statements, and facts that confirm this, but it remains unclear why the film, which is now part of the school curriculum, almost entirely omits them.

Even though the film has received numerous Croatian and foreign awards, it still leaves a somewhat bitter taste because it is, in the end, a one-sided view of the war, which has drawn much sympathy due to the topic. This is understandable and expected, but one should note that the movie lacks the dividing line between the subjective and the objective, and is obviously the result of the personal impressions of the film's director, who did not go much further than the *Diary* itself when preparing it. It is also apparent that these diary texts were approached in a very selective manner. The film does not offer a full, quality picture of the work of Diana Budisavljević during World War II.

In writing something like this, one exposes oneself to the already normalized labelling as a revisionist, or as someone who flirts with the political right, especially when this involves an exceptionally important and very shocking story that characterized the World War II period in this region, but one also gets the impression that history as an academic discipline did not play a role in the making of the film. Of course, this is not disputable because the subject is the director's authorial work, so you may then ask, what is the actual controversy here? The controversial issue is the mentioned film's inclusion into the school curriculum. Why? It appears that history did not have a significant role in its making. Apart from the mentioned, several important questions arise, and it appears that the key issue is: who will explain to schoolchildren this exceptionally shocking topic, which is more suited to academic discussion rather than children in the final years of primary school or in middle school, but who are nonetheless the intended public according to the curriculum? These are children aged 13 to 18, and one should not forget that they are in their formative years. We are witnesses that there are (and there will always be) historians and "historians", but we are now consciously putting ourselves in a situation where it looks like we will acquire a third group of interpreters of history, who will, in preparation for this lesson, explain to the children an exceptionally sensitive period of Croatian history—which is still, regardless of the temporal distance, a subject of disputes—according to their own affinities, tastes, or (lack of) knowledge. The topic itself, like many other topics from that period of Croatian history, is politically colored, and at the same time we are witnessing that history as an academic discipline is being pushed to the margins, STEM is being favored, and a disservice is being done to Croatian historiography since, thanks to the decisions of certain (un)informed assistant ministers, the state, which finances scholarly research projects, is denigrating the role of Croatian historiography and making hasty decisions that will, whether we want it or not, have long-reaching consequences, most of all for our children's upbringing. Do not forget that, as everyone knows, the future rests with the youth.