
Book Review

Subotić, Jelena (2019) *Yellow Star, Red Star*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 264 pages.

Jelena Subotić's *Yellow Star, Red Star* is an important book for all those who want to understand the changing memory narratives, politics, and strategies of the East-European Holocaust after the regime changes of the 1990s. There are indeed similarities among the forms of Holocaust memory characteristic of this region alone, typical patterns that repeat uniformly. With similar trends in the history and fate of the European countries stuck between the East and the West, it follows that their remembrance strategies show parallels.

Subotić has written about the narratives of the Holocaust and manipulation of memory in the context of the so-called 'post-communist' countries of Eastern Europe. Analogous events occurred in the East-European countries occupied by the Soviet Union after the collapse of the regime. We can name the desire to join the European Union and NATO among them, as well as the transformations of historical memory and forgetting. The construction of Holocaust remembrance, memory politics and strategies took completely different courses in the western world, in Israel and in the Soviet Union, or the East European, Balkan and Baltic countries belonging to its sphere of interests.

The book consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical argument about state response to various ontological insecurities it faces in the aftermath of a great political transformation – the end of communism – and links this framework to the issue of political memory and Holocaust remembrance. The chapter introduces the notion of memory appropriation and describes various strategies of the post-communist states changing the European Union's approach to the memory of the Holocaust. Chapters 2 and 3 explore Holocaust remembrance in the former Yugoslavia by focusing on the two deeply interlinked narratives in Serbia and Croatia. Serbia's Holocaust remembrance narrative is centered on Croatia's mass murder of ethnic Serbs. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the Holocaust in the Baltic states and explains the post-communist strategies of 'double genocide' which conflates the Holocaust and the Soviet occupation.

Subotić presents her research through illustrative examples, not ignoring her personal involvement either. She synthesizes theories and reframes the ideological backgrounds to post-regime-change Holocaust narratives. The main focus of her writing is to understand whose interests are served in post-communist countries by the trivialization, relativization and comparison of the Holocaust with the crimes of communism. What are the common traits to be observed in the nationalist, conservative, and anti-communist Holocaust narratives of Eastern Europe? Well known and less known examples of Holocaust relativization in the region demonstrate the points made, with distorting remembrance-policy issues in Serbia and Croatia discussed predominantly, grounded in personal experience.

Examples from the Baltics are also presented. Put simply, the new relativizing narrative is manipulative in presenting the crimes of the communist regime as greater, or at least of equal significance to the horrors committed during the Holocaust. This allows the criminal role of followers of the nationalist and conservative ideologies in the Holocaust to be ejected from the core of the discourse. Attention is diverted from the Holocaust onto the crimes of communism.

In post-communist countries, prior to the change of regimes all that could be spoken of were the 'victims of fascism' and the 'communist resistance', the word Jew was painstakingly avoided. The manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust, its distorted exploitation for various purposes continues into our day.

Jelena Subotić is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at Georgia State University working on international relations, memory politics, human rights, international ethics, especially as an expert analyst of the situation in the Western Balkans. She was a CNN and BBC expert on the Yugoslav wars. In her book she treats the questions of cultural appropriation, that is, the expropriation of memory, within the discourse of the social sciences. The concept denotes how various cultural and social symbols, memories, and their representations are expropriated for some hoped-for political or other gains, a better position in terms of social status. In the context of this book, appropriation does not signify borrowing, or even expropriation of a narrative, but rather the manipulation, distortion of memory, its transformation to meet personal interests.

Not only does Subotić acknowledge being personally affected by her subject but she weaves her family history into the work that is much to the advantage of the book. The text does not turn too intimate or bring about too much pathos with the conjuring of the personal family history. The author's motivations can be sensed from the beginning, as they provide a deep stratum within the book that offers relevant answers to real questions in place of dry scientific pretensions. At the same time, she builds on research, facts, and the impact of the book comes from the alloy of her evidence-based approach with her personal family history. Her family history is very complex, and this complexity characterizes the whole book. She writes about the conflicting personality of her grandfather who collaborated with the Nazis to a certain degree, but also rescued lives. He was the captain of the Belgrade Police during Nazi occupation. The Gestapo tortured him, but after Tito's rise to power during communism he was also imprisoned and tortured. In fact, Subotić came to understand who her grandfather really was while working on the book. She also completes the reconstruction of her traumas and memories in the course of writing it. She shows by these means too that the subject has an affect to this day. All that occurred seven or eight decades ago has still not been processed or uncovered. She also took a good deal of her father's traumas on, after he survived a Croatian Ustasha concentration camp. Though her grandfather saved many communists, the family did not sympathize with the Tito regime. It is one of the great virtues of the volume that it does not simplify the human fates scarred by the cataclysms of history. A victim often became a persecutor, and vice versa even in these times.

The book also strives to give a sense of the scientific theoretical background of memory politics by analyzing the memorial sites and policies of three larger geographical regions. The most essential theoretical background to her book comes from Michael Rothberg's competitive memory theory (Rothberg, 2009), as well as Jeffrey Alexander's analysis of the usually insensitive attitude of traumatized social groups to the traumas of others (Alexander et al., 2004). Culturally traumatized groups are often unable to acknowledge another likewise traumatized group, and moreover shift responsibility for it to others. The following three main areas or case studies are the focus of her study: Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania with of course, Vilnius at its heart. She also mentions the curious memory politics link between Hungary and Poland. Each of her examples demonstrates how the history of the Holocaust is used, instrumentalized for political purposes, in contradiction to the experiences of the survivors and Jewish victims. She cites examples of symbolic, or sometimes markedly direct manifestations that offend the memory of victims or are insensitive and untrue to them. The Jewish victims were not memorialized in Tito's Yugoslavia, or in any of the other East European communist countries. The ethnic or religious background of the partisans, their origins were irrelevant to them. Only the anti-fascist heroes were glorified.

The book also presents the brutality of the holocaust as case studies from Croatia, Serbia, and Lithuania.

The deportation of Jews began in September 1941, after the German and Italian occupation of the Yugoslav Kingdom, and its subdivision with the establishment of the Independent Croatian State. 70 concentration, extermination and transit camps were built across the territory of the country. The Jews collected here were transported to Auschwitz. One of the most brutal camps run by the Croats was the Sisak children's camp, where unaccompanied children were starved to death and raped.

In 1941, the Germans decided to establish the 'Semlin Judenlager' in Serbia, on the bank of the River Sava. It was a forced labor camp at first, but from 8 October they took women and children there as well. By May 1942 the Serbian Jews had all been wiped out. Survivors were mainly partisans, and also a few people in hiding. The extermination of Serbian Jews was the first modern, methodical system set up to murder in Europe. The first systematic, industrial scale genocide took place in Belgrade. Only in July of 2014 did they decide, on the proposal of the local Jewish Congregation, to make the 10th of May a Holocaust Memorial Day, as it was on this day in 1942 that the last groups of Jewish women and children were transported from Staro Sajmište in gas trucks. The captives of the Sajmište camp were commanded to get in the truck in 1942, then to leave for the forest at the other end of the city. This was one of the first experiments at killing Jews by diverting the fumes from the exhausts into the sealed back of the truck, with calculations even detailing how much time was needed for them to suffocate. The people of Belgrade looked the other way, but everyone knew what was happening. Subotić was shocked that an untended urban space had come about on the site of the genocide: including car mechanics bodegas, a garbage

dump, squares overgrown with weed. It illustrates perfectly how grotesquely the memory of the innocent people murdered there is kept, and the upsetting injustice of it, which is typical of the whole post-communist region to this day. The first modern systematic race-based human massacre of Europe may have happened under the eyes of the citizens of Belgrade. Subotić relates Hungarian and Polish examples as well, where the lack of memorial places or their warped form can be observed. She also analyzes the representations made by politicians, museums, intellectuals, and artists. An example of the latter is the Hungarian prime minister's cynical inclusion of Horthy among the great statesmen. These are the same mechanisms, distorted memory politics with the purpose of political gain.

Subotić discusses the Lithuanian situation in depth. She introduces a vast array of historical material, embracing the Holocaust history of Lithuania and Vilnius all the way up to the current memory politics of Holocaust representation. The comprehensive, serious research has led to a successful intricate analysis of the Lithuanian situation. This is one of the most thorough, most complex parts of the volume. The author gives an illustrative historical analysis of the historical memory of the Holocaust in Vilnius, or Vilna in Hebrew-Yiddish usage. Jewish community life was huge in Lithuania. Vilnius was traditionally compared to Jerusalem in Jewish folklore, as the Orthodox Jewish community living in this region before the Holocaust had achieved extraordinary results in religious scholarship. Between the two World Wars, Lithuania had been an independent country, though Vilnius belonged to Poland. However, in 1940 the three Baltic countries became parts of the Soviet sphere of interest. The Germans overran the Jewish population of Vilnius numbering 60 thousand in 1941. The Lithuanian police began to arrest Jews immediately, to be summarily massacred in the nearby Ponary forest by machine guns. Soon, nearly 20 thousand persons had been murdered by gunfire, and buried in mass graves by Lithuanians encouraged by Germans. Of the approximately 250 thousand Jews that lived in Lithuania, over 90 per cent fell victim to the Holocaust. The Lithuanian Jewish community currently numbers around 3,500 persons. Since gaining independence, every government of Lithuania has preferred to play down the horrors perpetrated by the local collaborators of the Nazis. They have also tried to obscure the fact that every strata of society participated in the extermination of the Jews. It is no coincidence then, that proportionally, the Lithuanian Holocaust felled the most victims, a fact never noted in remembrances. A row of Lithuanian governments has put an equal-to-sign between communist and Nazi crimes, trying to blur the line between totalitarian regimes. It is fully apparent that successive Lithuanian governments have not given up on rewriting the history of the Lithuanian Holocaust. In her detailed analysis, Subotić goes through the symbolic narratives of the more important memorial places, memorials and museums one-by-one, plus the reader is offered a broad range of factual information. The book concludes that apart from acknowledging the explicit fact of the Jews having been murdered, it is not accepted that Jewish life and culture could be an integral part of Lithuanian identity. Moreover, Lithuanians do not accept their own culpability in the Holocaust. They shift all responsibility to the Nazis. The Holocaust is not a part of

the Lithuanian national identity and image. The way they construe their identity, their own victimhood at the hands of the Soviets is placed at the forefront and in the center.

Similar processes are unfolding in the rest of the post-communist countries. Under the influence of the European Union, and in an attempt to meet the conditions required for accession, the official remembrance of the Holocaust is merely a sham. The memory politics of the post-communist countries did not come about organically, but under duress from the European Union. It serves not to present the horror of the Holocaust, but rather to turn it into a tourist attraction. There is more of an effort by these countries to identify with their own suffering under Soviet rule and present the Holocaust as an illustration of their own traumas. It is not a matter of Holocaust denial, just of its utilization to emphasize their own suffering.

It remains a question whether the effect the European Union had on Eastern Europe was one way, or if Eastern Europe has also had an effect on the EU? The question may be raised, has East European memory politics succeeded in convincing Western Europe that communism and Nazism were similarly horrible regimes? According to Subotić, equating the two totalitarian regimes represents an ideological struggle on the part of post-communist nations to trivialize their role in the Holocaust. For example, the children's camp established by the above mentioned Croatian Ustasha is a symbol of the memory politics chosen by independent Croatia as it makes its way into the EU, memorializing their brutal Nazi collaborator regime. The response in Subotić's point of view is, in fact, a lack of coming to terms, of forgetting, a rejection of memory-solidarity.

Subotić tries to understand her own traumas on an individual and collective level but does not stop there. The work's deeper meaning is revealed within its ethical and moral subtext. She tries to process the sufferings and traumas of individuals, various social groups, and societies or nations. So, through her analysis we can come closer to an understanding and acceptance of our own and others' sufferings. In this book she proposes that if we do not accept each other, do not confront and understand each other's crimes and traumas, we will only continue to suffer. For if we only shift blame, distort, and perhaps expropriate our stories, there will be no understanding or resolution born of it, and our traumas will live on. Acceptance of our own traumas and those of others is Subotić's ethical message. This is the context in which all that the book has to say gains meaning. *Yellow Star, Red Star* is a scientifically well-grounded work recommended as a seminal volume, a must read for those with an interest in Serbian, Croatian, and Lithuanian history. It is a systematic, well-structured reading on the strategies and narrative of post-communist regimes for their Holocaust memory politics.

ZOLTÁN HÁBERMANN

[habermanz@or-zse.hu]

(OR-ZSE – Jewish Theological Seminary – University of Jewish Studies)

References

- Rothberg, M. (2009) *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Alexander, J. C., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N. J., and Sztompka, P. (2004) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.