Book Review

Jelena Subotić. *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

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In 2010, Claus Leggewie, a German professor of Political Science, tried to define what he called “the seven circles of European memory”, common memories shared, in theory, by all Europeans:

- European unification as a success story which, however, has had little impact on European self-confidence;
- the notion of Europe as a continent of immigrants;
- European colonialism and colonial massacres, such as the Herero massacre, as forerunners of the Holocaust;
- War and wartime memories, specially about World Wars I and II;
- Population transfers and ethnic cleansings as pan-European traumas (for example, the Armenian genocide or the Ukrainian Holodomor);
- Soviet communism;
- The Shoah as Europe’s negative founding myth.

At that time, he saw the possible problems caused by the imposition of the Holocaust as “the matrix for dealing with communist state crimes against humanity across the whole of Eastern Europe” (Leggewie 4), which might lead “these nations to exploit this consensus [Eastern European countries having been victims of the Soviet empire] in order to relativize or conceal their participation in the murder of the Jews” (Leggewie 5).

This is exactly what has happened over the years and what Jelena Subotić studies in her book. As Eastern European states have pursued EU accession, and engaged in Europeanization and the associated remaining of collective identity, they have been forced to confront the EU-governed narrative of the Holocaust as a defining event of twentieth century European memory (Stańczyk). This

has triggered the offset of one memory against the other and Subotić analyses whose interests are served in post-communist countries by the trivialization, relativization and comparison of the Holocaust with the crimes of communism (Háberman 164). Describing what she calls “memory appropriation” or “victimhood nationalism”, in chapter one she sets her theoretical scaffolding, using Michael Rothberg’s competitive memory theory and Jeffrey Alexander’s study of the insensitive attitude of traumatized social groups to the suffering of others.

Chapter two describes what she calls memory inversion in Serbia, where Serbs are presented as abstract Jews persecuted by Croats, something which erases the memory of the industrial extermination of Belgrade Jews. The official Serbian remembrance of the Holocaust does not specifically discuss the persecution of Jews, something which has enabled the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators as “freedom fighters” against communism.

Chapter three discusses Croatian memory divergence, which decouples the Holocaust from fascists mass murders of Serbs and hides crimes, such as those committed at Sisak children’s camp. Looking for a usable past in a homogenous ethnic nation-state, Croatian authorities have only found the Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi satellite which existed during World War II.

Chapter four studies the Lithuanian case of memory conflation, where the memory of the Holocaust is combined with the memory of the Soviet occupation, considered together as a “double genocide”, playing down the horrors perpetrated by local collaborators and shifting all responsibility to the Nazis. This asymmetry in the perception of the Holocaust and the Gulag does not constitute a case of Holocaust denial, but rather its use as smokescreen to emphasize local suffering or downplay local responsibility.

Subotić’s conclusion is 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. Leggewie went beyond that and stated that there would only be transnational European memories when all Europeans, including migrant Europeans (insofar as they are recognized as citizens), take on responsibility for crimes and events that lie outside their own sense of their ethnic origins; and when, at the same time, European human rights and asylum policy could be applied in international crises without being used as a normative shield for protecting Eurocentric interests (Leggewie 15).

In general, reviewers praise Subotić’s work, but identify some downfalls in her book. Subotić studies official memory actors—museums, educational institutions, cultural ministries, and public intellectuals—but somehow disregards local historians, cultural and artistic creators, and others who prove that memory practices in post-communist countries do not come in only one voice (Winestock 471); she does not analyze municipal and grassroots memory projects which exist alongside state-sponsored remembrance (Stańczyk), a material which may have provided a different picture of Holocaust remembrance in Eastern Europe. Apart from that, it would have been useful to study Holocaust memories alongside the different memorial zones identified by Steafn Troebst: the clear anti-communist consensus in the Baltic states, Croatia, and Slovakia; the controversial interpretation of communism one can find in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or Ukraine; the ambivalence or indifference towards communism found in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia or Albania; and the high degree of continuity and authoritarianism found in Russia, Belarus, Moldova or the Commonwealth of Independent States. Maybe different patterns of Holocaust remembrance have something to do with different points of view about the communist rule in those countries.

A Spanish coda

In these times of fake news and ersatz memories, any consensus can be shattered by actors who claim a different point of view. This is what is happening right now in Spain. After a bloody civil war (1936-

1939) and forty years of Franco's right-wing dictatorship, which memorialized right-wing victims while erasing the memory of left-wing resistance against fascism, and thirty years of democracy, only in 2007 a law passed "to recognize and expand the rights of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and the dictatorship" (Law 52/2007, December 26th), the so-called Historical Memory Act, now being expanded by draft legislation on democratic memory. This legislation has been considered a direct attack by alt-right and neofascist groups, who talk about a "false, partial, and sectarian history" (Bartolomé) and have created an Association of victims of the Popular Front (the left-wing coalition in power in 1936), which pretends to homage the members of the Italian Corpo Truppe Volontarie, the German Condor Legion or the Portuguese *viriatos* who fought alongside Franco and the rebel troops. Their contention is the Spanish civil war was not provoked by Franco's military coup but rather was a reaction against the killings under the Popular Front rule and, therefore, he tried to stop what they are now calling a massacre. They claim that they are trying to "close open wounds" and present themselves as victims, but by contesting historiographical consensus and honoring fascist troops, in fact, they only try to hide the fact that they are the perpetrators' heirs.

As we can see, Subotić's study of memory appropriation and victimhood nationalism can be applied to controversial uses of memorialization in a different setting. Ultimately, it is always a question of historical manipulation and the perverse use of memory to honor criminals and not their victims for contemporary political purposes.

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