

Appropriating Memory in the Name of the State

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Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism, by Jelena Subotić, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2019, 264 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1501742408.

Jelena Subotić's *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* has already received such broad recognition and numerous awards that its invaluable contribution to memory studies likely does not need repeating. It is not only a study of Holocaust remembrance in particular, but contributes broadly to our understanding of memory appropriation by the state, through a careful and vivid analysis of its transformation over time in several Eastern and Central European countries. Subotić provides a study of how memory can serve as a strategic tool for reinforcing state interests. The central argument of the book is that the states in question – Croatia, Lithuania, and Serbia – engage in memory appropriation in order to qualify their ontological insecurities (14). The strategies include “memory inversion,” appropriating the Holocaust to emphasize crimes against them (primarily in Serbia), “memory divergence,” placing blame for the genocide on German Nazis (Croatia), or “memory conflation,” wherein Holocaust memory is combined and equated with Communist crimes (Lithuania, 15). These appropriation strategies, which overlap and are combined in the various states, allow states to paint themselves as the ultimate victims, absolving them of responsibility for their role in Holocaust crimes. The danger, of course, is that this not only set up the false equivalence between victims of Communism and of the Holocaust, allowing for the relativization of Nazi collaboration as anti-Communist resistance, but also because it banalizes and trivializes the specific suffering of the Jewish population.

A few words on the theoretical framework and methodology prior to delving into the contributions and critical reflection of the book is due. The theoretical contribution is in the field of ontological security studies, more broadly situated in international relations, revolving around the central premise that all states participate in Holocaust memory appropriation in order to moderate their ontological insecurities. Different forms of memory appropriation occur as states experience ontological insecurity: “conflict over political memory can be seen as an example of a critical situation that destabilizes both state identity and its relationships with other states” (28). The book thus deepens our understanding of how the past affects the present and the present uses the past, across time and space. Across time, it tracks memory politics through the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist project, showing how the immediate post-WWII agendas differed from the national consolidation agendas of the 1990s and 2000s. And across space, it sheds light on the dynamic relationship between states, wherein the national identity narratives are always in dialogue with other states and in relationship to Europe, showing how the trajectories of the various East Central Europeans related to each other and were shaped by European memory politics (30). This spatio-temporal dimension is methodologically explored by an analysis of a wide range of sources, including newspaper coverage of commemorations, court cases, textbooks, public speeches, museum exhibitions and catalogs, theater, film, and literature sources, as well as in-depth interviews and oral testimonies (13). Chapter 1 presents the theoretical argument on ontological insecurity and memory politics, Chapters 2–4 focus on

the three case studies – Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania – while the fifth and concluding chapter takes “a broader view of the importance of Holocaust remembrance after communism” by looking at other states in the region, including Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and other Baltic and Balkan states.

The contributions of the book are manifold and have been praised by others, so I will reflect on two key contributions that in my mind set this book apart. First is the moral and policy dimension of the contribution. *Yellow Star, Red Star* contributes to the broader dialogue on the question of how we as societies should remember and deal with the past. Is there a way to allow for the co-existence of understanding the Holocaust as a uniquely traumatic event, while also allowing for a contextual understanding of the other local traumas in ways that preserve the uniqueness of these local memories? Can a better (more nuanced, more responsible, more accurate) understanding of Holocaust trauma enable better understandings of these other traumas, or are these memories necessarily competitive, leading to misappropriation or reappropriation? What are ways to commemorate own’s own victims (e.g., a nation’s own suffering under the Nazis, or Communists, or both) while acknowledging local collaboration with Nazis and not turning a blind eye to what happened to the Jews specifically? In other words, how can we make enough room for both our own suffering and the suffering of others (xv)? This underlying theme is woven throughout the entire book. The need to emphasize crimes in which the state was the victim in turn leads to appalling consequences: not only does the state absolve itself of responsibility for crimes in which it was the perpetrator, but in some cases ultimately results in renewed violence against Jews. Subotić shows how Holocaust memorialization as it stands today has both contributed to an erasure of Jewish suffering, but in some cases led to renewed anti-Jewish violence via a surge in anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and new supremacist movements. This is clear for instance in the Polish case, where nationalists attempted to remove the “education of shame” because of its supposed minimization of Polish suffering in the “Polocaust” (206). As such, this game of “victim Olympics,” via not being able to make space for someone else’s suffering alongside one’s own, can explain the global emergence of the politics of exclusion (toward Jews, Muslims, the Roma, academics...) and extremist movements.

Relatedly, most academic work on WWII memory in the region has focused on local memory wars, without focusing specifically on the memory of Jewish suffering. For instance, scholars have examined how, over the course of the past 30 years of memory politics, fascists have become anti-fascists (because they fought against the Communists/Soviets) and anti-fascists became fascists (because of the two totalitarianisms narrative: “fascist Communism”). However, in focusing on local memory wars, scholars (myself included) are analytically complicit in foregrounding the “us vs. them” narrative, in which “us” is the national group (Serbs, Croats, Lithuanians) and “them” is the fascists or communists/Soviets. We have examined the rehabilitation of fascist collaborator Nedić in Serbian historiography, for instance, whose collaboration is justified by the claim that he was just trying to save Serbian lives and collaboration was simply necessary (Lazić 2011; Đureinović 2020). But our analyses have again foregrounded the issue on Serbian vs. Nazi suffering without analyzing what happened to Jews specifically as a result of Nedić’s decision to collaborate. Numerous articles have analyzed the reinterpretation of the Jasenovac narrative, which Serbia uses to place itself as ultimate victim and Jews simply one other group that suffered during the Nazi occupation (victims of concentration camps as typically described as “Serbs, Jews and Roma”), and Croatia has used it to absolve itself of responsibility by reinterpreting it as “victims of fascism” instead of “victims of Croatia” (Pavlaković 2019; Zaremba 2022). Yet no research has focused on the memory of the Staro Sajmište concentration camp, where the primary victims were Jews (Bajford 2009). In other words, academic research has focused precisely on those “us vs. them” narrative battles that the states themselves have invested in, regrettably contributing to the collective amnesia about Jewish suffering in particular. Instead, Subotić’s book puts the memory of the Jewish people at the forefront, setting aside the Serb vs. Croat or Lithuanian vs. Soviet narrative and reinventing the question of local responsibility and local

collaboration toward Jews. Subotić's book demands accountability for the effects of Nazi collaboration on Jews and analyzes the collective amnesia about local suffering – and contemporary absence! – of Jews.

I will now turn to some questions that arise after reading *Yellow Star, Red Star*. First, the book does an excellent job of showing how different states (mis)use Holocaust memory in different ways, sheds light on the different trajectories over time, and emphasizes the evolution and fluidity of narratives over time. Instead of taking memory as static, through reading the book, we learn how the “good guys” can become “bad guys” over time, and vice versa. What would be interesting to see is more comparison with the trajectories of Poland, the Czech Republic, and other (not just East) European states: are there differences/similarities in memory appropriation in East/post-Communist vs. West European states? Subotić mentions that the three strategies employed by Serbia, Croatia and Lithuania (memory inversion, divergence, conflation) overlap; are there patterns to the strategies chosen across other East European states? Particularly, if states' ontological insecurity is what leads to memory appropriation, what can we conclude about the differences in the states' trajectories of memory appropriation? Subotić's concluding chapter mentions Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, though does not analyze them as thoroughly as the three central states in question, leaving open the question of variation across space. We can hope for a sequel to *Yellow Star, Red Star* to learn about the strategies used and trajectories in other contexts.

The question of variation in state strategies leads to the question of causality. As Subotić writes, for Croatia, “this revisionism has happened not in spite, but as a result of the EU's own practices of remembrance, especially its reductionist interpretation of the twentieth century as an era of two totalitarianisms, equal in their criminal nature” (149). Can we assume that particular developments – like the resentment of Europe's imposition of a particular kind of Holocaust remembrance – are what led to the development of particular memory strategies? Or was Europe's normative Holocaust remembrance in response to the historical revisionism in many East European states in the 2000s? For instance, the main argument – that the radical anti-Communism of the “two totalitarianisms” narrative stemmed from state ontological insecurity – would imply that we could expect similar responses from states with similar ontological insecurities. Yet Holocaust remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, for instance, did not lead to radical forms of anti-Communism; historiography regarding WWII resistance has remained remarkably similar to that of Socialist times (Mihajlović Trbovc and Pavasović Trošt 2017).

One related question that arose while reading the book is an issue I have grappled with in my own research: while it is relatively straightforward to establish what is the official state meta-narrative, as the narrative is communicated through school curricula, official holidays, etc., and Subotić has done superbly, it is more complex to establish how a narrative becomes hegemonic in the first place. We know that many social and political actors are involved in memory politics, contributing to the existence of “countermemories” (Levy 2010) and what Ashplant has termed “oppositional” and “sectional” narratives: narratives that “achieved the level of open public articulation, but still have not yet secured recognition within the existing framework of official memory” (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2004). In Subotić's book, the main actor is the state, and she is focused on data that demonstrate actions of the state: newspaper coverage of commemorations, museum exhibitions and catalogs, history textbooks (13). Subotić does include other sources of data – such as oral testimonies, public speeches, and commemorations not endorsed by the state – which give us insight into the role of the public, but the precise relationship between the hegemonic meta-narrative and individual or public acceptance of or rejection of these narratives could be more elaborated upon. Similar can be said about the other voices of memory, like local and regional actors, of which many have not accepted the state's appropriation of memory and actively fight against its imposition into the public sphere. In other words, the multiplicity of actors and the local contestation of the state's memory narratives receives a backseat in favor of state (largely conservative and right-wing) practices. To be clear, the emphasis on official state

policies is of most importance, as states have the power, authority, and resources to impose their view in the public sphere, and the issue of state appropriation is the central question of the book, so this remark is more concerned with a potential book sequel than it is a critique of the existing book.

Finally, I will turn to the question of the role of the EU and the “West,” which unfortunately does not get developed enough in (and is likely beyond the scope of) the book. Subotić’s argument is that states must fit their national identities into the Western European ideological space and have accordingly adapted European memories of the Holocaust, including the “never forget” narrative of Holocaust remembrance, which cast the actors as fascists vs. Jews (allowing states to avoid their own responsibility for collaboration and crimes committed by the state), and the coupling of Communism and fascism (which allowed states to portray collaboration as anti-Communism). However, the effect of the West on memory politics in the region is much more complex. As Ana Milošević has extensively argued (Milošević 2017; Milošević 2019; Milošević and Trošt 2021), the relationship between European actors and East-Central European countries has both a top-down dimension, where memory politics are imposed by the EU via European Parliament and Council of Europe resolutions, soft laws, and pressure on governments of EU candidate countries that want to signal their alignment with EU norms of remembrance, and a bottom-up dimension, where states and memory entrepreneurs strategically use the EU framework as a political tool to pursue their own interests, leading to regional power imbalances between countries already in the EU and those still aspiring for membership. This intricate power play between the EU and local actors and the complexities of the different actors involved gets somewhat brushed aside for the sake of generalization of the “West” as a unified memory actor.

Ultimately, though, my objections to *Yellow Star, Red Star* contradict each other – I first challenge Subotić to provide a more systematic overview of different strategies and trajectories across the different countries, but I then ask for a more nuanced understanding of the local actors and contexts – which in and of itself points to the unquestionable contribution of the book. It contains just enough of local specificity, context, individual voices, but also a birds-eye view allowing for generalization and the big punch-line of the book: the importance of studying and understanding Holocaust remembrance and its (mis)appropriations. It calls on the public, the EU and scholars alike, to come back to the question of responsibility and ask ourselves how the European Holocaust narrative of “never forget” counterintuitively turned to collective amnesia of Jewish suffering, or worse – its transformation into radical exclusionary and xenophobic movements.

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