

Jelena Subotić. *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 328 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-4240-8.

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Holocaust commemoration as an expansion of Holocaust memory studies entered scholarship in the 1990s with the seminal works of Tom Segev (*The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* [1991]), James Young (*The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning in Europe, Israel, and America* [1993]), and Peter Novick (*The Holocaust in American Life* [1999]). Michael Steinlauf's groundbreaking work on Holocaust memory in Eastern Europe, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (1996), complemented these works that dealt, mostly, with Western and Israeli Holocaust remembrance. Since then, the field of Holocaust memory has proliferated in the last two decades, transforming the Holocaust from an event remembered as committed by specific historical agents (Germans and their collaborators) to a symbol of universal evil.[1] The memory of the destruction of European Jews, or, perhaps, its postmemory (considering that its carriers are second and third postwar generations), has acquired cosmopolitan and global qualities, which involve its "universalization, de-territorialization, decontextualization and mediatization." [2]

Surprisingly not included in this globalized trend of Holocaust memory are the countries of Eastern Europe, where the mass murder of the Jews took place. This region is, likewise, conspicu-

ously under-researched in the otherwise impressive literature of Holocaust memory. Apart from Steinlauf's work, John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic recently edited a comprehensive volume—*Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (2013)—analyzing the evolution of Holocaust commemoration and education in postcommunist countries. The essays included in this volume begin to fill the long-standing geographic gap in Holocaust scholarship.

Jelena Subotić, professor of political science at Georgia State University in Atlanta, continues this current refocusing of Holocaust memory studies on Eastern European countries. A point of departure of her concise and impressive book is the asymmetry of Holocaust memory between Western and Eastern Europe. In the West, the Holocaust slowly came to be recognized as the process of exclusively Jewish annihilation and became absorbed as a foundational memory of common European identity. More recently, the Holocaust acquired universal meanings, to the extent of the "disappearance" of Jews from Holocaust commemoration, "raising the essential moral questions about human nature and the nature of modernity." [3] In contrast, Eastern Europe dwells on the experience of communism as the foundational trauma of its identity. Within that memory

under communism, the destruction of the Jews was part of antifascist resistance or national martyrology, which submerged the distinction of Jewish experience. Lately, Holocaust memory in that region strives to find its place in relation to Western memory. The two metonymies of twentieth-century industrial killing—Auschwitz and the Gulag—came to symbolize a conflict of competing European memories that cannot be reconciled.

Subotić introduces her intricate historical analysis by revealing a memory “problem” within her own family—specifically, her grandfather who played a “dual role” as an alleged hero of the Serbian resistance and as someone who was also implicated in organizing Jewish deportations. This personal perspective illustrates how the political invades the personal by making demands on individuals from several morally ambiguous vantage points. It also demonstrates the reverse dynamics—how personal equivocal involvements complicate and challenge the bystander category, which continues to “make scholars restless.”[4] To be sure, the Hilbergian triad of victims/perpetrators/bystanders can be applied with greater accuracy to Western Europe, where mass killings did not take place. In the East, however, witnessing what Omer Bartov termed the “communal genocide,” the necessities of survival placed individuals in more complex social and, consequently, moral roles.[5] In the case of Nazi allies, the quandaries of defining the resisters, rescuers, traitors, and collaborators are particularly stark. It is possible that Subotić’s grandfather could represent a significant percentage of the population in Nazi-allied states. Their moral allegiances were difficult to untangle. “This story,” the author emphasizes, “reflects the complex nature of collaboration and rescue, responsibility and memory. Some people collaborated out of an ideological affinity with the fascist cause. Some collaborated out of careerism, others because they did not know how to get out of the situation they found themselves in, or out of fear, insecurity, or cowardice. Some ... seem to have worked for the occupying regime, but also helped

many people by sharing the information granted by their high positions” (p. xiv). Ultimately, Subotić notices that her “family narrative, then, was one of our own suffering,” as were most narratives of non-Jewish victims of the Second World War in Eastern Europe (p. xv).

From a diachronic perspective, the book investigates and meticulously dismantles the facades of those narratives in postcommunist countries as they appropriate Holocaust memory. While seeking accession to the European Union, former communist states found themselves under two conflicting pressures to create their new identities: the appeal of prewar anticommunist ethos on the one hand, and the obligation to align themselves with Western European mandate to commemorate the Holocaust as the paradigmatic evil of the last century on the other. To achieve that goal, the precommunist past had to be whitewashed of fascist and antisemitic elements, while the adaptation to the EU standards of Holocaust commemoration resulted in attempts of memory reconciliation by promoting the idea of “two totalitarianisms” and “the double genocide theory,” implying a symmetry between the Nazi and communist mass murders (p. 30). Expanding on a thesis of memory competition, Subotić demonstrates how, by favoring the equation of communism and fascism, “Holocaust remembrance and imagery” are being appropriated to “delegitimize communism” (p. 6). At the same time, the unprocessed memory of communist persecutions challenges EU’s insistence on the primacy of the Holocaust for European identity and, instead, encourages postcommunist states to promote the concept of equivalence of “two totalitarianisms.”

For her structural lens, Subotić applies the concept of “ontological insecurities,” which made a phenomenal career in political science: first used in psychology, it was transferred to sociology in 1990 and has since been broadly applied in the field of international relations (p. 27). While all states experience “ontological insecurities” in time

of transitioning identities, Subotić's work analyzes postcommunist states that belong to or aspire to access the demands of liberal democracy, especially those of the EU. The author's gaze is on a mezzo level, focusing on the government politics of commemoration manifested primarily through monuments, museums, and commemorative practices. The significance of this approach is invaluable, as there has been a dearth of works dealing with Holocaust monuments in Eastern Europe, especially from a comparative perspective.[6] Focusing on Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania, Subotić analyzes the appropriation of Holocaust memory, which is its *misuse* to serve current ideological needs, and carefully distinguishes it from denial and trivialization. Memory appropriation, she explains, happens when "the memory of the Holocaust is used to memorialize a different kind of suffering, such as suffering under communism, or suffering from ethnic violence perpetrated by other groups." By a thorough exposition and scrutiny of memorials—the "products of mnemonic practices"[7]—the author translates the process of the politics of Eastern European identity building and proves that this process is part of deliberate politics of postcommunist governments, "which are basing their contemporary legitimacy on a complete rejection of communism and a renewed connection to the precommunist, mythically nationally pure, and, above all, ethnic character of states" (p. 9).

The first chapter presents the theoretical framework for the analysis of Eastern European states, which were anxious to enter the "family" of Western Europeans after the fall of communism but were also concerned with emphasizing "the story of their suffering." Subotić notices that, parallel to this process, Western democracies largely ignored their poor cousin Eastern Europe and did not acknowledge the trauma of communism that lay at the heart of postcommunist identity. This lack of recognition created an Eastern resentment toward the West's commemoration of the Holocaust as a "foundational European narrative" (p. 31). This resentment covers deep anxieties: the

fear of discovery of the "dark past" that cannot be incorporated to the Western Holocaust commemorative narrative and the story of collaboration and participation in (and even benefitting from) the Holocaust, both of which are being erased or relativized from postcommunist memory.

In the remaining chapters, Subotić discusses the strategies of Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania to create "cognitive consistency in the face of moral transgressions" (p. 33). The three study cases are well selected for a variety of reasons: the first two states, emerging after the genocides of the 1990s, appear to compete for primacy in being the most "advanced" in Holocaust memorialization. Nevertheless, Serbia and Croatia are misusing the production of Holocaust commemoration to "speak to each other" about the atrocities perpetrated against each other.

The choice to research Lithuanian Holocaust memory is extremely valuable: the country, whose own citizens killed Jews mainly before the arrival of Germans, is resisting attempts to look into its "dark past." In contrast to Poland, whose work on the reckoning with such a past is probably the most sophisticated, Lithuania did not create even a modest group of scholars advocating for a serious and honest reassessment of the role of Lithuanians in the extermination of the Lithuanian Jewry. Nevertheless, a popular, non-scholarly book *Mūsų šaliai* ("Our people") (2016) broaching the subject of Lithuanians' liquidating Jewish neighbors, became the country's bestseller. Its famous author, Rūta Vanagaitė, tackled the question of Lithuanian murders of the Jews, including Nazi collaborators in her own family. A scandal broke out, however, after an interview in which she declared that Adolfas Ramanauskas, a national hero of anti-Soviet resistance, was "not a hero," as he, allegedly, might have been a KGB informant. It was then that Vanagaitė's books were withdrawn from all bookstores, while she suffered personal and professional attacks that forced her to leave Lithuania.

This persisting resistance to reconsider Lithuanians' war behavior is different from simple appropriation of the Holocaust narrative for other contemporary political gains, as is the case with Serbia and Croatia. The Lithuanian discourse is primarily directed at rejecting any accusations of Lithuanian complicity in the act of Jewish extermination and in emphasizing "the double genocide theory," born and most pronounced in the Baltic states.[8] The taboo of Lithuanian pro-Soviet collaboration might be applied to muzzle any discussion on controversial topics of the Holocaust.

Following the three case studies, Subotić provides a useful outline of several postcommunist states and their approaches to coping with the demands for common European Holocaust memory. Their strategies vary from appropriation, instrumentalization, marginalization, and distortion, to outward denial. While the scope of the chapter is more general, the choice merely to sketch the problem rather than to create equally comprehensive analyses of the three main study cases was a wise one: the phenomenon of appropriation of Holocaust memory has proven to be a working model for other similar sociopolitical cases, which may be explored by other scholars.

The book was impeccably researched, drawing on a variety of sources, including recent scholarship, interviews, in situ investigation, and archival records. It is precise and meticulous in putting forward thoroughly supported claims. It is also written with passion; one reviewer has even called it a "fine, compelling and *angry* book" (emphasis added).[9] Perhaps what seems to be "anger" is actually a certain imbalance in perspective: Subotić acknowledges that in 1995 the European Parliament demanded that Eastern and Central European countries apologize publicly for local complicity in the Holocaust (as well as oblige themselves to return Jewish property) but did not extend the same demand to any Western government, which has contributed to the resentment against the West. Western Europe also did not take

responsibility for the creation of the postwar order, which handed Joseph Stalin control over Eastern Europe. Eager to join the structures of the EU, Eastern European states accepted the new regulation about the European Holocaust Memorial Day, but they also created their own commemoration of the victims of communism that used Holocaust memorialization as a template. While Subotić concedes that belonging to the EU did not challenge Western Holocaust memory to conduct any "soul searching," apologies, or restitution of Jewish property, her perspective nevertheless appears to be Western-Eurocentric (p. 35). It is understandable that her focus is on the strategies of appropriating Holocaust memory by postcommunist states for their own political goals, yet her overall analysis would have benefited from including a perspective of mutual East-West influences and reactions in this process. As it is, she presents Holocaust memory in Eastern Europe as a warped response to desired participation in the structures of the EU. Unfortunately, the mirror image of this relationship, the EU's discomfort and anxiety of Western intellectuals at the attempts to create transnational memory of Stalinist crimes, is missing; it would have provided a complementary context of this process in Eastern Europe.[10] Acknowledging the fact that Western Europe feared and resisted "the theory of two genocides" would have helped traverse the Holocaust memory in Eastern Europe *not* as a hegemonic process but partly as a reactive one. In other words, had Subotić appreciated how Western tendency to commemorate the Holocaust as the paragon evil of the twentieth century made postcommunist nations feel displaced in their suffering, perhaps she would have provided a more disinterested view of the region's politics of Holocaust memory; she would have delivered a more encompassing perspective of understanding the painful desires for rehabilitation of prewar regimes with their fascist values by populations that were deeply traumatized by the communist political system.

Apart from this minor criticism, *Yellow Star, Red Star* is an excellent, in-depth analysis of current political processes afflicting postcommunist Holocaust memory. It should be required reading for anyone studying Eastern Europe, Holocaust memory, and the current rise of ethno-nationalism.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 5-85.

[2]. Marek Kucia, "Holocaust Memorials in Central and Eastern Europe: Communist Legacies, Transnational Influences and National Developments," *Remembrance and Solidarity Studies* 5 (2016): 161. On postmemory, see Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (1992): 3-29. On cosmopolitan and global qualities, see Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 87-106.

[3]. Tony Kushner, "Pissing in the Wind"? The Search for Nuance in the Study of Holocaust 'Bystanders,'" *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 9, no. 2 (2000): 57.

[4]. Hana Kubátová and Michal Kubát, "Were There 'Bystanders' in Topolčany? On Concept Formation and the 'Ladder of Abstraction,'" *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 4 (2018): 563.

[5]. Omer Bartov, "Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Bucacz, 1939-1944," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 491-92.

[6]. See Kucia, "Holocaust Memorials in Central and Eastern Europe," 161.

[7]. Jeffrey K. Olick, "From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll

and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 151-62.

[8]. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 18.

[9]. Tim Judah, "Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism," *Financial Times*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/9014e11e-3c79-11ea-b84f-a62c46f39bc2>.

[10]. Aleida Assmann, "Transnational Memories," *European Review* 22, no. 4 (2014): 546-56.

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