

Dora Komnenović

Reading between the Lines

Reflections on Discarded Books and
Sociopolitical Transformations in (Post-)Yugoslavia

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Abstract

(Public) libraries are expected to regularly weed and/or to discard parts of their collection. International standards and national regulations make sure it is carried out appropriately and that no book gets permanently lost. The perception that non-librarians have of discarding is often diametrically opposed to the way professionals think about it. In fact, the weeding and discarding that ensued after the collapse of communism were seen as a “de-ideologization” of library holdings by some and as “bookicide” by others. This research project, anchored in the field of (post-)Yugoslav studies, investigates the modalities of book removal from public libraries in Croatia and Slovenia in the 1990s and the sociopolitical implications thereof.

While the post-1989 “cleansing” of libraries might not be a (former) Yugoslav idiosyncrasy, certain developments in Croatia make this case stand out. A study on the topic, abundant newspaper accounts and meagre quantitative data available on the discarding of books in Croatia are confronted with personal recollections and figures from Slovenia in order to determine the extent to which this standard library practice was affected by the political, social and economic transformations concomitant with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Based on interviews and the close reading of documents, reports and newspaper articles, this volume offers an empirically founded study of the inconsistencies and lack of implementation of regulations in the field of librarianship and of the media representations thereof in Croatia, as opposed to a seemingly more synchronized environment in Slovenia.

Imprudent political statements, terminological unclarity, the lack of reaction from professional librarians’ associations to cases of inappropriate discarding and the overall polarization of society partially (but not exclusively) due to the War of Independence are identified as the main reasons for the politicization of the issue and the subsequent antagonism between librarians and non-librarians. The second part of the book focuses on the fate of discarded

volumes and by doing so provides an innovative and original interpretation of postsocialist transition and post-Yugoslav memory. Whether on the shelves of a library, in film or as objects in exhibitions and artistic performances, two books in particular and “the discarded” in general are analyzed as “memory triggers” and thus potential vehicles for a critical examination of the recent past.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALA	American Library Association
CEE	Central-Eastern European
COBISS	Cooperative Bibliographic Systems and Services
EU	European Union
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (<i>Savezna republika Jugoslavija</i>)
HDZ	<i>Hrvatska demokratska zajednica</i> Croatian Democratic Union)
HKD	<i>Hrvatsko knjižničarsko društvo</i> (Croatian Library Association)
HNS – LD	<i>Hrvatska narodna stranka – liberalni demokrati</i> (Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
IFLA/FAIFE	International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions / Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Advisory Committee
IUC	Inter-University Center Dubrovnik
JNA	<i>Jugoslovenska/Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija</i> (Yugoslav people's Army YPA)
LDS	<i>Liberalna demokracija Slovenije</i> (Liberal Democracy of Slovenia)
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSK	<i>Nacionalna i sveučilišna knjižnica</i> (National and University Library)
NSM	New social movements
SDP	<i>Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske</i> (Social Democratic Party of Croatia)
SDP	<i>Stranka demokratske prenove</i> (Party of Democratic Reform)
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

SKD	<i>Slovenski krščanski demokrati</i> (Slovene Christian Democrats)
SECI	Southeast European Cooperative Initiative
SR	Socialist Republic
UGM	<i>Umetnostna galerija Maribor</i> (Maribor Art Gallery)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA	United States of America
ZKS	<i>Zveza komunistov Slovenije</i> (League of Communists of Slovenia)

Preface and Acknowledgments

“Culture is essentially a graveyard for books and other lost objects. Scholars are currently researching how culture is a process of tacitly abandoning certain relics of the past (thus filtering), while placing others in a kind of refrigerator, for the future. Archives and libraries are cold rooms in which we store what has come before, so that the cultural space is not cluttered, without having to relinquish those memories entirely.”
Umberto Eco¹

In 1989 the Berlin wall fell, Yugoslavia won the Eurovision song contest, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie for having published the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history. If someone else were to write this sentence, the selection of events that marked 1989 would probably be somewhat different. The multiplicity of perspectives would nevertheless converge towards the fact that the year is generally remembered as a turning point in history, marking the end of state socialism in Europe and therefore the beginning of a new era, that of postsocialism. Around the same time, the process of disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) culminated in a decade of wars. Consequently, former Yugoslav countries are simultaneously postsocialist, post-Yugoslav and post-conflict societies that in the past quarter century faced multiple transformations. While the political, economic and social dimensions of what is commonly referred to as transition, i.e. the shift to market economy and political pluralism have been more or less successfully studied, mostly within the paradigm of Europeanization, the transformations in the realm of culture have been predominantly approached by deploying nation-building as the primary interpretative framework. What such analyses often exclude, however, are non-state actors, as well as local forms of organization, which operate in a globalized and increasingly interdependent world that in the meantime underwent the Internet revolution. In fact, to the abovementioned list of singular events that marked the year 1989 the invention of the World Wide

1 In Carrière, J.C. and Eco, U. (2011). *This is Not the End of the Book. A conversation curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac*. London: Harvill Secker, 63.

Web (WWW) by the British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee could be added.

When a country disappears, it leaves behind material and immaterial signs of its (past) existence. Some of these buildings, institutions, monuments, books, documents, festivities, practices or rituals are then preserved, stored, or musealized; others are torn down, removed, or abolished. Some outlive the defunct country in unchanged form, while the function and meaning of others change. Still others disappear forever, or until they resurface again in the future. The outcome of these processes undoubtedly influences national identity, narrative and image, but who does the “filtering” and on what grounds? Is it even possible to talk about a rational selection process? In those circumstances, what is the fate of the material legacy of a vanished state? What role does it play?

Objects as “carriers” or “triggers” of memory are as important for groups, which do not have a memory of their own, as they are for individuals because memory “exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with ‘things’, outward symbols” (J. Assmann 2008, 111). In the novel *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Dubravka Ugrešić writes that “if the country has disappeared, then so has collective memory. If the objects that have surrounded us disappear, then so has memory of the everyday life that we lived” (Ugrešić 1998, 243). But how do these objects disappear? Can their disappearance actually induce a form of remembrance or, rather, a (critical) examination of the past?

Such changes are rather complex and cannot be unequivocally attributed to “the state” and to a top-down course of action analyzed *ex post facto* through a “before” and “after” comparison. It is solely the tension and interplay between inclusion and exclusion, memory and forgetting, the spoken and the unspoken, the lost and the found that do justice to the multi-directionality of the power discourse that underlies each sociopolitical transformation. The renegotiation of these categories during the “Autumn of Nations” in 1989 and the transition to market economy produced residues in the form of statues, street signs, memorabilia, furniture, books: “cultural remains” that covered Eastern European streets together with fallen leaves. In the following years they began to inhabit

museums, flea markets, landfills, or other less likely places. At an abstract level, among these objects' books stand out because of their non-negligible symbolic weight, as they are universally associated with knowledge, wisdom, and, more broadly, culture and memory. Even if stained and with a couple of pages missing, a book in the rubbish dump is more likely to provoke disgust than an object of everyday use spotted at the same place. Furthermore, due to their double nature as objects and symbols, throughout history books have been targets of violence directed at their authors, their contents, their language, and, consequently, the culture they are associated with. This is particularly the case in times of sociopolitical upheaval and armed conflict like the situation in the former Yugoslavia.

The demise of this multinational, multilingual, multiconfessional, politically non-aligned and economically self-managed country, the ensuing wars and different attempts at nation and state-building left their mark on books and libraries across the region. The destruction of the cultural heritage, including libraries and invaluable manuscripts, during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s is widely known and researched. But what happened with books that became "outdated" once the country ceased to exist, such as *The Selected Works of Josip Broz Tito*, volumes on the People's Liberation Struggle, disquisitions on workers' self-management, and books on Yugoslavia in general? Is there such a thing as an outdated book? The overall impression one gets from conversations with people at different levels of familiarity with librarianship and the book industry, but who all lived through the dissolution of Yugoslavia, is that in the 1990s countless books were thrown away by individuals and institutions. At the same time, school and public libraries were increasingly reviewing their collections in order to adapt them to the new sociopolitical reality. In Croatia the first public reactions to the "cleansing" of libraries started appearing almost concurrently with the numerous newspaper reports about the libraries destroyed in war-affected areas. However, opinions differed as to the cause of the "cleansing", ranging from the need to "cleanse" the Croatian culture and language of Serbian influences to an absolute civilizational barbarism. A number of newspaper

articles, a couple of lawsuits and a book on the topic ensued. These clearly emphasized the Croatian case, but to what extent was the situation in this post-Yugoslav country different from what happened in other postsocialist countries, where large cultural institutions and publishing houses were massively dumping unsold books and libraries and making room for western publications by discarding so-called “red literature”?

These were more or less the questions that I had, and the little that I knew about the topic, before reading a volume published by Ante Lešaja in 2012: *Libricide: The Destruction of Books in the 1990s in Croatia*. In it, sporadic newspaper reports about library “cleansing” in the 1990s acquire a new meaning and are placed within a different context: the destruction of books is a phenomenon, argues the author, a symptom of the exclusionism (*isključivost*) that reigned in Croatia in the 1990s. Such exclusionism consisted in the antagonization of Yugoslavia, anti-fascism, the working class, the Serbs as well as dissenters and was the main criterion for the removal of books from primarily public and school libraries, and it applied to books on Yugoslavia, socialism, the National Liberation War and anti-fascism, the Serbs, and the working class, and, finally, to any books expressing disagreement with existing policies (Lešaja 2012, 502). The idea of libraries removing “unsuitable” (*nepodobne*) books started progressively attracting my attention. Are libraries not, in Eco’s words, “cold rooms in which we store what has come before”, and frequently considered as belonging to the same category as mnemonic institutions like archives and museums? Even mnemonic institutions, public libraries in particular, are compelled to discard certain materials from time to time, but this should not be regulated by ideological criteria. Through the mandatory periodic review of their collections, libraries often face the dilemma of what to keep and what to discard, which could be regarded as a synecdoche of larger, societal processes, of what Eco calls “filtering”. However, is there any difference in the criteria used in the process? Discarding is a regular library procedure that usually passes unnoticed to most of the population. It becomes an issue when it is carried out in an inappropriate manner, is contrary to professional regulations, and/or is turned into a (political) scandal. In Croatia most

citizens have heard of library “cleansing”, but what exactly is implied by this term? How did library “cleansing” even become a topic if, as most librarians insist, politically motivated discarding occurred, if at all, only in isolated cases? Is the Croatian case a *unicum* in former Yugoslavia? Other, more general questions started piling up: To what extent do the acquisition and particularly the discarding of books in public libraries reflect sociopolitical and value changes on a national and local level and do they concomitantly act upon them? What is the degree of control the state – that is, the responsible ministry (in the case of public libraries, the ministry of culture) – exerts in this domain? Or is it, rather, the individual librarian who decides what is to be weeded (moved to a second level of access usually not open to the public), discarded (permanently withdrawn from stock) and acquired? In other words, is it a political (enforced by the state/local authority), economic (regulated by the market) or professional/individual (initiated by the librarian) decision? How do developments in the publishing industry influence libraries? Is it possible to draw any conclusions on the Yugoslav dissolution and/or the process of dealing with the socialist and Yugoslav past by looking at library practices? These are some of the questions I tackle in the first part of the volume, where the accent is on discarding in public libraries in the transition period by using examples from Croatia and Slovenia. It is preceded by an overview of the salient features of postsocialist, post-Yugoslav and post-conflict transformations, namely, the framework within which the removal of books was taking place and was being discussed. In the second part I turn my attention to books, whose lives do not necessarily end once they are discarded. How does the value of books change with the changing of the sociopolitical context? Do books have a limited lifespan like other objects and turn into rubbish? What role do garbage dumps and rubbish have in the definition of identity? To what extent can books (and libraries) be regarded as a materialization of memory?

The present study is an attempt at answering these and other questions, the product of four years of research and several creative breaks, reflection and incessant journey through the legacy of Yugoslavia and the intricacies of post-Yugoslavia. This book is a

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All errors, inadvertencies and omissions are nevertheless my own.