

Yellow Star, Red Star: Response to Critiques

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Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism, by Jelena Subotić, Cornell University Press, 2019, 264 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501742408.

There is no greater honor for an author than to respond to such generous and thoughtful engagement with one's work such as the two commentaries by Mila Dragojević and Tamara Trošt. These commentaries are that much more appreciated as both Dragojević and Trošt have contributed tremendous scholarship on memory politics and historical narratives in the Western Balkans and in many ways *Yellow Star, Red Star* builds on their own work.

While offering very kind thoughts on the contribution and importance of the book, both Dragojević and Trošt ask some challenging and tough questions. I have grouped their criticism into four buckets and will respond to them in turn. These are (a) imbalanced focus on hegemonic to the expense of minority narratives, (b) possibility for generalization/extension beyond the case studies in the book, (c) simplification of “Western” responses to East European memorialization practices, and (d) lack of subnational, regional variation.

The first bucket of criticism relates to the book's focus on state, hegemonic narratives of commemoration and a lack of sufficient attention to minority, counterhegemonic narratives. This is an important point and deserves some elaboration. It is often the danger in big-picture, bird-eye-view analyses that much of the discipline of international relations engages in of generalizing state behavior and state action. In fact, some of the foundational questions that international relations is interested in—diplomacy, foreign policy, warcraft, and so on—are questions that take the state as a unit of analysis and then “flatten” it in order to make it useful as an actor in the inquiry. The more recent interest in political memory within the field of international relations has also not escaped this paradox—how do we talk about national Polish, Hungarian, Serbian, or French memory if not to simplify what is Polish, Hungarian, Serbian, or French. But more specifically as it relates to my book, my interest was quite explicitly in dominant state narratives and the way in which they become turned into policy. It is the state that sets standards for history textbooks, the state that controls exhibitions in national museums, the state that finances the erection of public monuments and memorials, and so on. The story I wanted to tell in this book, then, was, indeed, the story about states and specifically state control and power over historical memory.

This focus on the state, however, does not mean that counternarratives are not important, and I do take seriously the critique that the book does not give them quite enough due. This is partly the function of case selection—although the three countries I describe at length (Croatia, Lithuania, and Serbia) do practice different forms of Holocaust memorialization, they do all have very strong hegemonic narratives and quite marginalized counternarratives. In all three countries, I analyzed closely that counterhegemonic narratives do exist and in Lithuania, in particular, they seem to be getting stronger. However, they are still dwarfed by the unifying national narrative of victimization and a lack of serious interest in confronting responsibility for perpetration or complicity in the Holocaust. To put it very bluntly, there need to be many more alternative memorial projects, public

talks, and short documentary films to equal the power that the state has in setting up a history education curriculum.

The second critique Dragojević and Trošt raised is about generalizability and extension of analysis to cases beyond the three that I pay the most attention to in the book. As they both acknowledge, the short extensions of the argument I offer in the Conclusion are really quite superficial and only touch on the many complexities that each new country case would bring. And yes, this critique is valid. The book is on much firmer ground when it evaluates the three primary cases than when it speculates on new ones. Having said that, I think the book's main argument—that Holocaust memory is being appropriated to instead project a different kind of national suffering—pretty much holds across the entire region.

There are certainly variations, and as Tamara Trošt mentions in her commentary, contemporary narratives in Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or North Macedonia may resemble more the communist *ancien régime* than new, postcommunist narratives that are prevalent in Central Europe. And yet, Holocaust memory appropriation and, indeed, distortion, have become some of the central features of public discourse in Poland and Hungary, as has been much documented, including on the pages of this journal. Further, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been discursively narrated by Putin as a war of "denazification," where the preposterous claim that Russia is freeing Ukraine of its "Nazis" is built on an ossified understanding of the history of World War II in Russia. This interpretation of the "Great Patriotic War" as it is often referred to in Russia sees the role of the Soviet Union as the great liberator of the East and the "cleanser" of fascist sympathizers in Ukraine and the Baltics. From that narrative, Putin has produced his claim that Russia is just continuing what the USSR had to do in 1945. Unhinged and offensive as it may sound to our ears, this narrative that Ukrainians were (and still are!) Nazis is built on an unreconstructed memory of the Holocaust, both in Russia and Ukraine, where a full historical appraisal of the responsibility of various militias with shifting alliances still needs to take place. All of this is to say that the political importance of Holocaust appropriation is quite directly visible across the postcommunist East Central European space, far and beyond the three cases I detail in the book.

The third bucket of criticism relates to the lack of sufficient differentiation between various European institutions and their responses to East Central European reimagining of the past. The European Parliament is a different type of institution with different priorities and agendas than, say, the European Commission or the Council of Europe and certainly different from its constituent states. Subsuming all of these responses as responses from "the West" or "Europe" flattens this diversity and reifies the West or Europe into the unifying forces that they are not. This concern is on point, and certainly there is much diversity among various Western European states and their own practices of remembrance. In fact, probably a more useful metric to differentiate various European responses is along political, ideological lines. The right-of-center Western European parties, especially in the European Parliament, aligned with the East and Central European right-of-center governments to jointly push for a new kind of European memory, one that decenters the Holocaust as the foundational block of European memory and instead equates it with communism. The alliance was a political, ideological one, and not one along geographic lines.

Finally, the last group of concerns has to do with the possibility of further subnational, regional diversity in practices of Holocaust commemoration and political memory of World War II more generally. As Mila Dragojević writes in her commentary, this variation is especially obvious in the case of Croatia where the memory of the war in Istria, for example, is quite different than the memory elsewhere in Croatia. I briefly touch upon this in the book and speculate that this difference has to do with the ethnic heterogeneity of the Istria region and its own unique experience of Italian occupation. But Dragojević is quite right that this variation almost certainly exists and should have been explored in more detail in other cases. Perhaps in Serbia, for example, the variation is North/South, as the northern region of Vojvodina was under Hungarian occupation during World War II, and it was also the region with more prewar Jewish presence than was the case elsewhere in what is today Serbia. There could also be a difference between urban and rural settings, and this difference

could hold in Lithuania and Croatia as well. These are all excellent points that demonstrate the depth of attention and care with which both Dragojević and Trošt approached this symposium.

Not much is left for me to say other than to offer renewed gratitude for such deep engagement with the book from two outstanding scholars. I hope the book continues its life as a resource for them and for the broader field of memory politics and narrative analysis.