
Discarding a Common Past? The “Cleansing” of Croatian and Slovenian Libraries in the 1990s and Beyond

MIREES’ Open Lecture

On December 14th 2016, Dora Komnenović, MAIA alumna and PhD Fellow at Graduate Center for the Study of Culture, Justus-Liebig University in Frankfurt am Main (Germany), delivered an open lecture to MIREES students about episodes of book cleansing carried out both by Croatian and Slovenian libraries throughout the 1990s.

Kommenović started by mentioning several terms that closely relate to the act of removing books from library shelves, even though these bear a far more violent connotation: she named *bibliocide*, which refers to the material destruction of books, for instance by burning, and whose practice can be traced as far back as at the outset of Christianity, when the Bible became a symbolic target of persecution. A similar term is *libricide*, which describes the destruction of books and even libraries, like Nazi book burnings perpetrated in the 1930s. One last term encompassing not only the elimination of books, but also the systematic attempt to erase the culture of a specific ethnic/religious/political/social group, is *culturecide*, an illustrative example of which can be, once again, the Germans stamping out of Hebrew language in the 1930s.

In this particular case, however, *cleansing* fits better to the topic, as Komnenović clarified, for two reasons. First, because the books disappeared from library shelves, or better were thrown away, but never publicly destroyed. Second, because such term is also connected to the political discourse of Yugoslav wars. By implication, it is also linked to the exaltation of the idea of “pure Croatian blood”, cleansed of Serbian elements, so as to also delegitimize the former state of Yugoslavia along with former compatriots. The lecturer continued by explaining that the discarding usually happens every two or three years, when libraries eliminate books and thus cease to own them. Numerous librarians, however, prefer to resort to “collection renewal” rather than to discard, process which is clearly accompanied by a quite negative connotation. “Collection renewal”, on the contrary, means that books remain part of the library’s property after being subject to removal off the shelves as well as off the catalogue.

Kommenović then briefly illustrated the main criteria upon which most libraries decide to opt for discard. Materials are eliminated if they are too old; if they are damaged or feature scratches; if pages are missing; if they are duplicates; and if information contained are inaccurate. She dwelt upon the weeding method used in the USA, where the policy generally follows six criteria, grouped together into the acronym MUSTIE. A book, in fact, is discarded when deemed Misleading and

factually inaccurate; Ugly and impossible to mend or rebind; Superseded by a new edition or a better book on the subject; Trivial or of no scientific/literary merit; Irrelevant to the needs and interests of the library's community; Elsewhere - the material is easily obtainable from another library.

Book removal in Slovenia and Croatia, as Komnenović told the audience, unfortunately followed a mere principle of exclusion, according to which external (Serbian and Yugoslav) traces were to be eradicated. In this respect, she recounted one remarkable episode of biased book discard, that is a scandal which took place in Ljubljana in 1992. What happened in many libraries of the capital city wasn't covered by Slovenian media, although Komnenović managed to find a short newspaper column reporting on the event. Approximately 10 tons of books were weeded off libraries and dumped in normal trash cans, allegedly because of the forthcoming digitalization process and acquirement of new books. According to Komnenović, impartial and clear criteria for discard were not set out, while in contrast digitalization and renewal were used as an excuse to get rid of those ten tons of "old" material. As the lecturer pointed out, in fact, a discarded book could either be sold, donated to cultural centers and organizations, or thrown away in designated paper recycle bins, rather than simply being dumped in trash cans.

As far as Croatia is concerned, around 2.8 million books were removed throughout the 1990s from all kinds of libraries, following Croatian independence. Differently from the case in Slovenia, Croatian author Ante Lešaja extensively wrote about it in his work *Knjigocid: Uništavanje knjiga u Hrvatskoj u 1990-ih* (Bibliocide: Destruction of Books in Croatia during the 1990s, 2012). As the lecturer told us, Lešaja documented and analyzed the widespread and systematic mass destruction of libraries' material. Books in Cyrillic alphabet, written by Serbian authors, published in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, even if by Croatian authors, had to silently disappear. So did translations of classics published in Serbia and volumes praising socialism and WWII Partisans. Among those 2.8 million books that were removed overnight from Croatian library shelves there was *In War and Revolution* (Tomo Žalac, 1988), title after which documentary *U ratu i revoluciji* ([In war and Revolution](#), 2011) by Ana Bilankov was named. MIREES students had the opportunity to watch the 15-minute documentary, projected by Komnenović, where Bilankov records her grandmother's reactions as leafing through the almost forgotten book. As soon as the elderly woman was shown a picture of herself as an elementary-school teacher during WWII, the veil of oblivion seemed to have been lifted from her memory.

On the wake of Lešaja's work, in 2015 a collective of artists organized an exhibition in Zagreb on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Operation Storm. Organizers asked visitors to bring books that are known for having been discarded in order to scan and digitalize them. At the venue, people attending the exhibition were also given the chance to read the articles collected by Ante Lešaja. As a result, 173 books were scanned and are now accessible [online](#). The seminar was really interesting and proved how micro-stories, rarely known or spoken about, can shed light on grey areas of history such as the period following the collapse of Yugoslavia.

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