Jelena Obradović-Wochnik


Since the Second World War, and in particular since the end of the Cold War, an assumption has emerged that post-conflict societies must not be permitted to sweep the traumatic and problematic past under the carpet, but instead, must seek to confront and come to terms with it. This assumption is particularly important for societies that bear legal and moral responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. These societies are the environs from which perpetrators have emerged and in which they often enjoyed broad public and political support during the halcyon days of ‘patriotic’ wars. Serbia is one important contemporary example of such a society, and Jelena Obradović-Wochnik sets out to explore if and how Serbs have come to terms with their society’s and their state’s role in the wars of Yugoslav succession.

In the introduction to her book, Obradović-Wochnik argues that much of the Serbian public sphere has been drowned out by more vocal and publicly visible protagonists. At the international level, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has ensured that the events of the 1990s are investigated, prosecuted, and projected back into the domestic political and media landscape. In Serbia, on the one hand, nationalist politicians and media have contributed to a ‘hegemonic discourse on denial of the past.’ On the other hand, human rights NGOs and advocates have ‘created a hegemonic discourse on confrontation of the past.’ Nevertheless, ‘most “ordinary” individuals would not align themselves with either view.’ They belong to a ‘silent majority.’ In this context, Obradović-Wochnik wants to examine what happens when personal narratives of the past intersect with international or other ‘official’ narratives of transitional justice.

The source material for this study stems primarily from thirty-six semi-structured interviews carried out between 2005 and 2007. All of the individuals
interviewed have been picked for their ‘ordinariness,’ i.e. they belong to neither the political nor the economic elite, nor are they involved in the NGO scene in Serbia. The book first provides a theoretical framework and a brief summary of the conflicts of the 1990s. Thereafter, it turns to an exploration of the narratives of the informants, paying particular attention to ‘the theme of denial’ and ‘victimhood.’ The book rounds off with a discussion of ‘marginalization and alternative discursive spaces.’

In terms of her use of secondary literature, Obradović-Wochnik includes a solid overview of relevant recent theoretical and empirical works relevant to the former Yugoslavia. Yet it is surprising that she does not draw extensively on the massive literature that deals with Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) in Germany and Japan. Karl Jaspers’s classic tract on The Question of German Guilt would have been particularly relevant to this work, as would Jeremy Herf’s Divided Memory, Ian Buruma’s The Wages of Guilt, or Philip A. Seaton’s Japan’s Contested War Memories. Although Obradović-Wochnik occasionally makes reference to other countries, this book is very much a case study focused on Serbia. Therefore, readers looking for detailed comparisons with other former Yugoslav societies or with notable cases in the past will have to complement this book with other readings.

Throughout the book, Obradović-Wochnik is at pains to illustrate that the narratives of ‘ordinary’ people are often blurred, uncertain, and self-defensive. They weave and meander, and cannot easily be categorized as clear cases of denial, acceptance, or confrontation with the past.

In order to demonstrate this, Obradović-Wochnik sets out to speak to ordinary ‘Serbs’ and hear their views about the events of the 1990s. As a frequent visitor to Serbia since the mid-1990s, this reviewer recognized many strands in the narratives recounted by Obradović-Wochnik’s informants. These narratives mix politics, socioeconomic challenges, and recollections of daily life since the collapse of Yugoslavia. Since Serbia was not directly affected by the armed conflicts until the NATO bombardments of 1999, these tales often involve impressions of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia as remembered through associations with refugees who came to Serbia in the 1990s. It should be noted that all the informants reside in (though they do not all stem from) Belgrade, which leads one to wonder whether the results would have been substantially different if informants from Novi Sad, Kragujevac, or Niš had been interviewed. Or what if the author had ventured into even smaller provincial towns like Zrenjanin, geographically quite far from Bosnia, and compared narratives of ‘ordinary’ people there to those of inhabitants of towns like Užice or Loznica, which are much closer to Bosnia.