

# The Confiscation of Memory

Shto by stalo vse ponjatno  
Nado nachat' zhit' obratno<sup>1</sup>

I.

I knew them because I was friendly with their son when I was a student. Stanko and Vera lived in a small two-roomed flat in the centre of Zagreb. Stanko was a retired officer of the Yugoslav People's Army, Vera a housewife. They had come to Zagreb from Bosnia. Their flat was like a little museum of Yugoslav everyday life. On the walls hung pictures of plump beauties lazing on the shores of romantic lakes densely populated by moorhens and swans. On top of the television was a Venetian gondola, on the fridge wooden herons—the most popular yugo-souvenir usually sold by Gypsies 'from Triglav to Djevdjelija'. A picture of Tito hung on the wall beside family photographs. The gleaming polish of the heavy walnut furniture (the first post-war Yugoslav-made bedroom fittings) was protected by little hand-embroidered throws. Boxes decorated with shells and other seaside mementoes with inscriptions ('A souvenir from Makarska', 'A souvenir from Cres') made a kind of diary of their summer

holidays. Those were years when everyone 'went to the sea' every summer on holidays organized by the trade unions.

On the shelves in peaceful coexistence resided various kinds of books: the ones my friend read (Schopenhauer, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard), Stanko's (books about Tito, monographs on Yugoslavia and the National Liberation War) and Vera's (cheap, paperback romances).

The flat was full not only of things but also of people, just like a station waiting-room. Through the flat came the neighbours' noisy children; they would come for a drink of water or a piece of bread spread with Vera's home-made jam. Every day Vera's friends would come, for 'a coffee' and 'a gossip'. Our friends would come as well, some of them would stop to play a game of chess and drink a glass of home-made Bosnian plum brandy with Stanko.

Vera kept preserves for the winter under the massive walnut double bed. There were tidy rows of jars of jam, gherkins, paprika, pickle and sacks of potatoes and onions. Once Vera called me into the bedroom, dragged a plastic box of soil out from under the bed and proudly showed me her sprouting tomato seedlings. Every day Vera baked Bosnian pies and fed her neighbours, friends, the neighbours' children, everyone who called in. And many people did call, drawn by the life (and the beguiling cultural syncretism!) which bubbled cheerfully in the little flat like water in a kettle.

And then the children (Stanko and Vera had a daughter as well as their son) finished their studies and left home. Concerned for their parents, the children found them another, larger, more comfortable flat. When I went to see them, Vera burst into tears accusing the children of taking away her things, her souvenirs, her furniture, they had taken everything, she had only been able to save one thing. And Vera took me into the modern bedroom and dragged a picture out from under the bed of plump beauties lazing on the shores of a romantic lake densely populated by moorhens and swans. 'I keep it under the bed. The children won't let me hang it on the wall...' she said in the hurt tone of a child.

Vera still baked Bosnian pies, only no one came any more. Stanko invited people every day for a game of chess and a Bosnian brandy, but somehow it wasn't on people's way anywhere, or they didn't feel like playing chess. Yes, the flat was certainly larger and better, but life had definitively changed its taste. In the name of a brighter future, Stanko and Vera's belongings, the guarantee of their emotional memory, had been 'confiscated'. The two old people found themselves, like fish out of water, deprived of their natural surroundings. People are not fish, so Stanko and Vera did not expire, but they had somehow abruptly aged, or at least that's how it seemed to me when I visited them.

2.

As I travelled, I knew that I would end up among people who at some stage would start talking enthusiastically about things I would not

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<sup>1</sup> These lines by the Russian avant-garde poet Aleksandar Vvedenskij contain the message that for everything to become comprehensible one should start living backwards.

understand. So it was that I once found myself in the company of some Americans who were talking about children's books, their shared cultural inheritance. 'My favourite book was *Winnie the Poob...*', I said, not quite truthfully (it wasn't until much later, when I was already an adult, that Pooh had become my favourite literary character). My acquaintances looked at me in surprise. No one ever talked about Milne. Although I had been in America many times, I suddenly found myself on unfamiliar territory. For a moment, I was a complete stranger, a being from another planet. And now, what a nuisance, this stranger would have to be told something that we never usually have to explain.

Some time ago, I happened to be in the company of some Dutch friends. After a pleasant conversation about this and that, we were overjoyed to find that we always watched the annual Eurovision song contest. The thought of the silly television spectacle aroused a childish gaiety in these grown-up people. And suddenly the atmosphere became warmer and more relaxed. For a moment we were a family, a European family.

As I travelled, I discovered that my American, Dutch, English friends and I easily talk about all kinds of things—about books and exhibitions, about films and culture, about politics and everyday life—but in the end there is always a bit of space that cannot be shared, a bit of life that cannot be translated, an experience which marked the shared life in a particular country, in a particular culture, in a particular system, at a particular historical moment. This unshareable layer in us is activated by a Pavlovian bell. And we salivate unflinchingly, without really knowing why. That unknown space in us is something like a shared 'childhood', the warm territory of communality of a group of people, a space reserved for future nostalgia. Particularly if it should happen that this space is violently taken from us.

3.

There is an old joke about the Scots who, when they get together, shout out numbers and laugh at the numbers instead of telling the jokes. Why waste unnecessary words?

I believe that I can cross cultural borders easily, but nevertheless I observe that while I may communicate with 'Westerners' with greater interest, I definitely communicate with 'Easterners' with greater ease. It somehow turns out that we know each other even when we don't, that we pick up nuances more easily, that we know we are lying even when we seem to be telling the truth. We don't use footnotes in our conversation, they are unnecessary, it's enough to mention 'The Golden Calf' and our mouths already stretch into a smile.

An encounter with an 'Easterner' is often an encounter with our own, already forgotten past. I have met Russians who enthusiastically mentioned the name of Radmila. Karaklajic<sup>2</sup> and Djordje Marjanovic<sup>3</sup> or

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<sup>2</sup> A Yugoslav pop-star who was more popular in the Soviet Union than she was in Yugoslavia.

<sup>3</sup> A completely forgotten Yugoslav 'musical cretin', somewhat like the Czech Karel Got.

proudly displayed their Yugoslav-made shoes bought in the Moscow 'Jadran' shop. I have met Chinese people who, when they heard where I was from, delightedly pronounced 'Ka-pe-tan Le-shi'<sup>4</sup> and Bulgarians who enquired with incongruous rapture about 'Vegeta'.<sup>5</sup> All these names and things hardly meant anything to me, they belonged to an early socialist Yugoslav past which I hardly knew was 'mine', but the recollection of them provoked the momentary prick of an indistinct emotion whose name or quality I was not able to determine at the time.

'If I haven't seen something for thirty or forty years, it will give me that intense "punch" of nostalgia', says Robert Opie, a passionate collector of objects from everyday life and the founder of a 'nostalgic' museum (The Museum of Advertising and Packaging) in Gloucester.<sup>6</sup>

4.

Things with a past, particularly a shared one, are not as simple as they might first appear from the perspective of the collector. In this 'post-communist' age it seems that 'Easterners' are most sensitive to two things: communality and the past. Everyone will first maintain that his post-communism is different, implying at the same time his conviction that life in his post-communism is closer to that of the Western democracies than that of the other (post-communist) countries. The 'Easterner' is reluctant to admit his post-communist trauma in public, nor does he have the will to try to articulate it. He has had enough communist traumas (he holds the copyright on them, too), but they have worn out, aged, and don't seem to hurt any more. The cursed 'homo duplex', mentally trained to separate his private life from the collective, weary of the constant ideological pressure to live facing towards the future, exhausted by the excessive amount of 'history' he has experienced, frightened by memories that keep popping up from somewhere, at this moment the 'Easterner' would most like to sink into the compliant and indifferent present, at least that's how it seems. It is only the younger and more honest of them, like the (former) East German playwright Thomas Oberlender, who will exclaim out loud, 'Why, I have two lives and one biography...!'

5.

Things with a past are not simple. Particularly at a time when we are witnesses and participants in a general trend of turning away from stable, 'hard' *history* in favour of changeable and 'soft' *memory* (ethnic, social, group, class, race, gender, personal and alien) and a new cultural phenomenon which, as Andreas Huyssen suggests, bears the ugly name of *musealization*. 'Indeed, a museal sensibility seems to be occupying ever

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<sup>4</sup> Kapetan Lesi, the handsome, brave hero of Yugoslav Partisan films shot in the early sixties, completely forgotten today. He seems to have 'died' in China as well.

<sup>5</sup> 'Vegeta', seasoning for food, a popular Yugoslav export article, can still be found in Turkish shops in Berlin or Russian shops in New York's Brighton Beach. Together with 'Minas-coffee'—known affectionately as 'minasica'—'Vegeta' has become a cult object for the Yugoslav diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> 'Unless you do these Crazy Things...', an Interview with Robert Opie, in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds, *The Culture of Collecting*, Cambridge 1994, p. 29.

larger chunks of everyday culture and experience. If you think of the historicizing restoration of old urban centres, whole museum villages and landscapes, the boom of flea markets, retro fashions, and nostalgia waves, the obsessive self-musealization per video recorder, memoir writing and confessional literature, and if you add to that the electronic totalization of the world on data banks, then the museum can indeed no longer be described as a single institution with stable and well-drawn boundaries. The museum in this broad amorphous sense has become a key paradigm of contemporary cultural activities.<sup>7</sup>

6.

If we accept the 'museum' as a paradigm of the contemporary sense of temporality, then, at least as far as European-American culture is concerned, the places we occupy in the museum and our attitude to the museum do nevertheless differ. For instance, although in the American intellectual market, the key questions of our time at the end of the century are—what is history and what memory, what is personal and what collective memory, and so on—it seems to the European outsider that the American attitude to the 'museum' is different from that of the European, particularly in the East. History, memory, nostalgia, these are concepts in which contemporary America has recognized a high-cultural therapy and, of course, commercial value. The stimulation of the recollection of different ethnic immigrant groups, encouraging the reconstruction of lost identities, opening immigrant museums, establishing chairs at American universities (which, in examining various cultural identities, are concerned with memory), the publishing industry, newspapers and television which readily commercialize the theme—all of this supports the idea of the new American obsession with 'musealization'. The American market contains everything, from documentary videocassettes of contemporary history to souvenirs of the recent past. Americans of all ages can purchase instant products to satisfy their 'historical' yearnings. And, while in America everything rapidly 'becomes the past', it seems that nothing disappears. Television broadcasts series and films which were watched once by grandfathers and are now watched by their grandsons. The old 'Star Trek' and 'Star Trek, the New Generation', the old 'Superman' and the 'Supermen' of all subsequent generations, are available simultaneously. In this way, the American lives a kind of eternal present, or at least that's how it seems to the superficial European outsider. The rich market of nostalgia seems to wipe out nostalgia, it appears that real nostalgia for something implies its real loss. But America does not know loss, or at least not in the sense that Europeans do. Thus, through the process of commercialization, but also through the elasticity of an attitude to recollection which is constantly changing (making and remaking, shaping and reshaping), nostalgia is transformed into its painless surrogate, at the same time as its object.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, London 1995, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> The artistic representation of history often follows the idea of the commercial surrogate. Thus the American artist David Lowenthal represents the holocaust by using miniature children's toys—little SS-officers, little camps and camp inmates—photographed to reproduce well-known documentary scenes.

That, I repeat, is how it appears to the European outsider. Because what our European (or Euro-ego-centric) claims an absolute right to, without the slightest hesitation, is just that: History, and an understanding of History.

7.

Because for him, the European, History has been caught up in his private life, altered his biography; he was born in one country, lived in another and died in a third; it has caused him to change his identity like shirts; it has given him a feline elasticity. Sometimes it seems to him that, like a cat, he has nine lives...

Recently Europe produced the biggest souvenir in the world—the Berlin Wall. It shattered into millions of little souvenir pieces: some turned into senseless objects and ended up in the rubbish-bin, and others into pieces of shrapnel which opened wounds which had long since healed, and made new ones. Today Europe rummages through drawers of memories, particularly those which contain the traumatic files of the First World War, the Second World War, fascism and communism. This feverish activity, connected with remembering, may have its origin in the fear of the possibility of forgetting. At this moment, Europe is concerned with repeating the process of historical guilt: the old rubbish which European countries, in the process of creating and recreating their own memory, have shoved under each other's doors, is in the process of returning to its owners. The processes are often sensitive and painful, particularly in the relationship of (former) West and (former) East Germany. The politics of remembering is connected also with artistic questions of its representation, the media, its consumability, commercialization and morality. Europe is like the Teufelsberg with its contents bubbling out. (The Teufelsberg is the highest hill in Berlin, under its grassy surface lie millions of tons of Berlin ruins piled up after the Second World War). Old souvenirs which had previously surfaced—flags, relics, red and yellow stars, and black swastikas—are joined by new, still warm grenades, bullets and bombs freshly arrived from Bosnia.

8.

But let us return to a detail from the beginning of this story. Why did I tell my American acquaintances that my favourite book was *Winnie the Pooh*? Perhaps because for a moment I felt lonely, perhaps I wanted to be able to join them in the warmth of the collective steam of nostalgia by conjuring up a shared childhood, or perhaps, most likely, because I realized that an honest answer would have demanded too many explanatory footnotes and in the end would have remained untranslatable.

My favourite children's book was *The Hedgehog's House*. This little, warm, innocent book became the property of generation after generation of children born in Yugoslavia. Its author was Branko Copic. I knew a circle of Zagreb students who studied Lacan, Foucault and Derrida assiduously, but proclaimed the 'silly' but 'dear old *Hedgehog's House*' their cult book and amused themselves by reciting lines by heart. It was a free, nostalgic gesture, a little test of generational memory. Branko Copic, a Bosnian Serb, committed suicide twenty years ago, having previously foretold in

a dark postscript to one of his last books, all that would happen later. Today Branko Copic is a forgotten writer.<sup>9</sup> One day, when the ruins are cleared, he will find his place, according to his blood group, in the history of Serbian literature. Maybe Bosnian, too—it depends on the generosity of spirit of the moment. In Croatia, Branko Copic no longer exists. For three reasons, it seems. The first is the war itself which is by its nature a human activity that encourages amnesia. The second is that Copic was a Serb. And the third reason is the fact that he belonged to the former, Yugoslav culture. If he still existed, the hand of a nostalgic reader might well reach for him. And at a time of erasing one memory and constructing a new one—that is, at a time of enforced amnesia and enforced remembrance—every nostalgia, even the most harmless, is, rightly, considered dangerous.

9.

If the reader envisages the state as a house, it will be easier for him to imagine that for many inhabitants of former Yugoslavia, along with the war and the disappearance of their country, many other things have been confiscated: not only their homeland and their possessions but also their memory. In the general and obvious misery, no one takes into account invisible losses. On the priority list of losses, both for the loser and for the observer, the first place is the loss of life itself, then the loss of those closest, then material goods. Only then come, if they ever do, intangible losses. To discuss them at a time of real death is inappropriate. The memory of *The Hedgehog's House* is an offensively luxurious emotion. However, this little book is not the only thing on the list of losses. And that list could be drawn up by some twenty-plus million inhabitants of the vanished country—if they really could, if they really wanted to, and if they knew who to do it for.

Over the last five years, media consumers could hear from journalists, television reporters, politicians, historians, intellectuals, writers, more or less the same story about the war in former Yugoslavia. In this interpretative package of the Balkan misfortune, there was a place for geographical maps and borders, national, religious and ethnic differences, languages and scripts, historical causes, the 'repressive' Yugoslav federal system, communism and post-communism, aggressors and victims, the repertoire of human evil, massacres, rapes and camps, the names of international negotiators and mediators, peacemakers and murderers, politicians and leaders. Numerous books have been published by historians and political analysts, journalists and writers, reporters and lovers of 'catastrophe tourism', stray inquisitives and politicians, photographers and hunters of strong emotions, experts on Eastern Europe and authorities on other people's misfortune. These numerous observers, participants and

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<sup>9</sup> A note by the Sarajevo journalist Branko Vukovic describes a moving episode: a conversation with a young Sarajevo sniper of Muslim nationality. The soldier, who had 'freaked out', said that, remarkably, the only thing that really 'turned him on' was the book *Eagles Fly Early*. This children's book, by Branko Copic, is a highly emotive topos of the cultural memory of several generations of Yugoslavs. The episode is, of course, virtually untranslatable, its emotional impact, weight and symbolism can be understood at this moment only by former Yugoslavs, and only by those of them who are resistant to nationalist hatred—a minority, that is.

intermediaries, drawn by the spectacle of death, have accused one another of moral indifference and incompetence and scored for themselves intellectual, professional and moral points (though there is no cash desk where these could be counted), fighting over other people's land.

In this heap of spoken and written words, few have mentioned the ordinary people. The anonymous citizens of the former country were and have remained the indifferent statistics of the killed, dispersed, vanished, refugees, survivors, identified by national group as Muslims, Croats, Serbs... If for the local warlords people were simply indifferent cannon fodder, I wonder how it is that among the numerous interpreters of the post-Yugoslav misery so few pity the ordinary people. The misfortune of others is free and as a rule does not hurt. We may still pity, but it is hard for us to be in a position to comprehend the true dimensions of other people's loss. And those losses include such a difficult-to-grasp, many-faceted and complex thing as collective memory.

10.

Seen from outside, at this moment, the Balkan peoples resemble demented gravediggers. They appear stubbornly to confirm the dark stereotypes others have of them. Included in that repertoire of stereotypes is the idea that, throughout their history, the Balkan peoples have done nothing other than bury and dig up human bones. Now human corpses are being eaten by starving pigs or, at best, they end up in nameless, collective graves as a dark pledge to a 'brighter' future. And truly, the Balkan peoples are, it seems, most blithe when they are in a position to destroy each other's past—headstones, libraries, churches, monuments of cultural-historical value. Now they are confirming that they are masters of destruction: only true masters know how to remove one another's memory. Nor are they any more tender towards their own past: they will wipe it out or resurrect it, according to need, with the ease of a computer.<sup>10</sup> Through their activity of digging up and ritually mourning human bones and burying fresh ones without funeral rites, the Balkan peoples are spinning in a diabolical circle: it is impossible for them to come to terms with their own past, present and future.

On a different, and more elegant, level, this could be also the story of Proust who was deprived of the 'key' to his remembrance, a madeleine. At first glance a trivial thing, an ordinary madeleine. However, in the Balkans that 'key' is taken by force from its owners. The 'key' only comes to the surface many years later, when there is no longer anyone who would know how to open the door with it, and when the confiscators, too, are long gone, when it has become a meaningless thing.

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<sup>10</sup> One of the freshest examples is the Croatian town of Knin. For several years Croatian state propaganda used Knin, 'the cradle of the Croatian kings', to construct national memory. Knin and its surroundings were populated by rebellious Croatian Serbs. In August 1995, when Knin was 'libetated'—that is, when the Croatian Serbs were driven out en masse—and when the Croatian flag was placed on the Knin fortress, the town lost not only its manipulative-propaganda value but also its 'memorial' value. At this moment, Knin is a town of ghosts, deserted, and plundered by the Croats themselves. There are identical examples on the Serb side. One such 'hot' manipulative topos in the Serbian national memory is Kosovo, inhabited by the Kosovo Albanians.



The citizens of former Yugoslavia suddenly found themselves in the situation of having two lives and one biography. The older ones could even count three lives in their biography. The new, 'post-communist', powers, taking over the knowledge of their communist predecessors or simply applying their own communist knowledge, know the great manipulative value of collective memory. For collective memory can be erased and rewritten, deconstructed, constructed and reconstructed, confiscated and reconfiscated, proclaimed politically correct or incorrect (in the communist language, suitable or unsuitable). The political battle is a battle for the territory of collective memory.

With the collapse of multinational Yugoslavia, the process began of confiscating the Yugoslav collective memory and its replacement by the construct of national memory. The war simply speeded up the process and radicalized the measures. Today, it seems, the work has been successfully completed: one memory has been erased in order to establish another.

In this process, some 'fortunates' have acquired the right to reclaim their 'property' confiscated some fifty years previously. This generous gesture depended on the general policy of the individual self-design of each former Yugoslav state, on the creation of its own national image. Thus, for instance, in Croatia the right to reclaim their confiscated memory was extended to those who lost the Second World War, the ageing political émigrés, the Ustashes, collaborators with Ante Pavelić's regime, the occasional guard in Croatian concentration camps, the occasional minister in Pavelić's government. The old men acquired a symbolic satisfaction: returning after so many years they were able here and there to see Ustasha symbols, here and there a street sign with the name of Mile Budak,<sup>11</sup> here and there the portrait of their leader. They were given the opportunity of rehabilitating their own past: they could not resist explaining to the Croatian public that the Croatian concentration camps during the Second World War were actually the most comfortable hotels. Some of them acquired a function in the new government, some published books, some found a fragment of their past and the hope of its complete restoration in a group of young Croatian neo-Nazis. Why was it they, and not others, who were given the right to the return of their property? Simply because they served the new authorities as welcome living fragments in constructing the national memory. These authorities are working rapidly on the design of the new Croatian state. By all accounts, they intend to repair Croatia's interrupted historical continuity—that famous continuity was, presumably, interrupted by the communists and the Serbs. Hence the connection with the four-year fascist Independent State of Croatia is presumably felt to be more natural than the lengthy connection with communist Yugoslavia.

All in all, today memory in the form of fragments and splinters of the past, the occasional symbol and the occasional souvenir, has been

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<sup>11</sup> Minister and Croatian writer, the signatory of the racial laws in Pavelić's Nazi statelet.

restored to the minority. For the sake of the minority, it has been denied to the majority, those for whom the construct called Yugoslavia had with time become their daily life.

12.

Today it turns out that many East European, former communist cultures had prepared their own death by collecting the material of collective memory. Thus for instance, from the first signs of its encroaching end, Russian alternative artists assiduously measured the pulse of the dying mammoth of communism. There was the work of Russian 'sots-artists'—the Soviet political kitsch in the paintings of Komar and Melamid; the Soviet everyday reality, 'byt', in the paintings and installations of Ilya Kabakov; the language of Soviet pop-songs, newspapers and the street in the poems of Dmitri Prigov; the linguistic-mental collocations taken from popular Soviet almanacs, school readers and textbooks in the linguistic creations of Lev Rubinstein; the kitsch of Soviet communal living in the installations of Larisa Zvezdochetova; apt-art, and so on. With the disappearance of its context, this whole artistic 'archaeology' of Soviet daily life has changed its original function. The sharp tones of artistic subversion have today acquired the soft patina of nostalgia. In other words, the difference between American pop-artists and their Americana and Russian sots-artists and their Sovietiana is being established today, retrospectively. For while Warhol's Campbell soup may still be bought today in every American supermarket, the icons of Soviet daily life are disappearing. Whether they like it or not, the works of Russian sots-artists have consequently become the document of a vanished reality. Thanks to the assiduous, lengthy investigation of the mythology of Soviet daily life with which these artists were concerned, the epoch which is no more has left a vast array of artistic material. The intelligentsia—philosophers, cultural historians, sociologists, anthropologists—are all today concerned with investigating the various layers of 'Soviet' cultural memory, not avoiding (and not ashamed) to investigate the mechanisms of collective and personal nostalgia.<sup>12</sup>

The picture is, of course, incomplete and not all layers of collective memory are touched on equally. Particularly not the more delicate of them: Stalinist camps, but also the many years of shared life in the multinational and multiethnic community that was the Soviet Union.

13.

What stimulates nostalgia, that prick of indistinct emotion, is just as complex as the topography of our memory. Just as in the mechanism of dream, where the oneiric encounter with an insignificant and harmless object can provoke a quite disproportionate emotion, so with the mechanisms of nostalgia, unpredictable and hard to read. Nostalgia is not

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<sup>12</sup> In her book *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass. 1994), Svetlana Boym ends her investigation of Soviet everyday life with the observation: 'And so it goes: one wishes to cure nostalgia through history, but ends up simply historicizing one's own nostalgia.'

subject to control, it is a subversive activity of our brain. It works with fragments, scents, touch, sound, melody, colour, its territory is absence, it is the capricious corrective to adaptable memory. The strategies of its activity are deceit, capriciousness, subversion, suddenness, shock and surprise. Nostalgia knows no hierarchy of values, the 'material' it deals with is not divided into good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, clever and stupid—on the contrary, some 'silliness' is often its favoured choice.<sup>13</sup>

Precisely because of the elusive nature of nostalgia, the authorities in the new states of former Yugoslavia have coined the term *Yugonostalgia* and given it an unambiguous meaning. The word is used as political and moral disqualification: the Yugonostalgic is a suspicious person, a 'public enemy', a 'traitor', a person who regrets the collapse of Yugoslavia (and hence the collapse of communism, and communism is 'Serbo-Bolshevism!'), a Yugonostalgic is the enemy of democracy. The term 'Yugonostalgia' belongs to the new terminology of war.

14.

Whether nostalgia will one day succeed in articulating its object and determining its space is hard to predict. It is equally debatable whether such a thing, nostalgia, exists at this moment and, if it does, what is its nature. It is perfectly possible that the war has put an end to collective Yugo-memory, leaving behind only the desire for as speedy as possible oblivion.

Nameless ex-Yugoslav refugees scattered over all the countries and continents, have taken with them in their refugee bundles senseless souvenirs which nobody needs—a line of verse, an image, a scene, a tune, a tone, a word. In the same bundle of memory jostle fragments of past reality, which can never be put back together, and scenes of war horrors. It is hard for their owners to communicate all these shattered fragments to anyone, and with time they wrap themselves into a knot of untranslatable, enduring, soundless distress. Those who stayed and preserved a roof over their heads will adapt more quickly, will learn the words of the new times and forget the old.

Confiscated memory behaves like an incomplete body which, from time to time, suffers from the syndrome of the 'phantom limb'. They say that in Belgrade, in Serbia, people assuage their Yugonostalgia by listening to old hits by the Zagreb pop-singers Arsen Dedic and Gabi Novak. They say that in suburban taverns in Zagreb it happens that drunk

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<sup>13</sup> At one time, I had imagined a project of collecting 'mental souvenirs' of life in former Yugoslavia and asked my friends and acquaintances to participate. Regardless of social, cultural and generational differences, I was interested in knowing whether it was possible to identify a common corpus of emotional topoi in our memory. The meagre 'material' I collected proves that such research is impossible. Predrag Dojcinovic, a poet and essayist who lives in Amsterdam exile, contributed his 'souvenir', a description of the wrapping on 'Buco' cheese, a little square of processed cheese with the hideous portrait of a fat boy on the wrapping. This detail suggests not only the capriciousness of nostalgia but also its 'untranslatability' into other cultures, in other words the exclusivity of collective memory, its absolute copyright.

people shout the songs of Lepa Brena,<sup>14</sup> wondering later in their morning hangover ‘what came over them’. They say that divided families and old friends meet in Skopje, in Macedonia—Skopje is the ‘most natural’ meeting place, there ‘Yugoslav’ products can be bought in the shops, and dusty, greasy photographs of Tito have not entirely disappeared from the walls. They say that when the Vovodina-born pop-singer Djordje Balasevic held a concert in Ljubljana, many people from Zagreb travelled there, and also many from Belgrade. They say that in Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, videocassettes of old ‘Yugoslav’ films are sold illegally. In Skopje, they say, a cassette of ‘Yugo-hits’ from the sixties is selling like hot cakes. Even the Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, one of the fiercest proponents of the confiscation of Yugo-memory, in a speech at a moment of joyful excitement because of the ‘great Croatian military victory’ in Krajina (or the expulsion of the Serbs who lived there) accidentally used a Serbism, the Serbian version of the word ‘to organize’!<sup>15</sup>

And, as we are discussing confiscators, let us mention also Slobodan Milosevic, the first ‘player’ in the Yugoslav game of destruction. Stealing the name of Yugoslavia and applying it to Serbia and Montenegro, by simply manipulating the name, in other words, Milosevic confiscated the symbolic territory of possible community, therefore also of Yugonostalgia. The ordinary, fearful citizen of former Yugoslavia, when trying to explain the simplest things, gets entangled in a net of humiliating footnotes. ‘Yes, Yugoslavia, but the former Yugoslavia, not this Yugoslavia of Milosevic’s...’ ‘Yes, nostalgia, perhaps you could call it that, but, you see, not for Milosevic, but for that...former Yugoslavia...’ ‘For the former communist Yugoslavia?!’ ‘No, not for the state, not for communism...’ ‘For what, then?’ ‘It’s hard to explain, you see...’ ‘Do you mean for that singer, for Djordje Balasevic, then?!’ ‘Yes, for the singer...’ ‘But that Balasevic of yours is a Serb, isn’t he?!’

15.

*Yugoslaviana*—the mythology of everyday life which the citizens of former Yugoslavia built and shared for fifty years—is today sketching its outlines in the air. When chance brings them together, people with two lives and one biography—ex-Yugoslav émigrés, exiles, refugees and citizens of the new states of former Yugoslavia—they suddenly discover the charm of collective memory. Many are astonished at the realization that ‘all that’ existed and disappeared ‘just like that’ without their even noticing. It occurs to some of them that the East European ‘Trabant’ is now a museum piece, while the Yugoslav ‘Fico’<sup>16</sup> has simply disappeared and it

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<sup>14</sup> Lepa Brena, an unusually popular singer of ‘newly-composed traditional’ songs, the last ‘adrenaline’ unifying the cultural topos of the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia. Up until the last moment, she declared herself a Yugoslav. Today, Lepa Brena, a Muslim by nationality, in order to save the remnants of her market, declares herself a Serb.

<sup>15</sup> The film director Zelimir Zilnik conducted an unusually interesting test of collective memory in his documentary film *Marshal Tito Among the Serbs Again*. He took an actor with a remarkable physical resemblance to Tito, dressed him in a marshal’s uniform and let him walk the streets of Belgrade. Although all the passers-by knew that he was a surrogate, nevertheless, many of them, forgetting themselves, spoke with the surrogate as though he were Tito himself.

<sup>16</sup> The first car manufactured in Yugoslavia.

never occurred to anyone to put it in a museum. And what kind of museum anyway? Because where could you find anyone, in the new national states preoccupied with building their own national ego, prepared to take over discarded 'foreign' rubbish, fifty-years of 'Yugoslav' cultural memory? Even if it was clone, who would be able to read it properly in the context of completely altered codes? For memory consists of numerous components which demand numerous explanatory footnotes, and, even with the footnotes, who could understand something that entwined, grew together and evolved into a shared life over fifty years? Who would accept the articulation of a vanished cultural everyday life (jokes, objects, television series, newspapers, pop-music, language, humour, those warmest commonplaces of collective memory) and invest in it the effort required to 'musealize' it, even partially, when real museums and old libraries are being transformed by the demented Balkan gravediggers into dust and ash?

16.

*Where do you come from?*

*From Yugoslavia.*

*Is there any such country?*

*No, but that's still where I come from.*

This anonymous quotation comes from the beginning of a book entitled *Children of Atlantis*, a collection of essays by young people, ex-Yugoslavs, refugees from the war.<sup>17</sup> It is said that language produces reality. In the story of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the war, there are numerous cruel and terrifying examples that confirm this thesis. The word 'Atlantis', which refers to the myth of the disappearance of a country punished by the gods, erupted as a metaphor for Yugoslavia with the eruption of the war. The choice of Atlantis as a metaphor only confirms the general sense of its definitive disappearance.

We take our tale about collective memory back to the very beginning, to Cicero who, in *De Oratore* tells the story of the poet, Simonides of Ceos, the 'inventor' of memory.<sup>18</sup> According to the story, a nobleman of Thessaly named Scopas invited Simonides to a banquet at his palace so he could write a poem in honour of the host. Having received a message that someone was looking for him, Simonides got up in the middle of the banquet, left the palace and went outside. While he was outside the ceiling of the palace suddenly collapsed, killing the host and his guests. Their bodies were so crushed that the relatives of the victims could not identify them when they came to take them for burial. However, Simonides, who survived, remembered where each one had been sitting at the table. The story says that thanks to Simonides, the inventor of memory, the relatives were after all able to bury their dead.

Although in this story the word 'memoria' means 'mnemotechnique', which is one of the five parts of Cicero's rhetoric, I shall take the liberty

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<sup>17</sup> Zdenko Lesic, ed., *Children of Atlantis: Voices from the Former Yugoslavia*, Oxford 1995.

<sup>18</sup> I quote Cicero's story from Frances A. Yates's book, *The Art of Memory*, London 1992. I am grateful to Nenad Ivic for drawing my attention to this account.

of telling it in my own way. The story of Simonides tells us that the birth of memory preceded the accident, the collapse of the roof, death, disappearance. The story of Yugoslavia and its disintegration could be likened metaphorically to the scene of the banquet and the table with people sitting round it as the roof collapses. Simonides, asked by the relatives to identify the victims, does not manage to do his mnemotechnical job, because suddenly the remaining walls collapse, killing him and the relatives who had come to bury their dead. The new witnesses of the scene, struck by this double misfortune, are, admittedly, in a position to identify the victims, but only those they remember from the places where they happened to be when the remaining walls collapsed. And so each one remembers and mourns his own. The other victims—not to mention the original ones—do not exist.

The past must be articulated in order to become memory. The citizens of Yugoslavia have been deprived of their common past. That past will probably never have a chance to be articulated into a harmonious collective memory, but it will still be hard to erase as it came to life naturally, just as everyday life itself comes to life. In exchange for what has been denied them, the citizens are offered the construct of national memory, which many accepted with enthusiasm, thinking it was a firm foundation for a better future. However, the construct has not been adopted, because it has not had a chance to be, nor could it have been transformed into collective memory, because, in order for that to happen, generations would have to live it as their everyday reality.

So our story slips away in the opposite direction and instead of being about *remembering* it becomes a story about *forgetting*. As usual, things sink into oblivion, as Atlantis sank into the sea. So real lives and real people migrate into a parable. And this form of story-telling poses just one question: what was it that so angered the gods?

*Translated by Celia Hawkesworth*