

Total recall: complete and remembered lives

Review Number: 2421

Publish date: Friday, 16 October, 2020

Author: Jelena Suboti?

ISBN: 9781501742408

Date of Publication: 2020

Price: £22.00

Pages: 264pp.

Publisher: Cornell University Press

Publisher url: <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501742408/yellow-star-red-star/#bookTabs=4>

Place of Publication: Cornell

Author: Rudolf Mrázek

ISBN: 9781478006671

Date of Publication: 2020

Price: £34.00

Pages: 496pp.

Publisher: Duke University Press

Publisher url: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-complete-lives-of-camp-people>

Place of Publication: Durham

Reviewer: Thomas E. Keefe

The Complete Lives of Camp People by Rudolf Mrázek is part of the Theory in Form series by Duke University Press, which 'seeks new work that addresses the politics of life and death'. (1) Set in the Dutch Boven Digoel isolation camp and the Theresienstadt Nazi ghetto, Mrázek's work is well suited for the series. Jelena Suboti?'s *Yellow Star, Red Star*, too, explores the politics of life and death. While Mrázek describes the lives of camp people in the past, Suboti?'s *Yellow Star, Red Star*, examines the politics of remembrance in the context of current affairs. Exploring the former Yugoslavian Federation in particular, Suboti? suggests modern Eastern Europeans are trapped by historical trauma and conflated collective memory, with the lived-experiences and memories of Soviet oppression shaping the collective memories of World War II. Both Mrázek and Suboti? are creatively ambitious, and have significantly strengthened the field of literature in genocide studies with these offerings.

Mrázek interweaves the lived-experiences of prisoners in the Nazi ghetto of Theresienstadt, northwest of Prague, with the lived-experiences of prisoners in the Dutch camp of Boven Digoel. It can be intimated that the two camps were chosen as a nexus between Mrázek's personal history and academic areas of research. As Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Michigan, he has written extensively on the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia, but was born in Prague during World War II. Suboti? similarly has a family connection to her research which she discusses in the prologue.

Mrázek's *Complete Lives* is a detailed social history, rich in philosophy, music, and history of the nascent Indonesian Communist Party and interned European Jews. While the assumptive title is difficult to accept, the detailed history of Boven Digoel and Theresienstadt camp people is consummate. Mrázek roots his

history and chapters in culture and the human senses: fashion, sound, light, the city, and what he calls “the scattering” after freedom or liberation. Basic human customs and behaviors (hygiene, food, marriage, recreation, and education) are included in such a way that the people of Boven Digoel and Theresienstadt come alive on each page of this generous tome. Auschwitz hangs like a shadow on each page, and is repeatedly mentioned as a foil to the two camps; ultimately, over 80,000 Theresienstadt prisoners were transferred to Auschwitz and other extermination camps to be murdered. However, the memories of Theresienstadt and Boven Digoel have not just been preserved in diaries and museums. Mrázek immerses readers in the lived-experiences; the humidity of the Papua rainforest in Southeast Asia, inmate productions of puppetry and theater in both camps, the rhythmic sound of jungle insects as well as the church bells in the town of Terezín, then part of Czechoslovakia.

Mrázek and Subotić explore, not just the experiences of those navigating genocide and brutal police-states, but also the memories of victims and survivors. Citing Martin Heidegger, Mrázek reminds the reader that true history is ‘the return’ (p.378). In *Yellow Star, Red Star*, Subotić similarly asks the reader to return to the lived-experiences of Eastern Europeans during World War II and the subsequent Soviet oppression. Subotić’s history is not of incarcerated people, nor the curious Kaja-Kaja (p.65-66) or the denizens of Terezín outside the fences of Theresienstadt; Subotić returns the reader to the unincarcerated people who had navigated totalitarian Nazis and then totalitarian Soviets. If history is a reflective process of understanding, Subotić invites the reader to consider that Eastern Europeans not only lacked the space to process the trauma of Nazi occupation, but were again denied room to process the more recent trauma of Soviet occupation by the West, following the collapse of the rusting Iron Curtain.

In the selected diary entries and interviews of the Boven Digoel and Theresienstadt inmates, the stories are expository and often mundane, with little narration of overt trauma. Mrázek intentionally keeps the guards as minor characters in his social history of the camps. Similarly, Subotić’s *Yellow Star, Red Star* begins with a casual letter by a young Yugoslavian Jew, Hilda Dajč, who volunteered to be imprisoned at Judenlager Semlin, later emphasizing the horrific conditions in the Serbian camp “and the increasing desperation and fatalism of the inmates’ (p.2). Perhaps symbolically, Dajč’s letter at the beginning of Chapter 1 (‘The politics of Holocaust remembrance after Communism’) is the first and last letter of a camp person in *Yellow Star, Red Star*. Subotić is not focused on the lived experience of prisoners; unlike Boven Digoel and Theresienstadt, Judenlager Semlin was an extermination camp, and in June 1942 German authorities in Serbia declared ‘Serbien ist Judenfrei’ (p.3).

In citing Omer Bartov, Subotić points out the sites of ‘nonmemory’ in Eastern Europe (p.4). (2) The non-memorials include the deteriorating *Judenlager Semlin* and the repurposing of the Jasenovac Memorial. Nonmemory includes negating history by depicting the Croatian Ustaše, and the Hungarian Nyilaskeresztes Párt, as nationalist heroes instead of murderous criminals. It is part of escaping national guilt or responsibility, and, like the Prague Declaration, also calls attention to Soviet atrocities against Eastern Europeans during the Cold War (p.39).

In studying the politics of memory Subotić describes the results of collective guilt, avoidance, and communal pain. Eastern Europe did not have denazification programs like West Germany. In Soviet Eastern Europe, Nazi collaborators and sympathizers were prosecuted by Soviets and their puppet governments as military and political enemies while, in the West, Vidkun Quisling and Philippe Pétain were prosecuted as traitors and moral criminals. In *Yellow Star, Red Star*, Subotić suggests that since the West made acknowledgment of the Holocaust a litmus test for admission into Western international organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union (pp.42-43), the acknowledgment by nascent Eastern European governments was a lip-service and not existentially authentic. The post-Communist governments are not reconciliatory governments with a pan-ethnic understanding of multiple histories, but archaic institutions which are still rooted in an ethno-religious understanding of national identity and citizenship.

Genocide memorials are typically created by survivors, not perpetrators. In the case of the Armenian and

Darfur Genocides, and the near extinction of indigenous Americans, the sites of the massacres and crimes are controlled by those who committed the killings or their descendants. Mrázek specifically makes the connection between America's Jim Crow Laws and the Nuremberg Codes with a nod to Franz Kafka's *Nature Theater of Oklahoma*, in which the main character is labeled as a negro in a manner that Mrázek suggests prefigures the Yellow Star of the Nuremberg Laws (p.36). Today, the Boven Digoel Camp is a museum in an independent Republic of Indonesia, not a colony of the Dutch East Indies. Theresienstadt, like Auschwitz, is a museum and memorial in a successor-state to the World War II Nazi puppet regimes, and located in a nation-state formerly occupied by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Perhaps future research will explore why the Czech people and their government in Central Europe have acknowledged its past in an inclusive manner otherwise unseen in Eastern Europe.

In exploring the politics of Holocaust remembrance after Communism (Chapter 1), Suboti? details the social memory of Serbia (Chapter 2), Croatia (Chapter 3), and Lithuania (Chapter 4). This allows her to discuss how the conflation of Nazi persecution of European Jews during World War II with the persecution of non-Jews by Soviet regimes during the Cold War has heightened the stakes of Holocaust remembrance in the 21st century (Conclusion). Collective memory, as Guy Beiner has argued, can be more mythmaking than history. (3) For decades, for example, Poles had convinced themselves that Germans, not Poles, had committed the *Jedwabne Pogrom* and that Germans, not the Soviets, had massacred the Polish intelligentsia and military leaders in the Katyn Forest as well as prisons across occupied Poland. Essentially, Suboti? argues that East European national identity is rooted in victimization, so debunking mythohistories is perceived as an attack on national identity. Competitive victimization can be seen in the 36-year old strife over the so-called Auschwitz Cross outside the Block 11 prison in Auschwitz I. In Ukraine, the ethnoreligious understanding of national identity has led to a competition of memory between the Holodomor and the Holocaust. The conflation of victimhood and competition for victim status has given rise to increased antisemitism in post-Cold War Eastern Europe, and driven the rewriting of national history, particularly in Poland and Hungary. Suboti? concludes the analysis of Eastern Europe's mythomemories with a plea for memory solidarity, in which all stakeholders 'feel invested in and empathetic for histories that include all of their fellow citizens' (Suboti?, pp. 227-228).

Mrázek and Suboti? complement each other, expanding the field of literature regarding genocide studies through immersion and analysis. *The Complete Lives of Camp People*, however, generalizes its thesis. Mrázek's social history is a detailed look at the life of people interned at a singular Dutch camp in Boven Digoel, and the singular Nazi concentration camp of Theresienstadt. It is unclear how these two case studies represent the 'complete lives of camp people' detained by colonial governments and fascist regimes in the twentieth century [as stated on the cover copy of *The Complete Lives of Camp People: Colonialism, Fascism, Concentrated Modernity*]. In addition, the allusion to the Sitka Slattery Report and Franz Rademacher's Madagascar Plan in the discussion of rumors (Mrázek, p.126) may lead readers to conclude that these plans were merely gossip and not, in fact, genuine proposals of the American and German governments. Whether included intentionally or not as a rumor, Mrázek's point is still salient to the degree that neither the Slattery Report nor Madagascar Plan was ever acted upon by either government.

In *Yellow Star, Red Star*, Suboti? explores Holocaust remembrance in Eastern Europe after Communism with exhaustive research informed by personal history. Suboti? supports the thesis with specific chapters on Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania, as well as specific examples of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Suboti?, p.7) and Polish President Andrzej Duda (Suboti?, p.205). Although Suboti? does not include each East European state, the examples all support the central thesis describing similar Eastern European experiences post-Communism. Still, the omission of Europe's last dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, and his decades of antisemitic rhetoric to support his own political power and perceptions of Belarusian identity is noticeably absent. (4) (5)

The prisoners of Boven Digoel were Indonesian nationalists inspired by Communism, while the people of Eastern Europe have framed national identities as a rejection of Communist regimes. In both scenarios, the victims rejected the political and economic systems of the oppressor. In focusing on Soviet oppression,

however, Eastern Europeans have continued an ethnocentric sense of national identity construction eerily reminiscent of German National Socialism. While Suboti? points out the danger of equating the Nazi crimes against humanity with the ‘Crimes of Communism’ (Suboti?, pp.38-39), Mrázek could be misunderstood to be equating Dutch political prisons with Nazi concentration camps (Mrázek, pp.1-2; p. 169). Indeed, Suboti? notes that Serbian victim-mentality is rooted in the argument that Serbs are the metaphorical thirteenth tribe of Israel (Suboti?, p.65). Nevertheless, Mrázek’s social and anthropological history, together with Suboti?’s analysis of the historical and current factors of Holocaust remembrance has significantly expanded the field of literature. From the lives of people incarcerated in camps to the lives of people trapped by mythohistories and competitive victimhood, Mrázek and Suboti? allow readers to walk in the footsteps and footfalls of history.

Notes

1. Nancy Rose Hunt and Achille Mbembe. Theory in Forms Series. Duke University Press.
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/books/browse/by-series/series-detail?IdNumber...> [3][Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Omer Bartov. ‘Eastern Europe as the site of genocide.’ *The Journal of Modern History*, 80 no. 3 (2008), pp.557-593.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Guy Beiner. ‘Making sense of memory: Coming to terms with conceptualisations of historical remembrance.’ In McGarry, Fearghal; Grayson, Richard S. (eds.). *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland*. (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 13–23.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Brian Bennett. *The Last Dictatorship in Europe: Belarus Under Lukashenko* (Columbia University Press, 2012).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Andrew Wilson. *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (Yale University Press, 2012).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2421>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/326026>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/326024>

[3] <https://www.dukeupress.edu/books/browse/by-series/series-detail?IdNumber=4053776>