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The Power of Discarded Books

As counterintuitive as it may seem at the first sight, libraries do not only hoard items, they also have to discard parts of their collection from time to time. The process is usually a below-the-radar affair, unless carried out massively and/or inappropriately. It is precisely such instances that make it interesting to examine beyond the field of library science. I in fact argue that the so-called “wild” discarding (also known as “cleansing”) taking place in times of social and political upheaval, together with public reactions to it (or a lack thereof), can provide insights into how communities renegotiate identities and deal with their past. Current reports from Ukraine or from Croatia and Germany three decades ago of libraries withdrawing “unwanted” literature also show that (physical) books still possess an intrinsic and symbolic value despite the declining interest in literary reading, a value that the act of discarding only further enhances.

Libraries are expected to keep their collections up to date and in line with the needs of their patrons. In order to do so, they regularly acquire new volumes, but also weed the existing collections. In other words, library items are evaluated according to certain criteria and, if deemed superfluous, discarded.¹ MUSTIE is an acronym that best summarizes deselection criteria: Misleading (or factually inaccurate), Ugly (dirty and worn-out), Superseded (by a new edition or another contribution on the subject), Trivial (of no merit or interest), Irrelevant (to the needs of the users), Elsewhere (can be obtained in another library or digitally).² Ideally, weeding takes place at regular intervals or continuously, and as such it complements the acquisition policy, i.e. the process of selecting and obtaining items. Nevertheless, libraries often lack the resources (financial and human), required for implementation, so regular stock revisions remain a *desideratum*. To put it differently, they end up discarding too little. It thus may come as a bit of a surprise when libraries in countries at war initiate massive discarding actions, as was for instance the case with Croatia in the 1990s or with Ukraine at the time of writing. In such cases the motivation for overzealous collection revision transcends professional considerations that inform standard procedures, pertaining more to the realm of patriotic sentiment and emotions. This makes it a phenomenon interesting to examine beyond the field of library science and calls

1 This is the guiding principle for public libraries. Exceptions apply to national and other special libraries.

2 CREW: A Weeding Library for Modern Libraries. Revised and updated by Jeanette Larson, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, 2008. The document is available online at: <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/sites/default/files/public/tslac/ld/pubs/crew/crewmethod08.pdf>. Last retrieved on September 22, 2024.

for an engagement with books as symbols other than physical objects. In such a constellation, discarding, which I call “wild”, in order to distinguish it from the standard revision process, assumes the contours of a national purification rite.

Standard discarding usually passes unnoticed to the general public, unless the discarded material is too large and/or inappropriately disposed of. In fact, libraries normally donate or sell discarded items and, as a last resort, recycle them. Professional manuals and guidelines usually discourage librarians from dumping discarded books in publicly accessible paper bins, as this attracts (negative) attention. Most non-librarians are not familiar with the weeding³ process and associate bins full of books with libricide or book destruction. This is consequently a situation that professionals wish to avoid, as it can lead to a loss of users’ trust. However, sometimes librarians are subject to pressure coming from higher authorities (such as the national parliament or the responsible ministries) or their patrons to remove certain titles. This was for instance the case with post-1989 calls to de-ideologize libraries by removing communist and other “unwanted” (for instance Serbian books in Croatia) literature or the still ongoing withdrawal of Soviet and Russian books from Ukrainian libraries. Besides the inherent difficulties in defining what a Soviet, Yugoslav, Russian or Serbian book is (written in one language or script rather than another? Published in a particular country or in a specific period? Dealing with a set of topics? Written by authors that hold a specific passport?), the question arises, what will these books be replaced with, and how will the acquisition of new volumes be funded? Provided that money is not an issue, will the newly acquired volumes reflect the needs and language skills of the users? Will the process result in ordering dozens of volumes that no one can read, or rather in empty shelves and/or volumes of a dubious quality? On the other hand, it is precisely this “unusual” situation that might lead to a (public) debate and eventually incite communities to critically confront certain practices and, potentially, encourage decision makers to act differently.

Inspired by Thompson and Douglas, I wish to argue that “wild” discarding actually provides a great opportunity to study the socio-political constellation in which it takes place.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas argued that when a new order is being created, the rejected bits and pieces are considered a threat to the good order and therefore discarded. It is at this stage that they are dangerous: they still retain some of their previous identity and “*the clarity of the scene they obtrude is impaired by their presence*” (Douglas, 2001, p. 161). Once these rejected bits and pieces lose all signs of their previous existence through rotting and dissolving, they are no longer to be feared. Calls to “cleanse” libraries in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 of communist (and in some cases other unwanted) literature or to “derussify” Ukrainian libraries can be read as attempts at achieving order through elimination, which can, however, only be incomplete because books retain their “previous identity”. Changing political (or other) circumstances might make books lose their currency, but not their symbolic value. It is precisely

3 Weeding and discarding are frequently used as synonyms, but technically speaking they are not. Weeding may in fact result in books being removed from the shelves, but not from the library as such.

this characteristic together with their replicability that distinguishes books from other “*rejected bits and pieces*”. As Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory posits, “*the discarded but still visible, because it still intrudes, forms a genuine cultural category of a special type - a rubbish category. That which is discarded but not visible, because it does not intrude, is not a cultural category at all, it is simply residual to the entire category system*” (Thompson, 1979, p. 92). Similarly, written-off books form a specific category: that of the discarded. The fact of being relocated does not make them lose their identity as books, on the contrary, it makes them publicly even more visible than in a library. In the following, three instances of highly publicized discarding will be examined, which, although framed and carried out in slightly different settings, all have the creation of a new order, oblivious of the past, in common.

East German libraries after reunification

In an article published in the German daily *Die Tageszeitung* (commonly known as *taz*) on August 10, 1994, Micha Haarkötter writes about the “cleansing” of public libraries in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the “modernization of school books” and the “destruction” of books, most of which originated from the so-called “worker’s libraries”. He writes that “*reunification began in the cultural field with the biggest book destruction of the postwar period*”.⁴

Interestingly, the fate of East German books has made it into a museum: in the permanent exhibition of the Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig (*Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig*) “Our History. Dictatorship and Democracy after 1945” there is a small section on the rescuing of books discarded by publishing houses and cultural institutions of the GDR after reunification. The tag next to a photograph of piles of books, from which a small bookshelf protrudes, explains that in the spring of 1990, publishing houses were making room for new, western publications by dumping massively produced volumes that could no longer find a buyer. The closure of numerous cultural centres and their respective libraries due to a lack of funds followed. Among those who “rescued” the abovementioned books figure prominently the pastor Martin Weskott and the actor Peter Sodann. Weskott initiated the action *weitergeben statt wegwerfen* (passing on instead of throwing away) in his parish in Lower Saxony by offering discarded book from East (and later also West) Germany to interested readers in exchange for a donation for *Brot für die Welt* (Bread for the World), the development and relief agency of the Protestant churches in Germany. For this he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1993 and the Karl Preusker Medaille in 2008. Peter Sodann started collecting written-off books in Halle (Saale) in 1990 and ended up founding a library of books printed between May 8, 1945 and October 3, 1990 in the Soviet occupation zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone SBZ*) and the German Democratic Republic in Staucha, Saxony.

While it is noteworthy that the abovementioned exhibition dedicates some room to the occurrence (albeit without mentioning Sodann), it does not and cannot delve deeper into the transformation that the library system of the former GDR

4 The article is accessible online at: <https://taz.de/In-aller-Stille-abgewickelt/!1549011/>. Last retrieved on October 10, 2024.

underwent after German reunification. Ulla Wimmer and Michael Seadle label it “*not as a planned, healthy transformation but as a systemic breakdown, leaving many communities unserved*” (Wimmer & Seadle, 2014, p. 204). The number of libraries and librarians decreased notably, while between 50 and 70% of public libraries’ collections needed to be replaced, as West German and international literature became available (Wimmer & Seadle 2014, p. 206). In the first couple of years acquisition was funded by federal programmes. The two authors conclude that “*due to its high preunification standard, after the first two years of unification the eastern library system managed to consolidate on a level comparable to the western states*” (ivi, p. 205). The “high preunification standard” was given by a higher number of libraries and books per capita as well as library legislation defining public libraries as a municipal duty, as opposed to the Federal Republic, where it was a voluntary service (ivi, p. 204). With reunification, the Regulation on the functions of the library system (*Verordnung über die Aufgaben des Bibliotheksystems*) expired until it was “revived” again with the recommendations, issued by the Enquete- Commission of the Federal Parliament *Kultur in Deutschland* (Culture in Germany), urging federal states to introduce legislation concerning libraries in 2007 (Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 16/7000, p. 132). The first two federal states to introduce such legislation were the two eastern states, Thuringia (2008) and Sachsen-Anhalt (2010), followed by Hesse (2010), Rhineland-Palatinate (2014) and Schleswig-Holstein (2016) (bibliotheksportal.de, np). Could a “planned, healthy transformation” have contributed to a swifter introduction of such regulatory mechanisms in West Germany and to the adaptation and development of those already in place in the eastern part of the country?

“Libricide” in Croatia

If library “cleansing” after 1989 was a common practice in Central and Eastern Europe, why is the Croatian case associated with the syntagms “libricide/bookicide” and “book destruction”? In addition to the prevalent anti-communist mood that characterized pretty much all post-socialist states in the 1990s (and to a large extent still does), in Croatia public discourse was further polarized by the state of war and a certain degree of “anti-Serbian and anti-Yugoslav hysteria”. At that time, reports on the destruction of monuments, libraries and other cultural institutions in the war ridden areas were anything but rare, and in some ways overshadowed those on cases of „wild“ discarding, or the two were juxtaposed in order to „justify“ the latter. This also led to a certain terminological unclarity since both the phenomena were indistinctively referred to as „libricide“ or „destruction of books“ in the press. It is in this kind of setting that discarding was first publicly discussed.

An analysis of newspaper articles on the topic, meticulously collected by Ante Lešaja, the author of *Libricide. The Destruction of Books in Croatia in the 1990s* (*Knjigocid. Uništavanje knjiga u Hrvatskoj 1990-ih*), throughout the 1990s shows that isolated reactions to “*the crusade against unsuitable books that has been going on for four years in the Croatian Parliament*”, appeared in the media in the early 1990s.⁵ In a reader’s letter published by Novi List in 1994, Anton Lukežić

5 Anton Lukežić. “Tko pali knjige, palit će i ljude” (Who burns books, will burn people, too). *Novi list*, July 12, 1994.

mentions examples of unsuitable books, the sale and distribution of which was discussed in Parliament, such as the *Orthography manual of the Croatian or Serbian language* (*Pravopisni priručnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika*) by Vladimir Anić and Josip Silić and the book *Anglicisms in the Croatian or Serbian language: Origin, development, meaning* (*Anglicizmi u hrvatskom ili srpskom jeziku: porijeklo, razvoj, značenje*) by Rudolf Filipović.

The author of the contribution also mentions a librarian having announced on TV that her library would be about to complete the removal of “unsuitable” (written in or referring to the so-called Serbo-Croatian language) books. Five years later, in 1999, journalist Davorka Vukov Colić concluded that “the removal of unsuitable books is only a part of a much wider process of adjusting culture to new times and a new ideological ‘environment’ that is “*more or less completed today*” (my translation).⁶ There is no official data on the number of withdrawn books, but Ante Lešaja estimates in his book that approximately 2,8 million books were removed, primarily from school libraries (Lešaja 2012, p. 280).

School libraries had in fact been officially instructed on how to deal with their holdings, which was not the case with public libraries. This happened on two occasions, starting with a document for “internal use”,⁷ the Instruction on the Procedure for Elementary School Libraries (*Naputak za rad sa knjižnicama osnovnih škola*), signed by Veronika Čelić-Tica on behalf of a working group, sponsored by the Institute of Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (*Zavod za školstvo Ministarstva prosvjete, kulture i športa*), the Development Service of the National and University Library (*Razvojna služba nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice*) and the Central Commission of Zagreb Libraries (*Matična služba Knjižnica grada Zagreba*). The Instruction for example stated that school library collections needed to include books “*exclusively by Croatian authors or translators, written in the Croatian standard language and Latin script (exceptionally authors of other nationalities if their works are to be found in the list of suggested readings)*”. Besides volumes pertaining to school readings, “*libraries should only contain a selection of authors of Croatian nationality, respecting the principles and the criterium of quality*”. Moreover, school library holdings were not to contain “*ideologically tainted literature*” and “*unsuitable and ideologically tainted textbooks*” (*Prosvjeta* vol. 12 (37) n. 71 (681), 2005, pp. 4–5, 8, 24, 28–29; Lešaja 2012, pp. 106–116). The Instruction was followed by the “Binding Instruction on the Usage of School Library Book Inventories” (*Obvezatni naputak o korištenju knjižnog fonda u školskim bibliotekama*)⁸, signed by the Minister of Education, Culture and Sport, Vesna Girardi-Jurkić. The Binding Instruction required the introduction of “*literature for the needs of religious culture and religious instruction in schools*” and advised that “*ideological literature from the past system that provides its own interpretation of the historical truth may, in an adequate number of copies, form a special collection as a testimony to a specific*

6 Davorka Vukov Colić. “Sudstvo i kultura. Šutnjom u bezbolno društvo”. *Zarez*, 1/16, October 15, 1999.

7 Lešaja in fact writes that the text was not published in Croatia until 2000, in an article by Rade Dragojević “Disanje latinicom” (*Breathing in Latin Script*), *Feral Tribune*, April 22, 2000. It had however been published in Slovenia in August 1992 in *Knjižničarske novice* 2 (1992) n. 8 (Lešaja 2012, pp. 106–107).

8 It was published in the gazette of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, year 2, n. 5, June 23, 1992, pp. 15–16.

period, while the remainder, in compliance with library regulations, should be offered to an appropriate library that preserves such collections or similar” (ibidem). Some of the discarded books indeed went to form the Central Library of the Serbs in Croatia, which was founded in 1996.

Due to the prevalence of language policies promoting a clear differentiation between the Croatian and Serbian languages (which was not first formulated in 1990), the adaptation of libraries and other institutions to the new system involved a larger corpus of books in Croatia. This is, nevertheless, not the only specificity of the Croatian case: it is the frame within which the discussion took place (Komnenović, 2022, page 132). The debate on the revision of library stocks spilled over from professional circles to the public sphere and received considerable media coverage again in 1997, when the acting director of the library “Ivan Vidali” on the island of Korčula threw a number of books into a nearby trash can. The discussion soon polarized between those defining the removal of “socialist” and “Yugoslav” books as something “normal” and necessary, and those that called this a “libricide/bookicide” and compared it with the Nazi book burnings, with an ever-decreasing involvement of professional librarians in the argument. The case ended in court, i.e. with lawsuits against the main critics of “libricide”, the philosopher Milan Kangrga and the weekly *Feral Tribune*.

To sum up, the topic of library “cleansing” was picked up by the (critical) media more or less sporadically in the early 1990s and then again towards the end of the decade, starting with the mediatic exposure of the “Korčula case”. By that time the frame had partially changed, but the anti-Serbian mood did not: suffice it to mention that in 1997 the then Minister of Finance stated in Parliament that “public libraries will be financed to remove books in Serbian and similar languages, or those with inappropriate and obsolete translations”.⁹ However, by that time the war had ended, i.e. the “external threat” that had previously justified Tuđman’s authoritarianism disappeared. The conflict with an external enemy (the so-called rump Yugoslavia) consequently gave way to an internal, Croatian confrontation between critically minded intellectuals and the supporters of the regime. In such a highly polarized setting, writing about Korčula became a metonym for fighting against a system, where corruption and political crime was the prevailing state of affairs. It embodied criticism against historical revisionism, exclusivist cultural policies and impunity for crimes (Komnenović, 2022, p. 132).

Stock revision as a patriotic act

In the past several months, a number of (online) articles appeared on the withdrawal of Russian and Soviet books from Ukrainian libraries. Reuters for instance writes about 19 million discarded books, 11 million of which are Russian, together with volumes in Ukrainian from the Soviet era. The article does not mention the fate of these books.¹⁰ Similarly, Florence Aubenais writes in an

9 The statement, however, is not recorded in the official parliamentary reports (*Izvešća Hrvatskog Sabora*) about the debate on the VAT (n. 204, December 8, 1997, p. 5), but was reported in *Novi list* on November 27, 1997 (Lešaja 2012, p. 221).

10 „Ukraine withdraws 19 million Russian, Soviet-era books from libraries”, *Reuters*, February 7, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-withdraws-19-mln-russian-soviet-era-books-libraries-2023-02-07/>. Last accessed on September 26, 2024.

article titled *No more Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, or Tolstoy: Ukrainian libraries clean out shelves that “Russian authors have disappeared from most Ukrainian libraries since the 2022 invasion”* upon “official recommendations to remove authors who support the invasion or Russian supremacy from its shelves in the name of martial law”.¹¹ According to the author “librarians are not taking these decisions lightly, but rather out of a sense of patriotism”. Based on an article on the portal of the Institute of Mass Information (IMI), a Ukrainian NGO, the Director of the Book Institute, Oleksandra Koval, stated in an interview in May 2022 that “more than 100 million propaganda books, including Russian classics need to be withdrawn from public libraries”.¹²

The Ukrainian ban on Russian books goes back to a law from 2016 restricting import and distribution of Russian books. This was followed by another law, which entered into force in 2023, banning any imports of publishing production from Russia and Belarus and Ukrainian occupied territories. Furthermore, the law (Bill n. 7459) stipulates that it is only allowed to publish books in Ukrainian and languages of indigenous ethnic groups (Crimean Tatars, Karaim and Krymchak), as well as in the official languages of the EU. Russian, however, remains a widely spoken language in Ukraine. Whether and to what extent this legislation will have an impact on this in the long term remains yet to be seen. A reformulation or a softening of the provisions after the cessation of military hostilities is also not to be excluded.

The draft Ukraine Recovery Plan by the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the Consequences of the War foresees the replenishment of the funds of public libraries by “providing readers with access to new high-quality Ukrainian-language book editions” by privileging children’s and youth literature¹³. The document does not define quality and is, for obvious reasons, relatively vague about the completion date. It remains to be seen what the post-war period will bring to Ukraine; in Croatia it was marked by an authoritarian government and a decade of international isolation, a number of social problems, chauvinism and historical revisionism.

In lieu of a conclusion

The present paper briefly examined three instances of “wild” discarding of books from public libraries, two of which happened in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of state socialism in Europe, while the third one is still in process. All three can be seen as attempts at adapting cultural institutions, in this case public libraries, to new socio-political circumstances, which in one case were dictated by the unification of two (library) systems, and by separation, i.e. demarcation in the

11 „No more Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, or Tolstoy: Ukrainian libraries clean out shelves”, by Florence Aubenas Le Monde, March 10, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/m-le-mag/article/2024/03/10/no-more-pushkin-dostoyevsky-or-tolstoy-ukrainian-libraries-clean-out-shelves_6603661_117.html. Last retrieved on September 26, 2024.

12 „More than 100 million propaganda books to be withdrawn from libraries – Book Institute Director” Institute of Mass information, May 23, 2022. <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/more-than-100-million-propaganda-books-to-be-withdrawn-from-libraries-book-institute-director-i45735>. Last accessed September 26, 2024.

13 Available online at: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/recoveryrada/eng/culture-and-information-policy-eng.pdf>. Last accessed on September 26, 2024.

other two, further intensified by the state of war. Two opposite tendencies that are yet both characterized by the same execution pattern: elimination as an expression of the desire for purification by wiping the slate clean in the profound belief that what follows is necessarily better, and that patriotism is best expressed through adherence rather than critical thinking.

The result of such an approach in public libraries are discarded books. Their dismissal from public libraries does not harm them, on the contrary: it enhances their visibility and accessibility, as it had for instance through the creation of new libraries, such as the Peter Sodann Library (Peter-Sodann-Bibliothek) or the Central Library of Serbs in Croatia (Centralna biblioteka/središnja knjižnica Srba u Hrvatskoj). Discarding is a feast for bibliophiles, too: some might enrich their personal libraries in the process. It is a symbolic act, a statement, rather than a crusade directed at books.

Interestingly, the symbolic value of books does not seem to have decreased in the past thirty-five years, despite the unparalleled levels of digitization the world has undergone and the overall decline in literary reading. Due to their replicability, books do not disappear easily, and we can only hope that no rare book got lost forever in the process.

On the other hand, the way discarding was carried out in Croatia and in Germany points to a missed opportunity to reflect upon the collection, the structure of the system and the acquisition policy. Why did it take seventeen years for the German state to recognize the need for legislation in the library sector, when a similar practice existed in five of the federal states until 1990? Why did librarians in Croatia not participate more actively in the discarding debates? Why was discarding prioritized over a general improvement of conditions in libraries? What constitutes propaganda, and can Russian classic be subsumed under this category? What will these volumes be replaced with? These are just some of the questions that can be triggered by the discarded books, besides their acting as reminders of the past. Therein lies their power.

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