

Visegrad Scholarship at OSA Archives

Final report by dr. Milica Popović, Sciences Po CERI

„The silence of saying no. Narrating desertion in the Yugoslav wars“

Putting the act of desertion and draft resistance in the frame of memory studies and political sociology, the project aims to answer the question how, in the interplay of public and private, memory narratives create a *story of the deserter* of the Yugoslav wars in today's (post)Yugoslav space. Understanding the Yugoslav wars as one of the consequences of the end of the Cold War, within the Open Society Archives, I was interested in media and NGO coverage of the act of desertion during and, if any, after the war linking my research topic to the two questions outlined in the call: **the power of stories**: revisionist and public usages of history for political ends and **un/silencing suppressed voices**: detecting instances of epistemic violence/harm and recreating narratives of people pushed at the margins of society, like in this case people who refused to participate in the Yugoslav wars.

Research stay at OSA

The presented project, currently in the phase of preparation of a project proposal for the Austrian Academy of Sciences/FWF – Austrian Science Fund, benefited immensely from my research stay at OSA from 15 January to 15 February 2024. One month stay at Open Society Archives provided an opportunity to thoroughly investigate the existing relevant archives, but moreover to reflect further upon my project proposal and exchange with inspiring and brilliant colleagues at OSA, and the remnants of CEU in Budapest. I was honoured to have been invited to give a lecture at the CEU Democracy Institute, within the Democracy in History Workgroup as part of Jenő Szűcs lecture series on my previous research on Yugonostalgia during my research stay. I also had an opportunity to connect with several Hungarian and foreign colleagues, at the Democracy Institute, and other Hungarian universities. These exchanges not only enriched my stay in Budapest, but provided such a stimulating intellectual environment that my stay at OSA far exceeded the initial expectations. I am immensely grateful to the whole OSA team for incredibly welcoming atmosphere, and in particular Katalin Gadoros and Bianka Horvath for their time and consideration to make sure everything flows smoothly, to director Istvan Rev for his interest and kind advice, my supervisor Csaba Szilagyi for sharing the access to the Yugoslav Archive Project still in the making, Nora Bertalan for providing incredibly important contacts and Robert Parnica for daily support, encouragement and intellectual inspiration.

Even 30 years after the wars in Yugoslavia have started, an initial review of the academic literature shows that research on the topic is extremely scarce, focusing mostly on the anti-war movement, public protests organized by and for deserters, as well as, in the case of Bojan Aleksov, an autobiography of being an anti-war activist (Milićević 2004; László 2012; Aleksov 2013; Lučić 2015). The few academic and NGO reports that can be found are focusing on anti-war protests and desertion as an accompanying act (Lučić 2015; László 2012; Vejvoda 1994; Pešić 2000; etc.). The desertion rates¹ remain undetermined yet appear sufficiently significant to invite for further research.² However, the act of desertion and draft resistance³ has been researched from the point of view of military studies and military sociology, uncovering a myriad of deserters' profiles. Not necessarily heroes or anti-war leaders, the *ordinary* deserters have nonetheless refused to participate in the ethno-nationally framed Yugoslav wars. In the aftermath of the war, the last Yugoslav Defense Minister, Veljko Kadijević, claimed that draft resisters and deserters were the key factors for undermining the capacity of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) in the Yugoslav wars (Kadijević 1993) and thus contributing to shortening the war – adding the importance to the topic.

For this preparatory stage of the project, I have looked into the following archival collections at OSA:

- HU OSA 6 Records of the Open Society Institute - Croatia
- HU OSA 26 Records of the Fund for an Open Society – Serbia
- HU OSA 307 “VIN” Programs Broadcast at Studio B Television – Belgrade
- HU OSA 308 Monitoring of Yugoslav Television
- HU OSA 309 Monitoring of Television from Bosnia and Herzegovina
- HU OSA 310 Monitoring of Croatian Television
- HU OSA 318 Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights
- HU OSA 338 Monitoring of Television from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina
- HU OSA 350 Records of the International Monitor Institute: HU OSA 350-1-1 Balkan Archive

¹ In this project, I will focus on four key categories: deserters, draft resisters, draft dodgers, and conscientious objectors – the ones who did not return to any of the armies, nor did further pursue military or police activities.

² Various reports make estimates between 40% and 90% of deserter in relation to military service eligible adult male population.

³ By “draft resistance” we understand both “draft resisters” and “draft dodgers”.

OSA research conclusions

This initial research helped me to understand the availability of the archival materials on the research topic and determine the future approach within the project towards the media archives. I have concluded that the most efficient and effective way to approach media archives would be to focus on primarily printed media sources, which could at this point provide better accessibility. The archives provided me with an initial glimpse into the media portrayal of the act of desertion in the 1990s by both local Yugoslav and foreign media, due to a high number of foreign media clippings – especially in Austria – that was found. In the found foreign media clippings, the main attention has been given early in the wars to the deserters from the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) but no data on deserters from subsequently formed national armies. Local media coverage was solely focused on deserters from the enemy's armies, whether are those JNA, local national armies or even NATO in 1999, using the act of desertion as part of the war propaganda tools.

My research stay also confirmed my initial expectation that it would be needed to include the neighbouring countries into my research scope: Hungary, Austria, and Italy. High numbers of deserters who have fled the country fled into the neighbouring countries, and while additional archival data could be found among the countries' public administration bodies (Ministries of Interior for example), and nongovernmental organizations (refugee aimed organizations), many of the possible interviewees still reside in these countries.

Reports from nongovernmental organizations further uncovered the importance of another little researched topic of forced mobilizations and the necessary link between the two phenomena. Even if rarely appears as a specific topic on its own, desertion appears throughout numerous nongovernmental reports through individual cases, and some bigger protest incidents. Some of the reports raise the issues of the lack of international legal protection – the fact that the Dayton agreement for example did not specify the status of deserters and the War Resisters International 1994 report claiming that Western countries did not provide asylum for deserters. Reports also highlighted the need to pay additional attention to the particular cases of national minorities – Hungarians from Vojvodina and Serbs and Muslims in Croatia. Primarily providing reports from the Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the archives made it possible for me to map other relevant nongovernmental organizations that have dealt with the topic of desertion, as well as specific individuals which have been active in the nongovernmental sector and/or anti-war movement.

