



Book Review

Jacqueline Nießer. 2020. *Die Wahrheit der Anderen: Transnationale Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung in Post-Jugoslawien am Beispiel der REKOM Initiative.*

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In December 2019, the assembly of the civil society Coalition for RECOM formally ended its efforts to achieve the establishment of an official, government-backed regional truth commission in the post-Yugoslav space. “The Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001” (RECOM) represents the most ambitious and long-lasting initiative to “work through the past” (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) of the first European war since 1945, which had cost over 100,000 lives and had led to tremendous suffering and extensive war crimes, including genocide. The Coalition for RECOM brought together over 2000 civil society organisations and individuals from all the former Yugoslav republics and organised hundreds of meetings over the span of more than 10 years. It was the first project of its kind and was supported by a range of external actors, including the European Commission and the International Center for Transitional Justice in New York. As a unique project providing an opportunity to apply the knowledge gained from the international “justice cascade” to the creation of a transnational truth commission, the Coalition for RECOM was of great significance and its ultimate abandonment represents a blow to broader transitional justice endeavours.

Jacqueline Nießer's timely and important study is the first published book-length analysis of the trajectory of this project from its inception in the early 2000s until the late 2010s. It examines RECOM not through the prism of “transitional justice” (linked to the politics of transition) but rather by drawing on the German experience of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, viewing RECOM as a process of “working through the past” by building a factual record of the suffering of ordinary people and—through survivor testimony—promoting acknowledgment of the “truth of others” and empathy for victims across national lines. In this way, *Nießer* argues, RECOM articulated a type of “counter-memory” that challenged hegemonic nationalist constructions of the wars. The book is divided into two thematic sections, each consisting of a short contextual chapter and a long analytical chapter focused specifically on RECOM. The first half focuses on survivor testimony as the essential

aspect of truth commissions more generally and of RECOM specifically. The second half outlines the various failed efforts to create truth commissions in the region, before examining in detail the vicissitudes of the RECOM initiative over more than 10 years.

Nießer approaches survivor testimony through a detailed presentation of two case studies, that of Sudbin Musić, a Bosniak from Prijedor, and Saranda Bogujevci, an Albanian from Kosovo. Their youth was marked by devastating experiences of suffering: both survived massacres and “ethnic cleansing”, lost close family members and were forced into exile. Both also testified at meetings of RECOM, in a context that enabled them and other survivors to talk about their experiences in a supportive and unmediated way. These testimonies are compared to the same individuals’ experiences of testifying in courts and artistic forums (plays and exhibitions). While highlighting RECOM’s ability to create an empathetic space for such testimony, helping some survivors find agency and purpose and establish interpersonal connections with others, *Nießer* nevertheless notes that both Musić and Bogujevci ended up disengaging from RECOM—in Musić’s case even to the point of becoming a vociferous public critic of the project. While *Nießer* elucidates these critiques and correctly points to the inevitable “messiness” of projects such as RECOM, the disenchantment with and scathing rejection of the process—particularly on Musić’s part—calls for further analysis. Was the criticism justified? To what extent was it the result of conditions specific to RECOM, its leading individuals and internal power relations? Does the criticism represent an emotional response to the continuous and officially sanctioned denial of war crimes in the post-Yugoslav space? Is it the inevitable result of misplaced expectations and inherent contradictions of truth commission projects more generally—especially those, like RECOM, that are characterised by a dependence on external funding and sponsorship? *Nießer* suggests that all these elements were pertinent but does not quite explain which, in her view, were decisive.

The second half of the book traces the trajectory of the RECOM project, from its inception in the civil society meetings of the early 2000s to the problems of mustering support at the public level (e.g. in Croatia), within civil society itself (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina), and—ultimately—at the official level (across the region). *Nießer*’s nuanced portrayal sensitively and meticulously outlines the various stages of the process, RECOM’s own grappling with notions of “truth” and “reconciliation”, and its continuous efforts to produce “results” to satisfy external donors. It shows how the civil society activists sought to rally public support through well-conceived and creative marketing campaigns while constantly being subjected to scathing portrayals and outright lies in the nationalist media. While this process-tracing is very well accomplished, some questions remain. Did the RECOM process perhaps encompass too many strands—extensive and protracted civil society consultations,

public mobilisation, a constant need to secure and justify external funding, along with behind-the-scenes lobbying for government support—all while effectively already acting as a truth commission by providing a platform for survivor testimony and trying to document the number of war deaths and facts about crimes? Should the coalition have abandoned the stated objective of the establishment of an official institution earlier, instead supporting RECOM's own role as an alternative—unofficial—truth-telling commission that challenges official narratives?

Like all excellent scholarship, *Nießer's* book opens up the debate about this important civil society initiative and the very notion of the "truth commission" as a mechanism to deal with difficult and contentious pasts. It raises multiple questions about the possibilities of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* in the post-Yugoslav space, as well as about the nature of transitional justice endeavours which have been promoted internationally since the 1990s. Above all, *Die Wahrheit der Anderen* demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of civil society's role in the long-term struggle for memory and justice after conflict, in a context where the legacies of war and mass crimes remain palpable even decades later.