

## Book Review

***The Scars of the Erasure: A contribution to the critical understanding of the erasure of people from the register of permanent residents of the Republic of Slovenia.***

**by Neža Kogovšek, Jelka Zorn, Sara Pistotnik, Ursula Lipovec Čebren, Veronika Bajt, Brankica Petković & Lana Zdravković. Trans. Olga Vuković. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2010.**

A scar marks a site of trauma, usually in our bodies and, if we are lucky, at a place where some healing operation has taken place. Scars in the title of this monograph, however, mark a long-lasting social trauma, one that seems in no hurry to vanish.

The erasure of people from the list of permanent residents in Slovenia took place in two dimensions: instantaneously, with one push of the bureaucratic button in 1991, but also gradually, with thousands of separate visits to municipal offices across Slovenia, each one an awakening to a state of non-being.

I found out that I and my son had been erased when I went to the social service office to fix some papers for kindergarten (146).

The clerk asked for my personal document. When I gave her my ID card, she took it, punched it and instructed me to go to the Office for Foreigners . . . I knew that something was seriously wrong. But it wasn't clear to me what was wrong; they only told me: "You aren't here." "How come, if I'm here?!" (252).

You don't exist, you're here but you don't exist (222)

The issue of the erasure has received generous attention from the authors associated with the Peace Institute in Ljubljana. A previous volume, *The Erased: Organized Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion* (Jasminka Dedić, Vlada Jalušič & Jelka Zorn, 2003), brought an early barrage of social science expertise to bear upon what until then had been largely a sensationalized media scandal. The current volume<sup>1</sup> appeared first in Slovene, with the title, *Brazgotine izbrisa. Prispevek h kritičnemu razumevanju izbrisa iz registra stalnega prebivalstva republike Slovenije* (2010). The English version brings the aftermath of erasure to a world audience.

It's still possible to meet ordinary Slovenes who do not know what happened, who think of this as a tempest in a teapot, or as a justified act of retribution against evil Serbian warlords. The strength of this volume is its attempt to normalize the erasure, not in the sense of excusing it, but by contextualizing it within the climate of Slovene self-fashioning that marked that era. Far from being one evil aberration, the erasure as presented by Bajt, for example, becomes an outgrowth of the nationalist encysting that marked a yet greater scar—that of the rupture with Yugoslavia.

If Veronika Bajt establishes the events of the erasure as "an integral part of the construction of Slovenian national identity" (196), and Jelka Zorn that the erased were workers

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<sup>1</sup> Disclosure: the reviewer served as the language consultant for the English translation.

caught in a period of post-socialist transition (19-46), Neža Kogovšek's chapter argues that, far from being normal in any way, the treatment of Slovenia's erased residents constituted a complex violation of human rights (83-143). Moving from the right to freedom and security, through the right to a fair trial, and even as far as the right to marry and found a family, Kogovšek systematically demonstrates the far-reaching legal and personal ramifications of the erasure. Uršula Lipovec Čebren extends her work on the health of the erased, or rather, their futile quest to maintain their health after the cancellation of their right to health insurance. One remarkable feature of Čebren's chapter (151-190) is her depiction of the resourcefulness of these people in taking care of their own health in informal ways. Sara Pistotnik places the erasure in the context of European migration policy (53-78), while Lana Zdravković brings the theories of Arendt and Balibar to bear on the transformation of the erased from victims to activists (257-277). And on a topic that unites the voices of both the researchers and their subjects in the interchapters, Brankica Petković examines how language habit and policy were used to denigrate the erased persons, as the languages of the other nations of the former Yugoslavia became badges of shame to their speakers: "If I said something in Bosnian. . . I was ashamed" (232).

Although the analytical essays by Bajt, Zorn, Kogovšek, Čebren, Pistotnik, Zdravković and Petković are both well researched and convincing, the strength of the volume lies inevitably in the interchapters where the voices of the erased are heard. These three- and four-page narratives constitute a welcome change from the sound bites through which the victims of the erasure had usually spoken--when they were quoted at all. The one- line quotation, the remark that encapsulates suffering, innocence, outrage or ignorance—that has not been sufficient to portray the erasure experience. For these are extended life stories—not brief anecdotes of something that once was and ceased. These stories cross generations, borders and nationalities. Some could even be called epic. Four pages is the very least it takes to chronicle how a life changed forever and for the worse:

Because with this erasure the authorities destroyed. . . me . . . and my whole family along with me (100).

I was left literally without anything, like a hobo, left to my own devices, without documents, without a job, without a family and without an apartment. I slept in basements, old cars and parks (48).

Credit here goes to the skilled translator, Olga Vuković, for her ability to render both the crisp lexicon of social analysis and these mundane tales of broken lives. One cannot help but remember people like the status-deprived person who found a temporary solution in an arbitrary decision to declare himself Bulgarian (204), or the young man who felt that his desire to watch Slovene TV channels after he had been deported south was certain proof of his Slovene-ness: "I watched Slovenia [a football match] , I didn't watch Bosnia. I swear. I was attached" (206-207). After all, he watched football with his heart, not his residence stamp. Their stories are at once mundane and extraordinary; not the least troubling is the evidence of how these people were treated at their local municipal offices:

This lady asked me if I had my ID card with me. I gave it to her. She took it, punched it and returned it to me saying: "From now on you're erased." ( 47)

The bland, terse dismissals by Slovene municipal workers enact an almost Arendtian banality of indifference that is truly horrific.

This kind of humanitarian social science could have been faulted as capitalizing upon the trauma, as seeking promotion on the backs of these people. However, unlike other such volumes, this one is just one part of a larger initiative that offers practical support to the Erased people of Slovenia: The Erased People of Slovenia – A challenge for the Young Nation State. With funding from the Open Society (George Soros) the project, headed by Neža Kogovšek, offers legal assistance and a help line for those still attempting to apply for reinstatement as Slovene residents.

My story is now only a history that can be put on paper, nothing else. But I cannot turn time back to start again and change things. (81)

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