



Against the Pre-Archival Mentality (2006)

Jasna Koteska

Published: Blesok/Shine, No. 49, August 6, 2006, page count: 4

Link: <https://blesok.mk/en/literature/against-the-pre-archival-mentality-49/>

These lines are dedicated to the book "The Female Side of the Story: The Crisis in Macedonia in 2001" by Aleksandra Bubevska and Miruse Hoxa, Evrobalkan Press, 2006.

1.

"The Female Side of the Story" is about the 2001 war. Remember 2001? That year I lost someone, someone whose history is still not clear. That year I lived in the last apartment block on "Ilindenska" street. The window had a view of Skopska Crna Gora and I could hear, or I thought I could hear, the sounds of war. That year I stopped buying newspapers, whereas many others didn't begin buying them until then. The newspapers said we had a situation. Just as Bosnia had a situation at first, and later we found out it had been a war, in fact, while we were thinking it was only a situation.

2.

The TV screens in 2001 finally showed us what it means to have your field of vision organized as a map. A map offers a bird's eye view. Military Lego blocks. Your eye circles over the Skopje and Tetovo villages, as if you were a military escadrille pilot. Each night you see the moves of retreat or advancing. The map is clean. It hides the ironed face of death. Behind the map's drama you can sense the death, but in the given moment it has been erased from your field of vision. This book will give you back what the TV map took away from you then. It will bring back death's face and its iconicity. It will definitely show you what the war looked like from the inside.

3.

"The Female Side of the Story" contains six stories, three Macedonian and three Albanian. Every one of them seems sad, terribly grim and absurd in a Becketesque way. Depending on your take on the 2001 war, you'll see everyone in a different light: bewildered, indoctrinated, heroic, hypnotized. Regardless, everyone will look like cannon fodder. Cannon fodder catapulted into the first lines of battle. Cannon fodder that cries. You will see the crying. You will not see the ones from above, who hold the remote controls which teledirect the chip under the skin. Just a terrible pain of the thing that's beneath that skin. Perhaps it's already clear to you who was to blame, and who the victims were, who the awarded and the punished were, who the twice sacrificed were. And it's all right. But here, for a moment, everyone will seem the same. Losers. The weight of responsibility (once again) will become clear to you. Behind the reasons and military logic you'll hear the voices of the pushed, who clearly shout a single message: Weapons are a terrible and terrifying responsibility.

4.

You will see them surreal. In the book, there's a confession by a woman, who during four whole months of her pregnancy, rode a bicycle through the deaf Tetovo streets at 6 am. She was going to work. Going to work is necessary. No-one has officially declared wartime, so everything functions normally. And office hours and work deals should be kept to. She, with her unborn child, is trying to keep to her side of the deal. Except there are bullets flying outside. There's not a soul around... And so this pregnant woman rides her bicycle through the deaf streets of Tetovo and tells you that she felt like she was in a Spielberg movie. Yes, there are no "ordinary" people. Everyone's a poet. This woman will tell you, in a poet's way, what happens to you in a war. In a war, you're a player in a movie scene. A surreal movie scene.

5.

Anthropologists testify that primitive communities used to choose children to be their historians. These children were supposed to keep the elders' memory. They were specially trained to develop photographic memory and mnemonic technique habits. This is an extraordinary insight into the fact that, at last, we need vulnerable historians, who haven't soiled their hands with blood. Historians mustn't come from the ranks of those who were hammering the diplomatic and strategic slaughter. Instead, historians must come from the ranks of those who suffered. Gender studies have pointed out another subject as capable of being a keeper of history. It's the woman. The woman is closest to death; she washes the dead, just as she bathes the newborn. She has direct contact with death, from either side of life. And death, after all, is the main substance of war.

6.

Repetition of history is necessary. Repetition of history is made out of words. We remember Kafka asking, how is it that words can remind us? And he answers: Words can remind only when written by a gentle hand, a hand that caresses, instead of harsh tools. That's why official history is to be doubted. It is regularly written down by the harshest possible tools. The big, official history is written in the name of weapons.

7.

Let's begin with the most banal examples. There's been so much written about World War II, and we still have surprisingly large gaps in our understanding of its key phases. The strategic and diplomatic histories of these events have been well documented, but what about the underground documentation? What about the "ordinary", everyday documentation? What about the experiences of those who were that war's fodder, the sailors, those who built the infrastructure for an undisturbed development of those

ideologies? What about the less theatrical and the less glamorous experiences, which unexpectedly hide disproportionately more theatre than even the most theatrical diplomatic gestures?

8.

History belongs to the generals. Instead, it should belong not only to the ordinary soldiers, but above all – to the civilians. History belongs to the winners, but what about the defeated ones? What about the losers stationed on either side of the line called "the target"? History likes monuments, and doesn't like to see the people behind them.

9.

After all our modern history and modern memory experiences, we're finally rebelling against their methods. We are searching for a method that will be able to read the small print. It's high time we started reading our own history as Foucault would. Give us our history's small print: from 1945 to 1991, from 1991 to 2001, from 2001 to this day, as well as the small print of that Tomorrow. The media and the Big History ask us to have a myopic eye, but they don't give us glasses. This book will give you a magnifying lens. While you, blinded, peek trying to see a true image behind Big History's bright lights— behind the microphones, mantras and revolutionary dances—you will see, in this book, the faces of the named and the nameless.

10.

"The Female Side of the Story" was written using the methodology of oral history. Oral history is a sub-account that we've opened in history's general bank account. It started sometime in the 1930s, when it became clear that history was dominated by the visual. Ever since Gutenberg, we have lived in a civilization of linear habits. But, the mass media have definitely cemented that culture of sequences. We remember in sequences. We develop a mentality of resistance to the world's complexity. In return, we get a cleansed, deodorized and hygienic history. What's been called, since Cicero's time, the Trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) is a picture of the systematic ordering of Western culture. The tiny shortcoming being that the picture isn't true.

11.

Oral history uses audio material. War witnesses speak, and the interviewer records and then transcribes their testimonies. Reading this book, you get a vague feeling that there's been a break in the way you've been trained to receive the transmission. You hear these women and think their testimonies are fragmentary. They don't have a consensus about many things. Not even about themselves. For some, the war started on the 31st of March, for some on the 2nd of May, and for others on the 3rd of May. Often they cannot recall the dates. Often they don't have a name for what happened to them. But amidst all that information commotion, you'll see a path being cleared for a certain historic truth about our historic times, something very much like the revealing of great truths. So that it becomes clear to you – that it's, in fact, vice versa: Official history has fragmented our experiences about life in the world. Oral history, in contrast, gives you back the multiplied, intensified points of view, just as the very truths actually are. Fragmented, intensified, multiplied. In this book there are at least two ethnicities, at least six stories, at least three languages. You have to read them all to get a picture of the complexity and the completeness of the individual experiences from 2001.

12.

You'll get emotions. Emotion has been very underestimated in our civilization of harsh logic, and accordingly has been cleansed by the regime. We've been trained to think that emotion is an urge, response, something that lacks truth. On the contrary – pure emotion is cognitive by itself. Pure emotion

happens when you've chewed through all impulses, all cognitive processes, chewed up everything you've been sold as facts, all of your bewildered times, and when, via emotion, you clear a path for the truth about your times in history.

13.

"The Female Side of the Story" is a battle against the pre-archival, against the non-archival mentality, which we've been nurturing for a long time now, which we've been living, while thinking we have built large and correct archives. This book was told and written down by women. And it matters. Firstly, it matters because all archives are a big history of the absent women, the women from the public sphere and the women from the so-called private sphere. There's a story about a French female writer who during thirty years, from 1900 to 1930, built the largest archive about European women's history. She collected more than 300.000 archive items and then she died. Her friends offered the archive to the National Library in Paris, but the offer was declined. A few years later, the archive was lost. "Remembering was forgotten and thus left behind without a future."

14.

We memorize only accordingly to the ideological premises of our times. And the main premise of our time in history has regularly contained a totally disfiguring, terribly beastly and inhumane attitude towards one's own history. Every era has its own archives, but even now, as late as 2006, we in Macedonia have an astonishingly cemented approach even to our closest historical archives, which are unavailable to us. We have been systematically trained by the state to consider these archives unavailable, forbidden. Our historians have been systematically convincing us that we don't need the archives. Our state, our archives, our historians behave just as beastly as the National Library in Paris did. They learnt from the emperors so that they could, one fine day, become emperors themselves. Sad emperors, raised above the traces of their own hidden beastliness. They think that if they forbid us the archives they'll conceal their beastliness. That's why this book, "The Female Side of the Story", is extraordinarily valuable and important. It doesn't leave our recent past without a future. It restores our future, giving us back the story of our beastly past.

15.

And finally, there's something fascinating and powerful in this book. As I mentioned, the stories are told by women. These women are victims in every sense. But, even as victims, they have a clear love that knows no divisions. In their personal histories there's a tension, which can never be compensated by anything, but nonetheless they try to postpone that tension. They postpone the erosion until forever. These women aren't politicians. They tell you that they had to endure, they have to endure, and the means of that endurance is to begin seeing examples of benevolence and charity in the world. In the places where politicians start polishing the military trumpets. They try to postpone the tension. There's a story [in the book] about a mother who lost her 7-year-old girl during the shelling of her house's basement. And this mother speaks also about the losses of other parents. About another girl that died. She knows that the only cure is to come closer to the place where other people's trauma is. And there in that spot to mend, to kiss, to heal the trauma of others. By doing this, to heal her own. Not to alienate the meaning, not to keep looking at the door where meaning disappeared, but to look at the place where it used to be. This is also a battle against the non-archival mentality. It's an attempt to archive even emotion itself, one's own terrible pain, together with the pain of others. It's an attempt to archive all of the past, including the pain and the idea for its unravelling. As a way, as a possibility, to remember not only the mistakes and the pain, but also the medicine and the solution.