

The Importance of Holocaust Scholarship in Southeastern Europe

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When I studied history at my university in Croatia from 2009 to 2015, there was not a single course on antisemitism or the Holocaust. Even within the framework of larger survey courses, which dealt with Twentieth Century European and Croatian History, the Holocaust was not a part of the syllabus. Disappointed by approaches which focused exclusively on the empirical, I began to lose interest in history. Were it not for an unexpected sequence of events, I would not have become a historian, and you would not be reading these lines.

One of my professors approached me and recommended that I study abroad. However, as we approached graduation, I realized that I had no financial means to start another graduate program, nor did I have the necessary academic skills to compete with students from prestigious universities. My ignorance of modern international historiography and contemporary research methods made me an uncompetitive prospective student.

Five years later, I am working on a PhD in Holocaust Studies with a dissertation project titled, "Paving the Road to Death: Antisemitism in the Ustasha Movement 1929-1945." Generous support from several institution, including the Holocaust Educational Foundation, have made my studies financially viable. How was this possible? I was given a rare opportunity to study at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, an institution which has a clear

mission of recruiting students from various social, economic, and academic backgrounds and provide them with world-class education. Many of CEU's students come from academically disadvantaged environments. My first year at CEU was an intellectual roller-coaster; a period which profoundly changed the way I think about science, research, and academia. Yet, soon after I enrolled in a PhD program, CEU came under attack for its guiding mission of pursuing critical thinking, uncompromising academic research, and nurturing the values of an open society. Facing pressure from the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán, which refused to prolong its academic accreditation, the university was forced to move to Vienna in 2019.

Beyond the pressures on academic institutions, many individual researchers in Eastern and Southeastern Europe face additional stress from their colleagues when it comes to Holocaust research. I faced this myself. During one of my visits to the archives, a prominent Croatian historian showed interest in my research. When he heard that I work on antisemitism in Croatia, he looked at me confused and said, "But Lovro, there was no antisemitism in Croatia." I told him about my source base and added that we should explain the ideas which led to the death of at least three-quarters of Croatian Jewry. He responded, "why are you working on Jewish victims, aren't there enough Croatian ones to work on?"

Such cases of coded antisemitism, as well as attempts to disrupt and dismiss further research and students' interest in sensitive topics such as fascism and the Holocaust, demonstrate the urgent need to establish a more permanent presence of Holocaust education in various communities. Reinvesting in the research and education infrastructure in countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, which are often faced with severe brain drain, is a necessity. Projects such as the Holocaust Educational Foundation's teaching grant which encourages scholars to create Holocaust courses at universities where such courses do not exist is a step in the right direction. In 2020, eleven years after I first started to study history, I will return to the University in Rijeka and with the help of HEF's teaching grant we will start a course titled "Antisemitism and Holocaust Studies: History, Approaches and Debates." Through such investments in education I believe we will provide future students with more opportunities than I had and encourage new venues of research.