SLAVICA NON LEGUNTUR: ON A FEMINIST PROJECT OF INTERWAR YUGOSLAVIA¹

Abstract: The article outlines the challenges for literatures created in ”small” languages. The only chance for such cultures to emerge from literary obscurity is to be translated into a ”big” language, a lingua franca of an international influence. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the spectacular Bibliography of Books by Female Authors in Yugoslavia, published by the Federation of Women with University Education in 1936 in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The book, a unique and remarkable feminist project of interwar Yugoslavia, was conceived to defy the Slavica non leguntur statement (the Slavic languages are not read [world-wide]). It features the intellectual achievement of women from South-Eastern Europe. This first discussion of Bibliography, which was composed in four languages: Serbian, Slovene, Croatian and French, presents its structure, aims and premises in a wider feminist context of interwar Yugoslavia.

Keywords: bibliography of books written by women, feminism, interwar Yugoslavia, translation.

Many small European literatures and cultures that sustain them, especially those on the outer rims of the Old Continent, function within a linguistic and cultural niche. Difficult to access, they can reach larger audiences only through translations into major, so-called world, languages. Naturally, translations cannot guarantee acceptance by default, yet they undoubtedly offer such literatures an opportunity to emerge and be heard (of).

Since the turn of the 21st century – the momentum of surging globalisation – in the countries of South-Eastern Europe (as the region of the Balkans has frequently been called) there has been a marked tendency to popularise

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local problems – historical, political, social, cultural as well as literary – through the medium of English. This phenomenon has been particularly visible since the late 1990s, especially in academia. It has been paralleled by an ever more intensive de-universalisation of theory: there occurs a deliberate (g)localisation of knowledge, where the local reaches the status of the global. This process is supposed to decolonise Western narratives in the countries of the Balkan Peninsula and to free researchers from the methodological imperative of relying primarily on the Anglo-American paradigm. This imperative may be felt as more and more oppressive, as it narrows down or otherwise formats scholarly perspective. Such is the case of Southern Slavic gender and (post)colonial studies as well as feminist criticism, because academic circles in the Balkans were excessively fond of it (Slapšak, Blagojević, Kolozova 2006: 7–14). The situation has not been fundamentally changed by the fact which can be interpreted in terms of colonial relations: the decolonisation itself is carried out in the language of the “coloniser,” the “intellectually widest-ranging” idiom, *lingua franca* of the modern world, namely in English (Slapšak et al. 2006: 7–9). This paradox was pointed out by a Serbian, Svetlana Slapšak, professor at the Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis in Ljubljana. She reminds us of the sad, although popular rule, succinctly expressed in the formula *Slavica non leguntur* – the Slavic languages are not read (world-wide) (Slapšak et al. 2006: 8). Therefore, nowadays the medium of English offers a precious (if not the only meaningful) chance to present – more widely – and promote a literature, culture or theory of a given region, and thus to familiarise the international academic community with problems specific to culturally diverse South-Eastern Europe.²

Translation and feminism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

Translation is thus an extremely important instrument, an operational method, of the academic circles conducting gender and feminist research in the states formed after the bloody break-up of the socialist Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia. An intuitive (because not verbalised at the time) awareness of *Slavica non leguntur*, namely, that one’s own cultural issues should be presented and introduced to the international audience via “major” languages, was – in this part of Europe – shared by members of women’s movements, or more widely, of feminist movements, in the interwar period (1918–1941). I will show how at that time the problem was tackled by Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian women. To discuss one possible solution I will present one fairly spectacular feminist project involving translation.

In the wake of the First World War a new geopolitical situation crystallized in Europe. On the map appeared a number of new countries. One of them was the common multinational state by the name of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, created on the Balkan Peninsula on 1st December 1918, and renamed in January 1929 as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In that country a wide-ranging and diverse women’s emancipation movement developed, in accord with a larger European tendency of the period. Women’s organisations proliferated. In 1919, on the initiative of the Srpski narodni ženski savez (Serbian National Women’s Union, established 1906), during the Congress of Women, the organisation called Narodni ženski savez Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca (National Union of Women of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia) was established in the Kingdom of SCS, renamed within ten years (1929) as the Jugoslovenski ženski savez (Yugoslavian Women’s Union). Among the members of the organisation were representatives of all women’s circles from the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia, although not all groups constituting YWU were inherently feminist. Since its beginnings, the Union was in contact with the International Council of Women (ICW).

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3 The Second World War began for the Kingdom of Yugoslavia with a German air raid on Belgrade, on 6th April 1941.

4 International Council of Women (ICW) was established during the Congress of Women, on 25th March 1888, in Washington, D.C., by Susan Brownell-Anthony; there were forty-nine delegates from nine countries. After the First World War, ICW cooperated with the
a reason does bibliographical work tend to be described as ever unfinished and unrewarding.

We have to appreciate, however, the fact that *Bibliography* integrated female intellectuals from Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was their first common work that saw its publication. Moreover, it can be considered an all-Yugoslavian feminist project that made visible intellectual endeavours of women of that time. It overshadowed an earlier publication presenting one nation and one language: an almanac called *Srkinja* (Serbian Woman) prepared in 1913 by Serbian women under the supervision of Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska. The almanac’s authors did not aspire to international presentation; the political and social circumstances would not allow that anyway (the years 1912 and 1913 saw two Balkan wars). *Bibliography*, with its French version, acted as a foundational text for Yugoslavian feminism. The significance of this work could be noticed even more clearly because the 1990 feminist conference in Belgrade failed to propose any firm all-Yugoslavian resolution as part of the anti-war campaign (Slapšak 2005: 140–141).

All things considered, the authors of *Bibliography* seem to have carried out their plan. They managed to “save from oblivion, make visible” the oeuvre of their sister-compatriots and “leave a trace” (Dojčinović-Nešić 2006: 38–39) not only in their native countries, but also – through the French version – internationally. It certainly helped to break the rule of *Slavica non leguntur*, to make one’s voice heard and to popularise the work of women from one’s own region.

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**Bibliography**


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