



Making Sense of Archives

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Making Sense of Archives: An Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0069>

Abstract: This introduction to the thematic section “Making Sense of Archives” explores different archival terrains in Southeastern Europe. It discusses the politics of storage against the background of the processes of professionalization in the archival field, the provenance of funding for both storing and digitalizing archival collections, and the chronic lack of archival personnel. The author makes a plea for critical engagement with archival spaces by explicating the logics of the archiving processes of documents of different kinds and the dimensions of power immanent to them. Moreover, she argues that scholars need to reflect more critically on archivists’ mediating interventions, including appraisal, arrangement, processing, and description as a necessary complement to applied source criticism. Lastly, she locates the thematic section’s contributions within broader themes in the archival field, including knowledge management and blind spots in archives, the archival turn, the potentials and pitfalls of visual archives, and the study of documents as archival artefacts.

Keywords: archival terrains, archival turn, politics of storage, Southeastern Europe

It was late at night in February 2014 when I received a message on my phone: “The archive in Sarajevo is in flames!”, a dear colleague from Bosnia wrote. The shocking news was soon all over the Bosnian online news portals. At the time, major public protests were taking place in the Bosnian capital. Several protestors had thrown Molotov cocktails at the building of the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, violently expressing their dissent with the country’s corrupt government. The building caught fire. Anyone who has visited Sarajevo will certainly have seen the presidential palace. It was built during the Habsburg imperial governance of Bosnia, which lasted from 1878 until 1918. What is less known is the fact that the building houses not only the presidential cabinet but also the constitutional court, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina’s state archive.

Whereas in the specific context of the protests, the presidential palace was seen as the embodiment of the country’s government, it later turned out that major damage was inflicted on the state archive, situated on the building’s ground floor.

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Several days after the incident, I got in touch with the archive's staff, who were in the process of assessing the damage to the fonds and establishing which documents were definitely lost. It was an agony which I shared with many colleagues, both local and foreign, who soon began to network and update each other on what was happening in Sarajevo. Very quickly, the process of rebuilding the archival storage rooms and of preserving damaged document collections started. This was something many historians became involved in. Colleagues in Sarajevo, but also from Tuzla, Banja Luka, Mostar, and other cities invested hours and hours of their working time helping to remove or restore documents from the dusty and still smoky rooms. Historians around the world, many of them of Bosnian origin, secured financial aid from archival institutions. A strengthened sense of transregional and transnational solidarity emerged that centered around the archive as an important locus of Bosnia and Herzegovina's past, present, and also future.

On a more personal level, the tragic events of 2014 made me realize how fragile my own profession as a historian would be if deprived of the "archival memory" and how little I, and scholars more generally, knew and reflected upon archival work and the ways it actively shapes any research endeavor. When, years later, the editor-in-chief of *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, Sabine Rutar, upon suggestion of her co-editor Wim van Meurs, offered me the opportunity to act as guest editor for a thematic section on archives in Southeastern Europe, I did not hesitate to accept the task.

This thematic section is made up of four contributions representing a collective endeavor to critically approach archival collections and record-keeping practices in Southeastern Europe. Their thematic scope covers archival terrains with different institutional backgrounds including (imperial) governments, international courts, photographic agencies, and monasteries, whose record collections span a period from the early modern era until the present day. Taking a critical view of the archival field, the authors offer important insight into the respective records they investigate, and the history-writing that has emerged from such sources. Iva Vukušić discusses the archive of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, whose records reveal important insights into the logics of violence during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Gilles de Rapper explores photographic practices and their archives in the context of socialist Albania. Amila Kasumović engages with Habsburg documents in the state archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina, approaching them as a colonial archive in a European context. Lastly, Ana Sekulić examines the archive of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Fojnica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and its record-keeping practices for imperial documents originating from Ottoman governance.

The four authors aim to contribute to the development of a shared intellectual agenda to "relocate" Southeast European archives, to reimagine their institutional form and professional functions. One important part of this is to increase awareness

of archives' mediating roles, their genealogies, diversity, and the materiality of their collections. Another important task is to reflect on the connectedness of archival pasts with the future of archives, and the impact that research on and the usage of archival records has on their future existence.

Politics of Accessibility, or Archives as Abandoned Political Entities

The importance of archives is beyond dispute. And what historian has not struggled with them while desperately trying to secure access to their collections, to get a seat in the reading room, to "tame" the archives plowing through their catalogues and inventories, slowly deciphering them. Most historians will have experienced those butterflies in their stomach while waiting to receive the documents they had ordered, which, when they arrived, were frequently covered in dust. Often enough the information they contain requires historians to patiently decipher handwritings of another time. And finally, historians browsing through archival materials probably all experience that moment when they realize they will never ever take full possession of the treasures an archive hides.

Archives let researchers dive into another world, very different from today's. They enable them to "meet" people from the past, some of whom stay in their memories well beyond the work at hand. One of the most powerful and absorbing narratives about the bitter sweetness of working with archives and the experiences of those who delve into them was written by French historian Arlette Farge, who described the ways in which scholars attempt to connect analytically as well as emotionally with the documents they study. Archival materials are the basis on which scholars connect with each other, too: after all, primary sources remain a core part of any good historian's identity and professional ethics (Farge 2013).

Archives preserve the past so that we may know and relate to where we came from. Archival records thwart efforts by some, often politicians and others who hold power, to deny or instrumentalize the past (Jimerson 2007, 255). Southeastern Europe is no exception in this. Its societies are burdened by unprofessional history-writing that is not very fond of archival work. However, archival records and their accessibility are vital to any societal discourse, and all the more so when coming to terms with ethnic "cleansing" and genocide. The bloody dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia that descended into war led to the destruction of important archival sources. The attack on the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo in May 1992, which had hosted important Ottoman documents, is only one such episode of deliberate record destruction with a profound impact on the way future generations will experience

Bosnia's past. Yet, not only archives and research institutions, but also individuals lost important documents as their apartments or houses went up in flames. During my recent field work in Sarajevo, I met an elderly lady whose employment booklet (*radna knjižica*) was destroyed during the war. It was thanks to the state archive, which had preserved some documents testifying to her prewar services, that she was able to apply for a retirement benefit.

Just as important as the existence of archival records is their accessibility. The principle of public control of records and their open accessibility was seen as a key aspect of the emerging rights of citizens during the French Revolution (Cook 2013, 102). Archivists emphasize that this is the most important condition for the preservation of records of past events (Jimerson 2007, 261). One of the most telling instances of political elites exercising control over historical records as a direct instrument of power is the Apartheid regime in South Africa, during which records of oppositional memory were censored, confiscated, and destroyed. Thus, as archivist Harris Verne illustrates, the South African archives and the principle of open access, as well as transparency about record keeping became a matter of social justice. Archives, Harris reminds us, are political entities (Harris 2007). Whereas the South African case is an extreme one, a trend toward deliberate restriction of access to archival records has been observed in numerous countries around the globe, including those with a long history of democratic governance. For example, archivists in the United States have recently called attention to the US government's increased control of access to information, which, as they emphasize, undermines the very core of democracy (Jimerson 2013).

As discussed by several authors in this thematic section, in Southeastern Europe, restricted or denied access to archives has persisted. In contrast to the abovementioned cases, however, such a lack of accessibility has not always been due to deliberate censorship, but rather the result of a lack of political interest. Archives here are often abandoned political entities, in a way forgotten by governments. One consequence of such political indifference and lethargy is the fact that many archives simply do not have the prerequisites to be able to make their documents available: they lack catalogues, inventories, and digitalization.

The absence of catalogues and inventories is a chronic problem in archival knowledge management in Southeastern Europe. This reality, as I will show, inverts the perspectives immanent to the critical discourses on archival practices. The discussions in the field of archival sciences highlight the interventionist nature of the archivist's decision-making processes. These include selecting, describing, and archiving records, as a consequence of which documents are (re)arranged and (re)contextualized in larger and more abstract entities, such as series, fonds, or record groups. Making this core aspect of the archivists' work visible has been part and parcel of the efforts toward an empowerment of the profession of "record

creators”, whose role was to be reframed from passive guardians of evidence to active tailors of historical meaning and memory. As prominent Canadian archivist Terry Cook put it, the “major act of determining historical meaning [...] occurs not when the historian opens the box, but when the archivist fills the box” (Cook 2011, 613). Whereas he, and others, called for a critical reflection on the priorities and intentions of archivists, the problems historians face in Southeastern Europe begin a step earlier: Here, all too often, these archivist interventions have been and continue to be missing, as personnel, financial means, and technical supplies are lacking.

In contrast to many parts of Europe, where the archivist’s profession usually dates back to the 19th century, Southeastern Europe was a latecomer in this process of professionalization. In Serbia, for example, to this day the archival staff received their education in all manner of disciplines, except for archival science, turning archival institutions into melting pots of historians, economists, electrotechnicians, agricultural engineers, lawyers, and more. Unsurprisingly, this situation has had a negative effect on the professionalism of Serbian archives (Popović 2017, 238). Throughout the 20th century, employees in Yugoslav archives often only had high school education and acquired the relevant knowledge on the job and through a few seminars. In North Macedonia, a similar situation prevailed until quite recently. Only in 2001 were undergraduate and graduate degrees in archival science established at the University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje (Petreska 2011).

When it comes to the field of archival science at the university level, in socialist Yugoslavia this degree subject was not established until 1978 at the Universities of Ljubljana and Zagreb. In Serbia, however, the Archive of Serbia started offering educational courses in 1952. During the socialist period, the duration of these courses varied between nine and six months, but today they have been reduced to a two-week basic seminar (Popović 2017, 238). Consequently, in the region that was once Yugoslavia, the first professional cadres did not enter the archives until the second half of the 20th century, and even then this professionalization was uneven. In some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, graduate and postgraduate studies in archival sciences are still nonexistent.

Knowledge production, too, varies both quantitatively and qualitatively throughout the region. The most prominent and oldest journal in archival sciences is the peer-reviewed *Arhivski vijesnik* published by the Croatian State Archive, which since 1958 has served as the central forum for archivists to present new document collections, discuss challenges in the storage practices, and, more recently, engage critically with the social implications of archival practices. Today, it is published in open access.¹ Its Slovene counterpart is the journal *Arhivi*,

¹ Cf. the journal’s website at https://hrcak.srce.hr/ojs/index.php/arhivski_vjesnik (accessed 30 November 2022).

founded in 1978 and published, also in open access, by the Association of Archivists in Slovenia.² In Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 2003 to 2020, the Association of Archivists in the Canton of Tuzla published the journal *Arhivska Praksa*, and in 2020 established a new journal, the *Arhivski pogledi*, of which two issues have been published in open access.³ Another recent publishing initiative is the journal *Arkivat Shqiptare*, established in 2017 and published, also in open access, by the General Directorate of Archives in Tirana, Albania, and the State Agency of Archives in Pristina, Kosovo.⁴

In the Yugoslav space, as a consequence of the rather limited processes of professionalization, the first professional initiatives to transform documents into accessible archival records date from the second half of the 20th century. As of today, there are large piles of records that still lack the level of organization required to meet generally acknowledged archival criteria. They remain in the same shape in which they arrived when they were transferred to the archive from the institutions that produced them. Without any archivists' mediation, these documents have remained difficult to assess and thus mostly beyond the reach of scholars. The abovementioned lack of political commitment to ensure the preservation of important archival collections and their accessibility to scholars and generally to citizens is thus of fundamental significance.

Given the continuous lack of government funding, the question of the provenance of archives' finances becomes very important. The reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina's state archive after the fire of 2014 is a case in point. While state funding remained very limited, aid came mainly from foreign organizations, including some state archives of other countries, such as Sweden, at the initiative of the guest editor of this thematic section. Unsurprisingly, some of the donors channeled their money according to their preferences, prioritizing the preservation and digitization of certain archival collections over others. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*, TİKA) is a telling example, as it funded the renovation of primarily (if not only) those depots of the Bosnian state archive that store Ottoman documents. That said, the phenomenon of hierarchization of certain archival collections over others is a ubiquitous one in Southeastern Europe. As public institutions are dramatically and chronically underfunded, they often depend on nongovernmental funding, which leaves little room for a comprehensive approach to records preservation. However, reflecting on

2 Issues of *Arhivi* can be found at <http://www.arhivsko-drustvo.si/arhivi/> (accessed 30 November 2022).

3 These journals can be accessed at <http://www.daztk.net/ARHIVSKIPOGLEDI1.pdf> and <https://daztk.net/ARHIVSKIPOGLEDI2.pdf>; see also <https://daztk.net/publikacije/> (accessed 30 November 2022).

4 *Arkivat Shqiptare* can be found at <https://albanica.al/arkivat> (accessed 30 November 2022).

the determining factors in the decision-making processes concerning the preservation and management of archival collections directly impacts the future of institutional infrastructures and the composition of archival records.

It is here that a crucial dimension of archival work comes into play: archival activism. After all, any improvement in these circumstances will require a coordinated effort, most probably on a transnational level. So far, attempts at switching from passive to active mode in practicing the archival profession have mostly stemmed from individual critical scholars (Rajh 2003; Vukliš and Gilliland 2016). To my knowledge, there has been no collective endeavor by Southeast European professional archivists to raise awareness of the chronic problems in the archives. At the same time, there is indeed a growing awareness among archivists of the social power immanent to archival practice. Instances of participatory activism concerning marginalized groups—focused on sharing important archival records and making them available to scholars and individuals of such groups, including, for instance the Romani people—have, for example, become a part of archival practices. This is especially evident in the context of the records of the socialist era. Many kilometers of record collections from the recent socialist past have been shared by archivists and made accessible to scholars, even though a large number of these records still lack proper cataloging. The exponential rise in the “consumption of these archival records” has resulted in numerous critical scholarly works that have revealed new dimensions of socialist sociopolitical realities (Brunnbauer 2007; Lučić 2018; Ströhle 2016). The sharing of important documents from the socialist past can indeed be read as a participatory practice that turns the archival terrain into a negotiated space. All of the aforementioned instances of granting access show ways in which archivists (consciously) employ their social power to enable scholarly critical engagement with Southeast European history.

Southeast European Archives Framed by the Archival Turn

In the past few decades, scholarly works have offered new theoretical frameworks for analyzing archives. Parallel yet interconnected discussions appeared in several fields, including archival sciences, history, philosophy, ethnography, and postcolonial studies, which departed from the traditional “curatorial mindset” that understands the archive as a “passive”, “objective”, and “unproblematic” storehouse of documents (Cook 2011, 607). Instead, this new body of professional ideas centered around the subjectivity of archives. As engaging sites of agency and power, the archive’s four core functions of acquisition, arrangement, processing,

and description were no longer imagined as impartial storing activities for the sake of guarding historical evidence and truth. To the contrary, archives were reframed as institutions and terrains that hosted active, conscious processes of constructing cultural and social memory (Cook 2013; Jimerson 2007; Stoler 2002). To quote one of the most prominent scholars in this field, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, scholars began to move from “archive-as-source to archive-as-subject” (Stoler 2002, 87).

In Southeastern Europe, meanwhile, the 1990s marked the turbulent and—as in Yugoslavia—also violent end of the socialist era. In the archival field and practice, efforts to preserve sources and protect them from destruction took center stage. The preservation of the Sarajevo Haggadah, for example, one of the oldest Sephardic Haggadahs in the world dating back to the mid-14th century, which was even achieved in the context of two wars, World War II and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, is a well-known example of such efforts. This achievement also received literary attention, as it inspired Australian writer Geraldine Brooks’ novel *People of the Book*, in which she follows the long history of the Haggadah and highlights its multiple rescuers (Brooks 2008).

In the wake of Yugoslavia’s dissolution and the emergence of six, then seven, independent states, the question of the “future lives” of the Yugoslav governmental and state records arose. A legal framework for the succession of (not only) these two types of archival records was provided by Annex D of the “Agreement on Succession Issues”, signed in Vienna on 29 June 2001.⁵ Up to now, the implementation of the transfer of records remains an unfinished and to some extent also disputed business among the successor states of Yugoslavia (Dimitrijević 2019, 109–10). Practical issues such as covering the cost of the transfer (which needs to be done by the recipient state) and the storage of a vast amount of uncatalogued documents have made many of the successor states reluctant to initiate the transfer process. Consequently, a paradigmatic engagement with the “archival turn” and other critical, self-reflective perspectives on power and systemic biases inherent in archival work have only rarely and recently found their place in the archival knowledge production (Vukliš and Gilliland 2016; Novak 2019).

This thematic section seeks to contribute to this emerging discourse. The four research articles, three written by historians and one by an anthropologist, reflect on ways to conceptualize, use, and interpret archives and archival records. In many ways they are inspired by the aforementioned literature, which offers relevant theoretical frameworks for disentangling, reshaping, and making sense of the archives in Southeastern Europe. The authors engage with a rich set of different

⁵ The treaty can be accessed at https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2001/06/20010629%2001-33%20PM/Ch_XXIX_01p.pdf (accessed 30 November 2022).

types of archive, offering multiple perspectives as well as conceptual and methodological terms of engagement with the archival collections in question.

The four authors contribute to the development of a shared intellectual agenda to “relocate” Southeast European archives, to reimagine their institutional forms and professional functions. One important part of this is to increase awareness of archives’ mediating roles, their genealogies, diversity, and the materiality of their collections. Another important task is to reflect on the connectedness of archival pasts with the future of archives, and the impact that research on and the usage of archival records has on their future existence.

Archival science has exponentially grown over the past few decades but also, and more importantly, has become increasingly diversified, if not fragmented. Archives have been examined through multiple lenses, which has raised multiple issues: techniques of record keeping, including the increasing use of electronic records and information technology; politics of accessibility and memory-building processes; interconnections between gender studies and archives; the material turn, that is documents as artefacts; archival activism, and many more. All of these issues are of vital importance for a critical engagement with the archival terrain in Southeastern Europe, and several are addressed in the contributions that make up this thematic section. In the following, I contextualize the four research articles in the framework of these recent general issues of archival studies.

No Neutral Terrain: The Politics of Storage

Since the 1990s, the “politics of storage” have taken center stage in the multidisciplinary discussions aimed at demystifying romanticized notions of archives as value-free sites of record collections. Despite limited or no working experience in archival institutions of their own, prominent thinkers such as philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida offered important reflections, especially on the notion of power in the archival context. According to Foucault, the archive is “the law of what can be said, the system which governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Foucault 1972, 129). In his prominent essay *Archive Fever*, Derrida presented similar thoughts based on a different approach. Drawing, from an etymological perspective, on the Greek word *arkhē*, which means both “origin” and “dominion, sovereignty”, he concluded that archives are seats of command (Derrida 1995). Although these philosophical interpretations of the archive are frequently referred to, important works have also been published on the question of the “politics of storage” by other disciplines, including archival science, anthropology, history, and cultural studies.

One common denominator is that public, state-sponsored archives are the main objects of such reflections. Even though archiving practices are much older, this specific institutional type first appeared in the 19th century when, in the wake of the French Revolution, government archives became public institutions available to the citizens. At the same time, these archives were aligned with the political projects of the emerging nation-state building agendas of that time (Cook 2013, 102–5). In addition, the critical examination of public and state archives gave special attention to the colonial state archive. As Ann Laura Stoler poignantly writes, colonial archives were not only products of the state machine, but also powerful technologies that boosted the production of that very same imperial state and its colonial governance. Such archives not only stored but also actively shaped the colonial order of things (Stoler 2009, 20). Carlo Ginzburg's "evidentiary paradigm" served as an apt methodological tool when it came to shifting attention to the social and political circumstances under which state and colonial archival documents were produced (Ginzburg 1989).

Along the lines of this scholarly tradition, Amila Kasumović, in her contribution to this thematic section, reflects on the Habsburg archival documents in the state archive in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She assesses two major Habsburg fonds, those of the Provincial Government in Sarajevo and those of the Joint Ministry of Finance, and uses the label "colonial" to trace the knowledge management of the archive. The Habsburg imperial legacy conditioned not only the way in which knowledge about its imperial subjects in Southeastern Europe was indexed and structured, but also how "proper" history-writing was defined for a very long time. As Kasumović illustrates, the (imperial) state's ordering of social and political realities highlighted certain contexts and social groups, while silencing others. This then has been a forceful imperative in historiography, where, to this day, major topics remain political and (male) military history.

Kasumović reflects on ways to treat subaltern and marginalized groups as analytical categories in their own right, thereby linking her research to colonial studies that have posed similar questions (Chatterjee and Ghosh 2002; Cederlöf 2019). She explicates how, for example, groups such as the Romani people, female prisoners, or prostitutes, are present in the archives, allowing their history to be written despite numerous methodological difficulties. Her practice of reading the Habsburg imperial archive has broader implications for the polyphony of voices to be found in any state or imperial archive, much as they were all shaped and managed according to specific colonial and imperial biases and served to secure the political entity's rule, and even reflected (often unfulfilled) imaginaries of imperial and colonial superiority (Richards 1993).

However, numerous files, such as surveys, local reports, private correspondences with day-to-day reflections on events, offer panoramas of other social

realities (Cederlöf 2019, 21): The imperial/colonial archive cannot be reduced to the single perspective of the imperial/colonial state. Approaches to such archives need to be freed of their statal lens, and instead focus on the diversity of voices present, often concealed, in the administrative settings that generated and shaped the archive in the first place (Morton and Newbury 2020). One question that remains open is what it means that Southeastern Europe, in contrast to overseas colonies, was characterized by its geographical vicinity to the imperial centers (Ottoman, Habsburg) that governed it. Did this have an impact on the very archiving practice of the imperial states?

Going beyond Textuality: Photographic Archives in Southeastern Europe

In contrast to other (mostly written) archival records, photographic documentation tends to be very fragmentary, and Southeastern Europe is no exception. One reason why the visual legacy of the 19th and 20th centuries in Southeastern Europe is still underresearched is certainly the fact that their accumulation processes have only been institutionalized to a very limited extent. The region's sustained migration history adds further to the wide dispersion of photographs, both in the region and across multiple diasporas. Moreover, the turbulent postcommunist transition—of both the Yugoslav successor states and Albania—has meant important photographic collections (both private and institutional) have been subject to deterioration and loss. Others have ended up on the black market and/or in private collections abroad.

Nevertheless, the potential of photographic archives for engaging with the past cannot be overemphasized. They open up an archival terrain that sheds light on segments of societies and life of which there is otherwise very limited evidence in official government archives. In this issue, Gilles de Rapper introduces alternative archival spaces in the form of photographic archives. He examines visual deposits in and of socialist Albania as complex historical documents in order to transcend the focus on the textuality of archives and critically (re)examine Albania's socialist past. At the same time, he remains cautious not to prematurely interpret photographs as testimonies of alternate social realities, beyond the scope of the state. In Albania, the close connection between ideology, state politics, and photography as a medium deprived photographs of almost all traces of daily life and instead meant they served as a vehicle for the state's intrusion into people's private spheres. Admittedly, this might be, at least in its intensity, a particularity of the Albanian communist regime and the rigid control that characterized it. At the same time he

argues for the diversity of intentions, usages, and modes of production of photographs and warns against subsuming the visual material under the category of “propaganda photographs”. He juxtaposes Albania’s state-managed and largely supervised photographic production stored in archives with that found in multiple other institutional settings across Albania, including photography for ethnographic purposes.

Indeed, ethnographic works offer important frames within which photographs have been accumulated, which now inhabit archival spaces. From the 19th century onwards, both domestic and foreign ethnographers have documented Southeastern Europe also through the camera lens, stimulating, among other things, the creation of numerous photographic collections. The Gazi Husref-Beg Library holds a photographic collection entitled “Old Sarajevo”, which depicts the daily life of the public, especially the street life of the city, in the late 19th century (Šurković 2014). Another collection is the Photographic Archive Southeastern Europe, a collaborative endeavor between the Universities of Graz and Basel and more than two dozen partner institutions in the region, which represents probably one of the most important collections of materials visualizing aspects such as everyday and family life, gender relations, and the body in Southeastern Europe, covering different epochs.⁶

Apart from its inherent potential, visual material also implies methodological challenges and pitfalls. For example, ethnographic collections open up a series of questions around the visual representation of a given region and how it is perceived in other parts of the world (Morton and Edwards 2016). Colonial photographs are increasingly made available online, which has triggered, apart from critical scholarly analysis, attempts at their instrumentalization by those who wish to whitewash colonial rule (Hahn 2018, 90–1). To be sure, multiple narratives can circulate around one and the same written document as well. However, photographs more than other archival records depend on oral sources that contextualize them, which is obviously impossible for the eras of early photography (Morton and Newbury 2020). Here too, the archivist plays an important role in evaluating, selecting, storing, and finally integrating visual material into archival collections. As photographs do not speak for themselves, one central task of the archivist is to make sense of them by gathering contextual information. This is a twofold process that aims both to keep the original context of the image intact and to store it appropriately in the archive, which generally implies a relocation. Any critical engagement with visual archives needs to provide an in-depth understanding of the

6 The archive is hosted by the University of Graz, cf. Visual Archive Southeastern Europe in Cooperation with the Universities of Graz and Basel, <https://gams.uni-graz.at/context:vase> (accessed 30 November 2022).

contexts in which photographs have been accumulated, including the question about what happens to them once they become “encased in the archival filing cabinets” (Hayes, Silvester, and Hartmann 2002, 105).

Documents as Artefacts in Alternative Archival Spaces

One way to detach the archive from the state is to unveil those groups, and realities, that are not made explicit in official records. This can happen both in state archives and in alternative archival contexts. Ana Sekulić, in her contribution to this thematic section, reshapes the archival frames as she looks more closely into Franciscan monastic archives in Bosnia as institutions engaged in storing documents since their very existence. The institutional setting of a monastery is obviously different from that of a state archive: It has its own practice of archiving, often led less by the professional archivist guidelines than by other imperatives, be it intuition, the urge to survive (as a community), or to create new ways of being present in the world.

Sekulić provides yet another apt illustration of how archival practices and the writing of history are inextricably intertwined. Her important contribution relates to the ways in which the history of Ottoman Bosnia has been approached based on a combination of the historian’s traditional craft of analyzing documents with the archivist’s craft of tracing the very act of archiving the same document. As she shows, analyzing records’ *content* with a deeply grounded *context*-rich knowledge about them (Cook 2011, 619) has important transformative consequences for how not only the Catholic communities’ historical experiences during Ottoman times are narrated, but Southeast European history more broadly.

Sekulić’s analysis of the Ottoman documents in Franciscan possession, stored and administered in the monastery in Fojnica, clearly show that the very possession and storage of written documents of the imperial state was a sign of political and legal authority. Indeed, the archival history of a document is not only about which records are given the privilege of credence and become archival patrimony. It is at least as much about the ways in which the document was circulated, employed, contested, and reevaluated. Keeping certain Ottoman documents in the monastery’s archive was tightly intertwined with the aim of tailoring the Franciscans’ socio-economic and legal position in relation to both the Ottoman imperial state and the local Catholic community. Importantly, written legal documents served the local legal practice in regard to property rights, as the possession of an Ottoman legal deed, followed by its reinterpretation and textual recrafting by means of interpolations by

the friars, paved the way for the Franciscan monks to assure and more significantly expand their rights in forests and land. The materiality of legal documents was of enormous importance in a transregional sense, at least as much as their content, which has important implications for the understanding of law and its local practice at the time: a local archiving practice, the active reshaping of documents, and their employment in dialogue with both the imperial administration and the local community is very telling in this regard.

In her contribution, Sekulić foregrounds the historical sociology of the archive of the Franciscan monastery in Fojnica. With a particular focus on the material and discursive contexts of the monastic archival space she shows “how the documents are stored, handled, written on, imagined” (Sekulić 2022, in this issue). Inspired by the “material turn” that induced a shift of focus from bureaucratic practices to the very materiality of paperwork (Hull 2012), Sekulić poignantly shows the importance of analyzing archival documents and archives as artefacts. The mere fact that the monastery kept an archive symbolized—and materialized—the power it was able to exhibit, in its local context, and in some respects also beyond. Thus, Sekulić adds to the concept of making sense of archives as active agents of knowledge production: This was true not only of the record-keeping institutions that emerged from the rising state machineries from the 19th century on, but also previously, of early modern institutions and political realities.

A Transnational Archive of Suffering: The ICTY Archival Storage as a Counter-Agency to Discourses of Denial

Storing and sharing records that document shattering historical events are an important vocation of any archive. In the context of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s the most prominent archive that embodies this vocation is without doubt the archive of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), about which Iva Vukušić contributes a compelling analysis. The 24 years of the Tribunal’s existence, between 1993 and 2017, marked a period of intensive data accumulation amounting to millions of documents, audiovisual materials, and artefacts that document the crimes committed during the wars. As Vukušić notes, the ICTY archive is one of the more important legacies of the Tribunal and one of great value for scholars.

Like archival records, court records are new neither to historians nor to archivists. What makes them a special challenge for both professions is, on the one hand, the complexity of their language and their legal jargon, and on the other, their sheer physical volume, that is their materiality (Shepard 1984, 125). International

criminal tribunals however have unique qualities: They are transnational in their scope when it comes to their administration and staff appointments; they are located outside the region on which they work; their work is covered by the international media; and, lastly, they are subject to the hybrid system of international law that transcends national judicial systems (Wilson 2011, 19). So, the ICTY archive as an institution corresponds to a gigantic amalgam of multiple archives on various administrative levels, ranging from government and military archives to regional and municipal archives of the successor states of Yugoslavia. The storage of its data, the archiving practice and management, mirrors the very process of accumulation and organization of documents as it evolved with the trial proceedings, which makes it a very specific kind of archive.

As Vukušić shows in detail, beyond the difficulty of tackling the sheer abundance of accumulated data, there is the problem of their numerous blank positions or “blind spots”, as she calls them. Such blank positions raise, as Margrit Prussat points out in regard to photographic archives, a set of questions (2018, 148): What type of documents are absent from a particular archival collection? What are the motives behind such “blind spots”? Are there any general patterns in the blank positions that would allow for more substantial conclusions about the selection and evaluation criteria of a given archive? What do the “blind spots” reveal about the history of an archive? In the case of the ICTY archive, there are additional questions, such as which crimes were disregarded, and why they are absent from the collection? Vukušić connects the “blind spots” to the media coverage on the war, which focused on prominent cases such as the fall of Vukovar and the genocide in Srebrenica, which in turn had a direct impact on the trial coverage. However, the more complex power-related dimensions of the archive’s partiality are beyond her research question and still require in-depth scrutiny.

Vukušić painstakingly displays how to approach the court’s materials, and the value of the ICTY archive stands out without doubt. It has been used by legal scholars, lawyers, prosecutors, and judges as well as historians. Less known is whether and how it has been used among victims, including those who summoned up the strength to testify in the court rooms. The archivist Eric Katelaar has pointed out how archives have increasingly become terrains of memory practice, offering people a place “to put their trauma in context by accessing the documents not primarily seeking *the* truth or searching *the* history, but transforming their memory and open to such meaning-making” (Ketelaar 2009, 120). To what extent the ICTY archive, and other archives that store important evidence about the wars of the 1990s, are or can become such places of post-traumatic meaning-making remains an open question. It is indeed a question of public interest, which all archives must serve, as well as of willingness and conscious decision to transform the power that archives and archivists embody to promote and strengthen this part of their purpose, which amounts to promoting and strengthening social justice, as has been explicated above

using the example of South Africa's Apartheid system (Jimerson 2007). Not least, the question of social justice raises the issue of the ethics of archives, an important one not only in the Yugoslav region, which struggles to confront its most recent past of war and genocide, still burdened by numerous crime and genocide denials, but in Southeastern Europe as a whole.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, a reflection on the "blank positions", to use Prussat's term, in this thematic section is due, by way of providing some prospects for future studies on archives in Southeastern Europe. The four authors should be commended for engaging in innovative ways of understanding archives in institutional contexts, and going somewhat beyond this, thereby all revealing worthwhile prospects for future research. Of course, many other case studies could have been added.

One aspect however that, conceptually, remains outside of this thematic section and that I would like to highlight is the tendency of popularizing archiving practices that are grounded in grassroots initiatives. Such initiatives specifically evolve outside institutional frameworks and are practiced without archivists' professional intervention. Internet websites, for example those on Yugonostalgia, have become prominent repositories of various documents and function as personal or group-based record-keeping platforms. Personal accounts, oral testimonies, photographs, as well as written documents can be navigated in such archival spaces. Their creators and participants often refer to their initiatives as aiming to empower and enable participation in the shaping of social memory by making personal pasts visible and virtually navigable. Such initiatives are inherently activist and antithetical to "mainstream" archives, and thus constitute genuine social movements (Vukliš and Gilliland 2016, 18). They aim to carve out their very own presence in the discourses on the past, to promote underrepresented voices, to safeguard voices and memories from being lost to oblivion. These creative community-based archival activities and personal archives in digital format have rarely been at the center of scholarly attention, and unfortunately this thematic section does not change that.

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Bionote

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