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Memory politics in the Former Yugoslavia

Polityka pamięci na obszarze byłej Jugosławii

Abstract: This article provides an overview of some of the most prevalent topics in post-Yugoslav memory politics as well as on some of the scholars working on these issues, focusing on the commemorative practices of the Second World War and the wars of the 1990s. Thirty years after the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's disintegration, the discourse of post-war memory politics continues to dominate nearly all of the successor states, even though two of them have seemingly left the past behind to join the European Union. While the wars of the 1990s created an entirely new memoryscape in the region, they also radically transformed the way in which each country commemorated the Second World War. Although the article examines in-depth the collective remembrance of sites of memory, such as Jasenovac, Bleiburg, and Knin, trends across the broader region are also addressed. The work of young scholars, as well as experienced researchers, who have introduced innovative approaches in memory studies in the former Yugoslavia, is highlighted to show how new studies focus on the cultural reproduction of dominant narratives in addition to top-down political discourse.

Keywords: memory politics, former Yugoslavia, commemoration, Second World War, Wars of Yugoslav Dissolution

Streszczenie: Artykuł zawiera przegląd najbardziej rozpowszechnionych tematów w postjugosłowiańskiej polityce pamięci, a także przegląd prac badaczy zajmujących się tymi zagadnieniami, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem praktyk upamiętniających II wojnę światową i wojny lat 90. Trzydzieści lat po rozpadzie Socjalistycznej Federalnej Republiki Jugosławii dyskurs powojennej polityki pamięci nadal dominuje w prawie wszystkich państwach powstałych na gruncie byłej Jugosławii, mimo że dwa z nich pozornie pozostawiły za sobą przeszłość, przystępując do Unii Europejskiej. Wojny lat 90. stworzyły w regionie zupełnie nowy krajobraz pamięciowy oraz radykalnie zmieniły sposób, w jaki każdy kraj upamiętniał II wojnę światową. Chociaż artykuł dogłębnie analizuje w pierwszej kolejności pamięć zbiorową o takich miejscach, jak Jasenovac, Bleiburg i Knin, uwzględniono również trendy w całym regionie. Badania prowadzone zarówno przez młodych naukowców, jak i przez do-

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świadczonych badaczy, którzy wprowadzili innowacyjne podejścia do badań nad pamięcią w byłej Jugosławii, zostały przedstawione tak, aby pokazać, jak nowe badania koncentrują się na kulturowej reprodukcji dominujących narracji, w nawiązaniu do odgórnego dyskursu politycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka pamięci, była Jugosławia, upamiętnienia, II wojna światowa, wojny jugosłowiańskie

In January 1991, the Yugoslav veterans' organization, SUBNOR (*Savez udruženja boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata*), issued instructions for the planned celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the antifascist uprising against Nazi-fascist occupiers and domestic collaborators. Emphasizing the importance of Yugoslav unity and educational programs that would have “a lasting character”, the document recommended that manifestations needed to be organized during the entire year of 1991 throughout the country¹. Each year's key commemorative days included Fighter's Day (*Dan borca*, 4 July) and Uprising Day (*Dan ustanka*), celebrated on a different day for each republic related to communist-led Partisan actions in 1941. The memory of 1941, with its victims of fascist terror and heroic resistance movement, was a constitutive part of socialist Yugoslavia's collective remembrance along with victory over fascism (9 May), Josip Broz Tito's birthday (25 May), and Republic Day (29 November). The 50th anniversary was, therefore, a significant landmark in the history of the state, as a great deal of the state's legitimacy rested on the legacy of the Partisan struggle. Despite the seemingly nonchalant language used in the document to describe the upcoming celebrations, the planned jubilee never took place; not only had the ruling Yugoslav League of Communists essentially disintegrated the previous year, but the country was also engulfed in a bloody war only a few months after this document was approved by the federal government. Over four decades of memory politics designed to strengthen the loyalty to the common state were swept aside as new nation-states emerged out of the ashes of socialist Yugoslavia in the turbulent 1990s.

Now, thirty years after the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the discourse of post-war memory politics continues to dominate nearly all of the successor states, even though

1 State Archive Bosnia and Herzegovina, Čedo Kapor collection, SUBNOR, box 1, “Program obeležavanje 50-godišnjice ustanka naroda i narodnosti Jugoslavije”.

two of them have seemingly left the past behind to join the European Union. Croatia, the EU's newest member, had placed a lot of hope in turning exclusively to the future after the 2013 accession, yet debates over the Second World War and the 1990s conflict characterized both presidential and parliamentary elections. The other countries in the region similarly wrestled with unresolved issues in the 20th century that impacted domestic politics and their relations with neighboring states. While much of the former Soviet bloc was also dealing with the legacies of the Second World War (the Holocaust, collaborationists, resistance movements) and communist regimes, the former Yugoslavia had an added layer of memory politics related to the conflicts of the 1990s. Whereas the ideological, ethnic, and mnemonic divisions vary from country to country, all of the Yugoslav successor states – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia – have struggled to build strong liberal democracies resistant to corruption, populism, and ethno-politics. While the current political elites across the region have generally built their legitimacy upon the rejection of a common Yugoslav state and its memory politics, they have all enabled the creation of new narratives through strategies of symbolic nation-building that selectively draw on the past to create equally problematic mnemonic regimes to the one they worked to destroy². This article provides an overview of some of the most prevalent topics in post-Yugoslav memory politics as well as the scholars working on these issues, although due to space restrictions, not every issue has been addressed equally.

1. Post-Yugoslavia and cultural memory of the Second World War

Just as the first two Yugoslav states were born in the aftermath of the world wars, the current geopolitical configuration in the post-Yugoslav space is, for the most part, a result of wars or low-intensity conflicts in the 1990s³. Slovenia fought a ten-day war in 1991 against the Yugoslav

2 *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe*, ed. P. Kolstø, London 2014.

3 For the most concise overview of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution see: C. Baker, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*, Basingstoke 2015.

People's Army (JNA), followed by a much bloodier conflict in Croatia (1991-1995) that included not only federal forces but also rebel Croatian Serbs and volunteer units from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter former Yugoslav republic erupted in a multi-sided war from 1992-1995, which was halted only after mediation from the United States that resulted in the Dayton Peace Accords. Although the fighting ended, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided into two entities, the Croat-Muslim Federation and Republika Srpska, while the international community tries to prop up the, mostly, illusionary central government. Kosovo fought its own war for independence against Serbia (at the time still united with Montenegro as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) in 1998-1999, culminating in a NATO bombing campaign against Serb forces. North Macedonia had avoided serious violence during the 1990s but was destabilized by a brief armed conflict between the majority, Macedonian Slavic population, and the minority of ethnic Albanians in 2001. Only Montenegro was able to declare independence bloodlessly (separating from Serbia in 2006), even though Montenegrin troops had been involved in the fighting around Dubrovnik in 1991.

While the wars of the 1990s created an entirely new memoryscape in the region, they also radically transformed the way in which each country commemorated the Second World War⁴. Even though narratives of the People's Liberation War (NOB, *Narodnooslobodilačka borba*), as the 1941-1945 conflict was referred to in socialist Yugoslavia, was never monolithic and included various regional interpretations across the country, after 1990, this narrative was not only nationalized but also radically reinterpreted, often including the rehabilitation of Nazi-fascist collaborators⁵. In Croatia alone, approximately 3,000 out of 6,000 antifascist monuments, memorial sites, and plaques were destroyed, damaged, removed, or altered, while a similar fate befell

4 See: D. Karačić, T. Banjeglav, N. Govedarica, *Re:vizija prošlosti: Politike sjećanja u Bosni i Hercegovini, Hrvatskoj i Srbiji od 1990. godine*, Sarajevo 2012; R. Jambrešić Kirin, *Politics of Memory in Croatian Socialist Culture*, "Narodna umjetnost" 2004, vol. 41, no. 1, p. 125-143; *Kultura sjećanja 1941: Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, eds. T. Cipek, O. Milosavljević, S. Bosto, Zagreb 2008.

5 *Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits: Post-Communist Historiography Between Democratization and New Politics of History*, ed. O. Luthar, Budapest 2017.

monuments in neighboring countries to a greater or lesser degree⁶. The prevalence of the revisionist narratives throughout the region prompted an initiative by historians to issue the Declaration “Defend History” in 2020 as a reaction against widespread manipulation and distortion of the past by political elites and other social actors⁷.

Memory studies scholars have shown how political elites selectively articulate cultural memory in order to construct and maintain political legitimacy⁸. The disintegration of the Yugoslav state and the emergence of post-Yugoslav nation-states provides a particularly interesting series of case studies to analyze how the past, whether semi-mythic foundation narratives or more recent wars for independence, has been framed to fit the current political climate. Memory studies are still a relatively new (but growing) field of research in Southeastern Europe, but a new generation of younger scholars from the region and internationally have, in recent years, contributed significantly to understanding the importance of collective remembrance in contemporary politics⁹.

Commemorations and commemorative speeches are some of the most visible arenas for political elites to outline their interpretations of the past as well as define their political agenda for the future. As Barry Schwartz argues, commemorations are important for our understanding of the narratives of the past because they “lift from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary historical events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values. Commemoration

- 6 M. Jauković, *To Share or to Keep: The Afterlife of Yugoslavia's Heritage and the Contemporary Heritage Management Practices*, “Politička misao” 2014, vol. 51, no. 5, p. 80-104; S. Horvatinčić, *Monument, Territory, and the Mediation of War Memory in Socialist Yugoslavia*, “Život umjetnosti” 2015, vol. 96, p. 34-69; G. Kirn, *A Few Critical Notes on the Destiny of the Yugoslav Modernist Partisan Memorial Sites in the Contemporary, Post-Yugoslav (Croatian) Context*, [in:] Vojin Bakić: *Lightening Forms – A Retrospective*, ed. N. Ivančević, Zagreb 2013.
- 7 The Serbian NGO Krokodil coordinated the project “Who Started All This? – Historians Against Revisionism” which issued the declaration in June 2020. For the text of the Declaration, see: Official site of Krokodil: <http://www.krokodil.rs/eng/> [21.09.2020].
- 8 P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire*, “Representations” 1989, vol. 26, p. 7-24; *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge 1992; P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge 1989.
- 9 T. Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja*, Belgrade 2006; *Kultura sjećanja 1991: Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, ed. T. Cipek, Zagreb 2011; O. Manojlović Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja: spomenici i identiteti u Srbiji 1918-1989*, Belgrade 2014; *Conflict and Memory: Bridging Past and Future in [South East] Europe*, eds. W. Petritsch, V. Džihic, Baden Baden 2010.

[...] is, in this sense, a register of sacred history”¹⁰. Due to the traumatic experiences of the 20th century in the former Yugoslavia, war commemorations play a particularly central role that appeal to emotions, evoke heroic state-building narratives, and highlight the previous generations’ sacrifice for the nation. War commemorations serve two other important functions. Firstly, they invariably construct a political landscape, or, in other words, accompanied by memorials, they delineate an ideological topography that reflects the ideals and values of the victorious side¹¹. Secondly, war commemorations help define national identities, since, as J. M. Winter observed in memorializations of World War One, they are “acts of citizenship – collective affirmations of identity of a nation under threat”¹².

Commemorations and other political rituals are key components of a nation’s cultural memory, crucial for the construction and reinforcement of ideological, ethnic, economic, gender, and other identities. The construction of cultural memory and cultural identities are central themes of memory studies which analyze the different processes of remembrance and forgetting that occur at the individual, group, and societal level. The interaction between cognitive (individual) and social (collective) memory is established and manifested symbolically through “body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image”, as is the case of political rituals and their reliance on triggering past memories¹³.

Since the Second World War played such a key role in socialist Yugoslavia’s political legitimacy (Tito’s cult of personality, remembrance of the Partisan movement, the motto of Brotherhood and Unity), commemorative practices related to this period underwent significant changes across the region. While countries such as Slovenia and Montenegro exhibit more continuity in the commemoration

10 B. Schwartz, *The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory*, “Social Forces” 1982, vol. 61, no. 2, p. 377.

11 J. M. Mayo, *War Memorials as Political Memory*, “Geographical Review” 1988, vol. 78, no. 1, p. 62-75.

12 J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1995, p. 80.

13 M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. by Lewis A. Coser, Chicago 1992; J. Assman, J. Czaplicka, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, “New German Critique” 1995, vol. 65, p. 125-133; D. I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, New Haven 1988.

of the Second World War, integrating Partisan narratives into more contemporary national interpretations of the past, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are examples of dramatically contested commemorative practices and memoryscapes. Not surprisingly, this is a result of the considerably greater degree of violence in the 1990s and ethnonational divisions which exacerbate ideological ones. Despite sparking some debates and commemorative events during the recent centenary, collective memory of the First World War is considerably more de-politicized than the second half of the 20th century. Debates about Gavrilo Princip (terrorist or freedom fighter?) or the role of Gabriele D'Annunzio in the contested borderlands of Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia occasionally register during significant anniversaries but are not as emotionally explosive as the memory politics related to 1941 and afterward.

Croatia offers numerous examples of contested commemorations, as shown by the results of the research project "Framing the Nation and Collective Identity: Cultural Memory of 20th Century Trauma in Croatia"¹⁴. During the first five years after Croatian accession to the EU, every major commemoration of the Second World War was contested, involving political debates, protests, or counter-commemorations¹⁵. Two of the most controversial commemorations have been related to the collective remembrance of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp and the Bleiburg Massacres. Both have provoked extensive political debates, antagonized relations with neighboring countries, and spawned extensive local and international media coverage. At their core, they include reflections on ethnic relations within Croatia, ideological interpretations of the second half of the twentieth century, the manipulation of the numbers of victims, and discussions about the essence of Croatian statehood: did the antifascist Partisan movement represent a continuity of statehood or did it break it by fighting for a federal Yugoslavia? While commemorations held at the Jasenovac Concentration Camp highlight the crimes of the fascist Ustaša regime that ruled the Independent State of Croatia (NDH, *Nezavisna*

14 This project was financed by the Croatian Science Foundation (2014-2018) and the data is available at framnat.eu [21.09.2020].

15 *Framing the Nation and Collective Identity: Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, eds. V. Pavlakovic, D. Pauković, London 2019.

Država Hrvatska), the Bleiburg commemorations symbolize the collective remembrance of communist crimes at the end of the Second World War and in the immediate post-war years.

The terrorist Ustaša movement, allied with Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, established the NDH on 10 April 1941 and immediately implemented racial laws, dictatorial powers, and a system of terror against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political opponents of the regime that involved mass arrests, the destruction of villages, systematic murder, and the creation of a series of concentration camps. The largest and most infamous one was at Jasenovac, established by the Ustaše in the summer of 1941. Jasenovac and its satellite camps functioned as both work camps and death camps, although revisionist historians have sought to deny the mass murders that took place there and in the surrounding sites¹⁶. During socialist Yugoslavia, the number of 700,000 victims could not be challenged, although in the last few decades Croatian and Serbian nationalists have sought to either minimize the number to a few thousands or inflate the number to over one million¹⁷. In contrast to the gas chambers of the Nazi death camps, victims in Jasenovac, nearby Stara Gradiška, and other Ustaša camps were often murdered by less methodical but more brutal methods¹⁸. Although the memorial complex was built in the 1960s and was used by the communist regime to support its own political myths, Jasenovac's manipulation contributed to victimization narratives in the late 1980s and 1990s and continue into the present.

The commemoration of the camp, held annually in April, was attended by the Croatian political leadership since 2000 and was used to articulate Croatia's antifascist legacy, commitment to fighting discrimination and anti-Semitism, and dedication to European values as accession to the EU drew closer¹⁹. The election of a right-wing presi-

16 See: *Jasenovački logori: istraživanja*, eds. S. Razum, I. Vukić, Zagreb 2015; and the reaction to this revisionist position in S. Goldstein, *Jasenovac: tragika, mitomanija, istina*, Zagreb 2016.

17 *Jasenovac: manipulacije, kontroverze i povijesni revizionizam*, eds. A. Benčić, S. Odak, D. Lucić, Jasenovac 2018. The Jasenovac Memorial Site currently lists over 80,000 names of victims, although though this list is considered to be incomplete.

18 N. Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941-1945*, Zagreb 2003; I. Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, Zagreb 2018.

19 L. Radonić, *The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, "Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju" 2018, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 131-154; V. Pavlaković, *Remembering War the European Way: Croatia's Commemorative Culture on the Eve of EU Membership*, [in:] *Croatia and the European Union: Changes and Development*,

dent and by extent the government in 2015 and 2016 resulted in essentially a “silencing” of the commemoration by no longer holding commemorative speeches, prompting boycotts and alternative commemorations by Jewish, Serb, Roma, and antifascist organizations who felt that the Croatian Government was permitting rampant revisionism to take hold in the country. Numerous publications, press releases, and documentary films flooded the public space, and certain groups denying Jasenovac’s murderous nature were even funded by the president’s office and government ministries. By portraying Jasenovac as merely a work camp, revisionists sought to whitewash the Ustaša regime and essentially deny its participation in the Holocaust. The controversies only increased when a plaque to fallen Croatian soldiers from the 1990s war featured the Ustaša slogan *Za dom spremni* (“Ready for the Homeland”) was erected close to the memorial site. Although the plaque was relocated to a different memorial site and the entire episode prompted the formation of a commission to investigate totalitarian symbols, the debate over Ustaša and communist symbols was not legally resolved²⁰. The Jasenovac commemoration remained divided until April 2020, when a single commemoration was held under Covid-19 conditions.

While the Jasenovac commemoration in Croatia was divided over accusations of downplaying the murderous nature of the NDH and pandering to right-wing Holocaust deniers, similar commemorations in the past several years in the Bosnian Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska (RS), exaggerated the numbers and focused on the atrocities of the Ustaša even more than during socialist Yugoslavia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, along with RS strongman Milorad Dodik, regularly attended the commemoration in Donja Gradina, once part of the Jasenovac Memorial Site but now divided by the international border on the Sava River. Not only has Republika Srpska sought to reject any

eds. P. Maldini, D. Pauković, Farnham 2015; and J. Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, Ithaca 2019.

20 See: Document of Dialogue, Vlada Republike Hrvatske, Vijeće za Suočavanje s Posljedicama Cladavine Nedemokratskih Režima, *Dokument Dijaloga: temeljna polazišta i preporuke o posebnom normativnom uređenju simbola, znakovlja i drugih obilježja totalitarnih režima i pokreta*, 28.02.2018, <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2018/02%20veljača/28%20veljače/Dokument%20dijaloga.pdf> [30.10.2020].

common commemorations with the central Bosnian Government or the Federation, but the Partisans have also been recast as an exclusively Serb resistance movement. Like commemorations at the Kozara memorial or the divided commemoration of the Battle of the Sutjeska, under Dodik, the Second World War is portrayed as a period of Serb victimization (along with Jews) and Serb resistance, while the other ethnic groups are only presented as the perpetrators. Thus, the Jasenovac commemoration at Donja Gradina has been used to argue for RS independence based on the argument that Croats Croats and Bosniaks cannot be trusted. Furthermore, Dodik has announced plans for a new memorial center at Donja Gradina, supported by his allies in Serbia and an Israeli historian, Gideon Greif, with little knowledge of Balkan history that will undoubtedly perpetuate an interpretation of Jasenovac that exacerbates regional hatreds rather than fosters cooperation²¹.

While the Jasenovac Concentration Camp epitomizes how fascism victims have been manipulated in the region, the Bleiburg commemoration is a vivid example of the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators reinterpreted as anti-communist patriots. Although initially established by survivors of the NDH armed forces and used to remember the revenge carried out by the victorious Partisans against the defeated army, the commemoration now more broadly symbolizes the communist repression against Croats in the post-war period. As the NDH collapsed in the face of Partisan forces in the final stages of the Second World War, the Ustaša political leadership, military units, and accompanying civilians fled the Partisan advance through Slovenia towards Austria. The main body of soldiers and officers attempted to surrender to the British at the Austrian town of Bleiburg but the British insisted that they surrender to the Partisans, who sent the captured soldiers back to Yugoslavia. The prisoners were sent on death marches into camps across Yugoslavia, while tens of thousands were liquidated without proper trials in mass graves in Slovenia and Croatia. As in the debates over the numbers of Jasenovac victims, estimates range from 50,000 to half a million Croats. In addition to NDH units, thousands of Germans, Montenegrin and Serbian Četniks, Slovenian White Guards, and Cossacks were likewise captured and/or killed in

21 <https://www.gradnja.rs/kako-ce-izgledati-memorijalni-centar-donja-gradina/> [09.10.2020].

the chaotic and violent events throughout Southern Carinthia during the final weeks of the war²².

Since the 1990s, the commemoration, which is still held in Austria, has been controversial for its transformation of fascist perpetrators into communist victims, politicized rhetoric, and the presence of symbols associated with the NDH²³. This has been additionally problematic due to the fact that the Croatian Parliament has sponsored the commemoration since the 1990s, with a brief break in 2012-2015 when a left-wing government was in power. Although the communist regime certainly persecuted many civilians and political opponents that had nothing to do with the NDH, critics of Bleiburg point out that this commemoration, organized by mnemonic actors (Bleiburg Honorary Guard, or PBV) with direct ties to pro-Ustaša political groups essentially have promoted the rehabilitation of collaborationists since the 1960s up to the present day. Although other sites of memory, such as Tezno outside of Maribor, Slovenia, or Macelj, in Croatia, are more appropriate commemorative places since they actually contain mass graves of victims, Bleiburg remains a powerful place of remembrance precisely because of its politicization. Despite funding from the Croatian parliament, no Croatian President or Prime Minister has attended the official commemoration due to its controversial nature and presence of symbols, although the Catholic Church has always had a dominant presence.

In 2018, the Austrian Government had sought to limit and potentially ban the commemoration due to its politicization and widespread belief it functions as a gathering for right-wing extremists more than a ceremony to remember innocent victims. Initially, the Austrian Government banned food stalls and souvenir stands, followed by a ban on Ustaša symbols in 2019. The PBV itself began issuing instructions to limit the display of Ustaša images, and the speeches tended to be less radical than in previous years. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the commemoration on 16 May 2020 was divided into three separate ceremonies. A simple wreath-laying ceremony was held on Bleiburg Field in Austria, while a slightly larger event took place in Zagreb's cemetery

22 F. T. Rulitz, *The Tragedy of Bleiburg and Viktring, 1945*, DeKalb 2016.

23 V. Pavlaković, D. Brentin, D. Pauković, *The Controversial Commemoration: Transnational Approaches to Remembering Bleiburg*, "Politička misao" 2018, vol. 55, no. 2, p. 7-32.

Mirogoj, attended by the PBV and a number of Croatian politicians. However, the real controversy, erupted over the decision to hold the third commemoration in the Catholic Cathedral in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both Croat and Bosniak political and religious representatives had regularly attended the Bleiburg commemoration over the past decade but actually holding a Mass in Sarajevo sparked massive protests and public debates over the glorification of fascist collaborators. Although the Mass was attended only by a handful of participants, the mobilization of antifascist demonstrators indicates the degree to which the commemoration has become associated with the radical right. The politicization of Bleiburg since the 1990s has made it difficult to scientifically and objectively deal with the civilian victims of the communist regime since the Bleiburg narrative has long been monopolized by those who seek to rehabilitate the Ustaša movement. Moreover, the reaction in Sarajevo reveals how everything is instrumentalized by the various ethnic groups, as well as an indication that the Second World War and communist period in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains overshadowed by the memory politics of the 1990s. Just over a month following the uproar in Sarajevo, the Austrian Parliament voted on a resolution to ban the Bleiburg commemoration in its entirety, which will certainly affect the way Croatia deals with this chapter of history in the upcoming years²⁴.

Whereas Croatia, and to a lesser extent Bosnia and Herzegovina, have struggled with diametrically opposed narratives of resistance and collaboration related to the Second World War, in Serbia, the rehabilitation of the Četniks has resulted in a narrative of multiple anti-fascist movements. While, to some degree, the Partisan movement has been demonized in a similar vein as in other countries²⁵, including the changing of holidays related to antifascism, in other aspects, the Partisans have been depicted as exclusively a Serb movement

24 A. Vladislavljević, *Austrian MPs Vote for Ban on Croats' Bleiburg WWII Gathering*, "Balkan Insight", 06.06.2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/09/austrian-mps-vote-for-ban-on-croats-bleiburg-wwii-gathering/> [21.09.2020].

25 Srđan Cvetković's work on Partisan crimes has resulted not only in several academic volumes on the subject, but a widely attended exhibition, *U ime naroda* (In the Name of the People) that spawned many lectures, debates, and outreach events. See: S. Cvetković, *Između srpa i čekića: Represija u Srbiji 1944-1953*, Beograd 2006. This book has been reprinted and followed by two subsequent volumes.

that fought fascism alongside the royalist Četniks and Soviet Russia. The latter emphasis is clearly due to close ties between Belgrade and Moscow, while the rehabilitation of the Četniks and their leader Draža Mihailović ignores the fact that they collaborated extensively not only with the Nazis and Italian fascists but also with the Croatian Ustaša movement. The various intricacies of Mihailović's legal rehabilitation and the various nuances in the contemporary representation of the Četniks in Serbia has been meticulously elaborated in Jelena Đureinović's impressive book *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia*²⁶.

Although this section has primarily focused on the commemorative practices associated with the Second World War, Tito's memory deserves a brief mention. While in some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, and North Macedonia, Tito continues to be viewed positively, public opinion is considerably more divided in Croatia and Serbia, where his opponents hold him responsible for post-war repression, assassinations of outspoken emigres, and the crushing of anti-Yugoslav nationalist movements. Tito still generates heated debates from both his supporters and those who condemn him as a brutal dictator, with these polemics extending into the academic field across the region²⁷.

2. Memory Politics and the Wars of Yugoslavia's Dissolution

While the brief overview of only a few of the ongoing memory debates about the Second World War in the former Yugoslavia reveals the

26 J. Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia*, London 2019.

27 Several biographical studies, ranging from sensationalism to serious academic research, include: P. Šimić, *Tito: Fenomen stoljeća*, Zagreb 2009; W. Klinger, D. Kuljiš, *Tito: Neispričane price*, Zagreb 2013; S. Goldstein, I. Goldstein, *Tito*, Zagreb 2018. Other studies have focused more on the collective memory of Tito, such as T. Kuljić, *Sećanja na Titoizma: između diktata i otpora*, Belgrade 2011; M. Velikonja, *Titostalgija*, Belgrade 2010; and *O Titu kao mitu: Proslava dana mladosti u Kumrovcu*, eds. N. Škrbić Alempijević, K. Mathiesen Hjemdahl, Zagreb 2006. The Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, which also houses Tito's grave in the adjacent House of Flowers, has done the most regarding the branding of the Tito image, although other places associated with Tito across the former Yugoslavia (such as Kumrovec, the Brioni Islands, Drvar, and Bled) offer memory tourism and souvenirs associated with Tito.

complexity of the mnemonic landscape in the region, the commemorative practices related to the wars of the 1990s are even more politicized and instrumentalized, affecting both internal developments as well as international relations. The consequences of massive demographic shifts, the numerous war crimes trials in domestic courts and at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)²⁸, the attempts at creating a regional truth and reconciliation commission²⁹, and the fertile ground for manipulation by mnemonic actors³⁰ in all of the successor states, mean that the memory politics dealing with the 1990s would require an entire monograph to explain them adequately. Nevertheless, there are a number of trends across the region which deserve mention. Firstly, as in the Second World War, all of the countries engage in some degree of competitive victimization, attempting to portray both the Yugoslav state and its disintegration as being the most harmful to one's own ethnic group. Secondly, each of the countries have engaged in excessive memorialization projects, whether related to distant pasts (such as North Macedonia's infamous Skopje 2014 project)³¹ or the building of extensive memoryscapes in Croatia, Kosovo³², and Bosnia and Herzegovina³³ related to the wars of the 1990s. Thirdly, these memory regimes have been impacted by regional relations, the processes of Euro-Atlantic integration, and a re-

- 28 Hundreds of books and articles have been written about the ICTY's impact on the former Yugoslavia, but a few studies specifically dealing with the interplay of history, memory, and international tribunals include I. Sokolić, *International Courts and Mass Atrocity: Narratives of War and Justice in Croatia*, London 2018; A. Ljubojević, *Remembering The Hague: the impact of international criminal justice on memory practices in Croatia*, [in:] *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities...*; V. Petrović, *The Emergence of Historical Forensic Expertise: Clio takes the Stand*, London 2017; J. Subotić, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans*, Ithaca 2009; and E. Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia*, Philadelphia 2013.
- 29 The RECOM initiative was established in 2006 by a coalition of regional NGOs to try and establish a regional commission modeled on other transitional justice practices around the world, and although the lack of political will in the post-Yugoslav space makes it unlikely that a true commission will be enacted the efforts of RECOM have considerably contributed to promoting dialogue and assisting victims of violence. See: <https://www.recom.link/home/>.
- 30 *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. M. Bernhard, J. Kubik, Oxford 2014.
- 31 L. Risteski, *Monuments and Urban Nationalism: The Skopje 2014 Project*, "Antropologija" 2016, vol. 16, no. 3, p. 49-70.
- 32 D. Ermolin, *When Skanderbeg Meets Clinton: Cultural Landscape and Commemorative Strategies in Postwar Kosovo*, "Politička misao" 2014, vol. 51, no. 5, p. 157-173.
- 33 A. Sokol, *War Monuments: Instruments of Nation-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, "Politička misao" 2014, vol. 51, no. 5, p. 105-126.

surge in great power geopolitics that has seen Turkey and Russia asserting their presence in the Balkans in the wake of the European Union's enlargement fatigue and internal crises.

Whereas countries such as Slovenia or Montenegro have experienced a relative continuity in the memorialization of the 1990s, with relatively little impact on elections or everyday politics, in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the dissolution of Yugoslavia plays a constant role in the political arena. For many years Serbia denied or downplayed its complicity in the bloody fighting in neighboring states and instead focused on its own victimization during the NATO bombing in 1999³⁴. However, in more recent years, the Serbian armed forces have been celebrated more openly under Aleksandar Vučić despite a record of committing or enabling war crimes from Croatia to Kosovo, while simultaneously emphasizing the victimization of Serbs who were ultimately a collateral damage of Slobodan Milošević's wars. The Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the central pillars of Bosniak identity, confirmed in a number of ICTY trials, European declarations, and memorialization efforts³⁵, but has been systematically denied in Republika Srpska as Milorad Dodik increasingly challenged the international community and turned to allies in Serbia and Putin's Russia. Whereas Srebrenica is the most well-known war crime from the Bosnian war, a common pattern throughout the country is the celebration of war criminals from one's own ethnic group while denying the other side the ability to memorialize in public space in ethnically contested territory, whether it is Prijedor, Novi Travnik, Sarajevo, or numerous other tragic sites throughout the country.

Although there are dozens of potential case studies to choose from in illustrating how the memorialization of the 1990s wars continues to be manipulated by political elites and other social actors, the annual commemoration of the Croatian Army's Operation Storm (*Oluja*) in August 1995 is a useful example of the ongoing memory struggles inside a post-Yugoslav country but also in its relationships with its neighbors. Long considered one of the most difficult hurdles for restoring

34 O. Fridman, *Memories of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Belgrade, Serbia*, "Südosteuropa" 2016, vol. 64, no. 4, p. 438-459.

35 L. J. Nettelfield, S. E. Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide*, Cambridge 2014.

Serb-Croat relations in Croatia, and exacerbated by increasingly politicized commemorative practices in Serbia, this year's 25th anniversary of the operation represented a remarkable shift in the discourse and a symbolic step in the right direction for long term reconciliation.

Approximately 30% of Croatia was occupied by rebel Serbs and the Yugoslav People's Army after the Yugoslav crisis escalated into open war in 1991, in the so-called Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK)³⁶. Never recognized internationally, the RSK's brief existence was characterized by crimes against the non-Serb population within its borders, its leaders' incompetence, the manipulation of its people by Slobodan Milošević and his plans for a Greater Serbia, and the complete failure at creating a functioning state. After the Krajina Serbs rejected the so-called Z-4 plan offered by Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and negotiated by the international community, the Croatian Army launched Operation Storm on 4 August 1995. Militarily the offensive was a complete success, breaking the rebel Serb resistance in only a few days. Knin, the capital of the RSK and symbolically the heart of the Serb rebellion, fell on 5 August (the day that is subsequently commemorated), and by 7 August the Croatian Government declared that the fighting was over. Croatia's victories were sullied by the subsequent exodus of the Krajina Serbs (estimated at 150,000-200,000 people), widespread looting, the destruction of housing stock and other buildings, and the murder of several hundred civilians in the four months after hostilities ended³⁷. The ICTY indicted Generals Ante Gotovina, Mladen Markač, and Ivan Čermak for war crimes committed during and after the operation, resulting in numerous delays in EU accession due to Gotovina's four years on the lam. Opposition to cooperation with the ICTY and domestic trials served to rally rightists and many veteran groups, but in 2012 the Appeals Chamber acquitted all of them, and war crimes issues lost their mobilizing function³⁸. Opera-

36 V. Pavlaković, *Symbols and the culture of memory in the Republika Srpska Krajina*, "Nationalities Papers" 2013, vol. 6, p. 893-909.

37 For estimates of civilian deaths and number of people who left the Krajina, see: Gotovina et al. (IT-06-90), <http://www.icty.org/case/gotovina/4>.

38 V. Pavlaković, *Better the Grave Than a Slave: Croatia's Relations with the ICTY, 1995-2005*, [in:] *Croatia since Independence: Politics, Society, Foreign Policy*, eds. S. P. Ramet, K. Clewing, R. Lukić, Munich 2008; V. Pavlaković, *Croatia, the ICTY, and General Gotovina as a Political Symbol*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2010, vol. 62, no. 10, p. 1707-1740.

tion Storm thus became the keystone of the heroic narrative of Croatia's War of Independence as well as the country's greatest obstacle to Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Croatian Government began commemorating Operation Storm already on the first anniversary, although under Tuđman most of the official celebrations took place in Zagreb. Since 2000 the central celebrations commemorative speeches have taken place in Knin. However, it was only after Ivo Sanader became prime minister that the entire political leadership (president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament) attended the commemoration more or less every year. Known colloquially as Victory Day, the commemoration's official name was expanded to Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day, and Day of Croatian Defenders.

Croatia's relationship with the ICTY frequently influenced the speeches, reactions from the crowd, and images spotted on the streets of Knin, which hung over the commemoration for a decade due to the indictment of the key generals involved in the operation. As opposed to the commemoration in Vukovar, during which victims of the war and victimization of the town for Croatia's freedom and independence are remembered, the speeches held in Knin mostly focus on the bravery of Croatian defenders and on their heroic deeds in the fight for independence. The memory of victims plays far less of a role than in Vukovar, and the main victims mentioned are the fallen defenders who gave their lives for Croatia. Their victimhood is, for that reason, *celebrated* and not *commemorated*³⁹.

From 2005 until 2014, nationalist singer Marko Perković Thompson held concerts in his hometown of Čavoglave on 5 August, drawing as many as ten times more participants as the official commemoration as a form of protest against Croatian cooperation with The Hague. In 2015 and 2016, Thompson moved his concert to Knin, resulting in numerous incidents of nationalist excesses, particularly due to the use of "Ready for the Homeland" (*Za dom spremni*) in the opening lines of his biggest hit song. Although in subsequent years Thompson's concerts moved to other towns such as Slunj and Glina on 5 August, the

39 T. Banjeglav, *Filling voids with memories: Commemorative rituals and memorial landscape in post-war Vukovar*, [in:] *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities...*, p. 194-208.

Knin commemoration nevertheless continued to be seen as an event celebrating victory with little consideration for the traumatized Serb population. While Croats saw Operation Storm as a legal, justified, and necessary military offensive to liberate the occupied territory, Serbs viewed it as a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing. By selectively focusing on 1995 and not reflecting on the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs from the RSK from 1991 or the fact that Serb leaders themselves ordered the exodus of the Krajina population, Serb nationalists use Operation Storm as the ultimate proof of victimization. Since 2015, the leaders of Serbia and Republika Srpska, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, respectively, have organized an official parallel commemoration in Serbia dedicated to the Serb victims of the operation after years of unofficial commemorations by Croatian Serb refugees. The diametrically opposite narratives and commemorative practices in Serbia and Croatia every August meant that any efforts for reconciliation that had taken place during the previous year were threatened by nationalist speeches from both sides, with each group seeing the other as exclusively perpetrators with little or no empathy for the civilian victims belonging to the other ethnic group.

Although relations between Serbia and Croatia dominate the press during the Operation Storm commemorations, the situation of Croatia's remaining Serbs is necessary for the wounds of the war to heal fully. The rebuilding of destroyed infrastructure, an end to discrimination, and investigation into all war crimes, regardless of the victims' and perpetrators' ethnicity, are key problems that need to be resolved. The Serbian National Council in Croatia, along with a number of human rights NGOs, have worked on these issues as well as organizing annual commemorative events in various towns (Varivode, Gošić, Glina, Dvor) in honor of not only Serb victims but all victims of the war. The 25th anniversary of Operation Storm, organized in extraordinary circumstances due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, represented a break from the previous cycles of antagonistic political rituals and focused on bringing together both Croats and Serbs in recognizing the victims on both sides, followed by concrete projects for improving the lives of citizens who remain without access to electricity or other utilities.

The 2020 commemoration featured powerful messages of reconciliation from the entire political leadership – Prime Minister Andrej

Plenković, President Zoran Milanović, and Speaker of the Parliament Gordan Jandroković – as well as a plea to turn to the future from General Ante Gotovina, the commander of the military offensive⁴⁰. Not only were the commemorative speeches proof that a different kind of narrative is possible, in which the legality and validity of Operation Storm were not challenged while acknowledging Serb civilian victims, but the commemoration was attended by a member of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) who also serves as a vice president in the coalition government. Nationalists in Serbia and Croatia were outraged at this unprecedented symbolic move since it deprived them of the kind of divisive politics they had profited from for decades. The Ministry of Veteran Affairs has promised to attend commemorations of Serb victims, and the government announced a number of projects intended to improve the lives of citizens in former war zones. Further, Archbishop Marin Barišić called on Serbs who fled Croatia over two decades ago to return to their homeland. While it remains to be seen how these symbolic acts could be transformed into deeds, this commemoration represented a dramatic shift in commemorative culture in the region and demonstrated political will at the highest level by using memorialization in a healing, rather than antagonistic, way in the wake of the destructive wars of the 1990s.

Conclusions

This article briefly analyzed the complexities of memory politics in the Yugoslav successor states due to the intertwined narratives of the Second World War, communist rule, and conflicts of the 1990s. While there have been governments across the political spectrum throughout the former Yugoslavia, many of the parties and even political actors were directly involved in the wars that led to the country's disintegration, resulting in an atmosphere where reconciliation is not necessarily a goal pursued by elites thriving off of manipulating the past. Nevertheless, there are actors who seek different and more positive trajec-

40 A. Vladislavljjevic, M. Stojanovic, *Croatia Hails 25th Anniversary of Operation Storm Victory; Serbs Mourn*, "Balkan Insight", 05.08.2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/05/croatia-hails-25th-anniversary-of-operation-storm-victory-serbs-mourn/> [21.09.2020].

tories, and despite a myriad of socio-economic problems (corruption, poverty, demographic losses, interethnic tension) and global crises, there are examples of transparent initiatives in dealing with the past. The Second World War remains a source of ideological contestation, but more importantly, resolving the issues related to the wars of the 1990s is key to building a better future.

Commemorative practices and memorial sites are not the only arenas where memory politics are played out. Education and textbooks influence young generations, and while projects that seek to create common histories exist, curricula and educational materials remain an ideological battlefield⁴¹. Popular culture, from films⁴² to the theater⁴³, graffiti⁴⁴, and music⁴⁵, also perpetuate narratives and employ symbols in transmitting selective visions of the past, at times even more influential than official commemorations. As the memory of the 1990s wars becomes increasingly institutionalized over time, more and more museums and memorial sites have been established across the region, with nearly all of them conforming to each country's official narratives⁴⁶. From nationalist mobilization during global events such as the World Cup, to the use of fascist symbols by hooligans, sports also represent a broad field where memory politics plays a role⁴⁷. The banal nationalism that reproduces historical narratives

- 41 J. Mihajlović Trbovc, T. Pavašević Trošt, *Who were the anti-Fascists? Divergent interpretation of WWII in contemporary post-Yugoslav history textbooks*, [in:] *The use and abuse of memory: interpreting world war in contemporary European politics*, eds. Ch. Karner, B. Mertens, Abingdon – New York 2017, p. 173-192; and S. Koren, *Politika povijesti u Jugoslaviji, 1945-1960: Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, nastava povijesti, historiografija*, Zagreb 2012.
- 42 *Partisans in Yugoslavia: Literature, Film and Visual Culture*, eds. M. Jakiša, N. Gilić, Bielefeld 2015.
- 43 Theater director Oliver Frljić staged numerous provocative plays in Rijeka dealing with issues of fascist revisionism and war crimes committed by the Croatian Army, resulting in numerous threats and even an attack by hooligans against his theater, S. Milekić, *Threatened Croatian Theatre Director Slams Police Inaction*, "Balkan Insight", 10.03.2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/03/10/threatened-croatian-theatre-director-loses-trust-in-police-03-09-2016/> [21.09.2020].
- 44 M. Velikonja, *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, London 2020.
- 45 C. Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War, and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991*, London 2016; *Sounds of Attraction: Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Popular Music*, eds. M. Kozorog, R. Muršič, Ljubljana 2017.
- 46 R. Schellenberg, *Commemorating Conflict: Models of Remembrance in Postwar Croatia*, Oxford 2016; and T. Banjeglav, *Exhibiting Memories of a Besieged City: The (Uncertain) Role of Museums in Constructing Public Memory of the 1992-1995 Siege of Sarajevo*, "Sudosteuropa" 2019, vol. 67, no. 1, p. 1-23.
- 47 D. Brentin, *Ready for the Homeland? Ritual, remembrance, and political extremism in Croatian football*, "Nationalities Papers" 2016, vol. 44, no. 6, p. 860-876.

on an everyday basis means that it is an even greater responsibility for political elites, intellectuals, leaders in the various religious communities, and the media to challenge the discourse that resulted in the destructive war in the 1990s. Youth need to develop critical thinking skills, and the Yugoslav successor states need to foster historical dialogue and scholarly exchange on all levels in order to prevent future conflicts at a time when regional solidarity is needed more than ever.

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