

Nationalising Scorched Earth – Memory and Destruction of Monuments from Vukovar to Knin

MICHAŁ PIASEK

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Research has often focused on Croatian memorialisation processes in specific places like Bleiburg and Jasenovac, controversial places during and after World War II. This article employs another view and elaborates on the destruction and removal, as well as the recent restoration of monuments and reconstruction of sacred architecture. It examines current memory processes in places once in the Republic of Serbian Krajina (1991-1995), from Vukovar to Knin. It stresses the different roles between state-organised and private commemorations in these historically multi-ethnic and -religious areas. The paper addresses problems like the demolition of monuments not fitting into the state narrative and analyses various historical processes that instigated the (re-)use of revisionist and mostly politically tolerated symbols and inscriptions on monuments and sacred architecture. With attention to the latter, it specifically deals with the reconstruction of a Catholic and Christian-Orthodox church in the Lika region. The research connects historical and anthropological approaches and contributes to the interdisciplinary field of memory studies.

Keywords: Croatia, Croatian War of Independence, Nationalism, Memory, Monuments.

Introduction

Croatia's historical metanarrative of the thousand-year struggle for independence has become a key element in nation formation since 1991.¹ However, the role of (national) self-determination linked with the reconstruction of monuments and sacred architecture in memory-making within multi-ethnic and -religious areas remains a relatively under-investigated dimension of sociological and anthropological studies.

What makes these regions worth mentioning is their hundred years long history as border regions, which left a multi-ethnic and -religious legacy still waiting for its historical reappraisal. Along the former Croatian and Slavonian Military Frontier, in today's Croatian Adriatic hinterland and eastern Croatia, the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995) left its indelible mark. This also included the very sensitive multicultural space. For the process of nation-building, the presence of a certain minority does not fit the metanarrative. Correspondingly, as Robert Bevan puts it: 'The destruction of the cultural artefacts of an enemy people or nation as a means of dominating, terrorizing, dividing or eradicating [...].'² 'If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented. The past legitimises. The past gives a more glorious background to a present that doesn't have much to show for itself.'³

With this in mind, nationalist groups consider multi-ethnic (-cultural) coexistence as threatening and obstructing the nation-building process.⁴ The idea of nation-building followed the principle of 'one state=one nation=one language',⁵ and regarded multilingualism as an exception. Hence, after the war in the 1990s, they demolished partisan monuments, which had inscriptions in several languages like Croatian, Serbian, Hungarian and Ukrainian. Over half of the antifascist monuments were demolished without legal sanction.⁶ At that time, authorities erected new plaques and monuments commemorating the victimhood of

Independent Croatia (1941-1945) alluding to communist crimes. The use of a Croat-centred self-victimising language denies or silences the existing ethnic and religious diversity. Additionally, they manipulate historical events with its inscriptions and, thus, successfully establish a metanarrative in the public discourse.

This study concentrates on artefacts in (former) multi-ethnic and -religious places within the former borders of the Serbian Krajina (1992-1995) in Croatia, a region with its own conflicted remembrance.⁷ It draws on research conducted in villages once along the historical Croatian and Slavonian Military Frontier and which before 1991 bore a multi-ethnic and -religious stamp. In this context, a striking moment is the destruction and removal as well as the recent erection and/or restoration of monuments and reconstruction of sacred architecture.

I aim to follow various historical processes that instigated the (re-)use of revisionist and mostly politically tolerated symbols and inscriptions on monuments and sacred architecture. This research connects historical and anthropological approaches and fills a gap within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, offering a heuristic lens that considers both distant (multicultural Military Frontier) and recent history (the 1990s war).

Contrary to existing research, my method looks at how nationalising and strengthening tradition(s) influence iconography and language. With attention to these factors, I will show that these processes lead to establishing revisionist narratives. During my field research, I gathered information on over 700 monuments in roughly 550 towns and villages. I localised the monuments with the help of local newspapers mentioning commemorations or by visiting places which suffered from military actions. I photographed all monuments and created a corpus with GPS-data, the inscriptions and symbols. The monuments appear in a variety of places. For example, in parks, central squares, streets, along the roads,

cemeteries or remote locations, often a significant place where an incident happened.

So far, there were several attempts to discuss the destruction of partisan monuments and post-Yugoslav memory politics in Croatia. As Stef Jansen postulates, memory might not be based on what happened during the war, but on what the post-conflict administration and decision-makers perceive as politically convenient to tell a story about.⁸ Jansen researched the early stage of the memorialisation processes after 1995.⁹ He highlights the enormous discrepancy between the remembrance of Croats and Serbs in former Serbian Krajina and provides evidence for memories being selective and nationally exclusive by reconstructing specific historical events.

The remembrance practices and transitional justice in the Balkans have been quite well analysed by Jelena Subotić.¹⁰ Further specific research referring to war narratives in Croatia have already been outlined by Vjeran Pavlaković,¹¹ Tamara Banjevlav,¹² and Janine Clark.¹³ The latter two have contributed to commemoration practises and the erection of monuments in Vukovar.¹⁴

Other relevant research has been done by Ljiljana Radonić.¹⁵ She has pointed out the dangerous and strengthening remembrance practices within the far-right movements in Croatia, denying atrocities during World War II and the Holocaust.

The legitimising processes, which are inextricably linked to political power, are another key point. Political authority strives to delimit the range of possible interpretations of the past and control the process through which such interpretations become politically and socially viable and legitimate. Nationalising comprises various factors. For instance, Martin Gegner and Bart Zino include war as one of its processes and postulate: 'The main arguments are that war mostly mobilises

identities, mentalities and emotions. Therefore, remembrance provides legitimacy to political systems and underscores territorial claims.¹⁶ Hobsbawm and Ranger see tradition as a key, as it constructs versions of 'the past', which ends in a unified common culture. Symbols are part of this constructed past. According to Anthony Cohen, they are important for the production of space.¹⁷ Certain communities and groups perceive the symbols as their own and use them to strengthen their In-group values. Arjun Appadurai put it in a similar way, saying that the dualism 'majority—minority' is a recent invention and aroused from the so-called 'anxiety of incompleteness.'¹⁸ These remarks significantly provide a profound understanding and the basis for this paper.

Historical Outline

To get a better understanding of the situation in the researched area, I will shortly outline several important historical events. The first and crucial one was the establishment of the Habsburg Military Frontier, which lasted from 1521 to 1881 in its longest extension.¹⁹ Throughout history, the Frontier had been a refuge for Catholics and Orthodox Christians from the Ottoman Empire. It also attracted colonists from the Habsburg Empire to work the fields in exchange for tax relief. In 1702, after the defeat of the Ottomans, the Habsburg authorities established the Slavonian Military Frontier,²⁰ which then formed a continuous border from the Adriatic coast through central Croatia to the Danube river. Colonising the Frontier region resulted in a multi-ethnic and -religious territory.

However, only from the mid-nineteenth century onwards did the authorities introduce a categorisation of ethnicities.²¹ However, the ethnic identities were limited to the educated elites.²² By the end of the nineteenth century, the former Frontier regions consisted mostly of

Serbs except for eastern Croatia. In the latter there were also Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Slovaks and Ukrainians.

In the twentieth century, two events disturbed the conviviality. Firstly, World War II and the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. Secondly, the Croatian War of Independence.

The latter put the new Croatian government in a difficult position of how to deal with its own actions during World War II, its situation as part of Yugoslavia and how to memorialise its newly acquired independence. For Croatia's first president, Franjo Tudjman, there was only one way to accomplish his vision.²³ To maintain his political legitimacy and to frame Croatia's 1000-year-old foundation narrative, he decided to break radically with the Yugoslav past and rehabilitate Croatia's collaboration with the Nazis.²⁴

The return of ethnic phrasing has also been beneficial for Tudjman. In the 1990s war, terms like Chetniks and Ustashe (synonymously standing for Serbs and Croats), reappeared.²⁵ Besides that, further newly-coined terms, like 'Serbo-' and 'Yugo-Communism', delegitimizing the Tito-regime and implying that Serbs would overtake Croatia, were used.

The two military Operations *Bljesak* (Flash) and *Oluja* (Storm) in May and August 1995, spelled the end of the Serbian Krajina, which not only vanished almost the last traces of the Military Frontier and its multicultural landscape, but it also entailed an enormous win for the Croatian government. The regions of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmia remained under UN-protection, but returned peacefully to Croatia in January 1998.

Croatia's memory politics is no coincidence. Since 1991, Franjo Tudjman's (1922-1999) party HDZ (Croatian Democratic Party) has only been out of government between 2000-2003 and 2011-2015. In 2006,

the Croatian parliament adopted the ‘Declaration on Operation Storm’ and used it to make the heroic winner narrative official. The Declaration plays down the committed crimes by calling the victims innocent and powerless civilians, who ‘usually get killed during such actions.’²⁶ The Croatian army and paramilitary groups were involved in committing crimes against civilian victims who were mostly older Serbs who could not or did not want to flee.

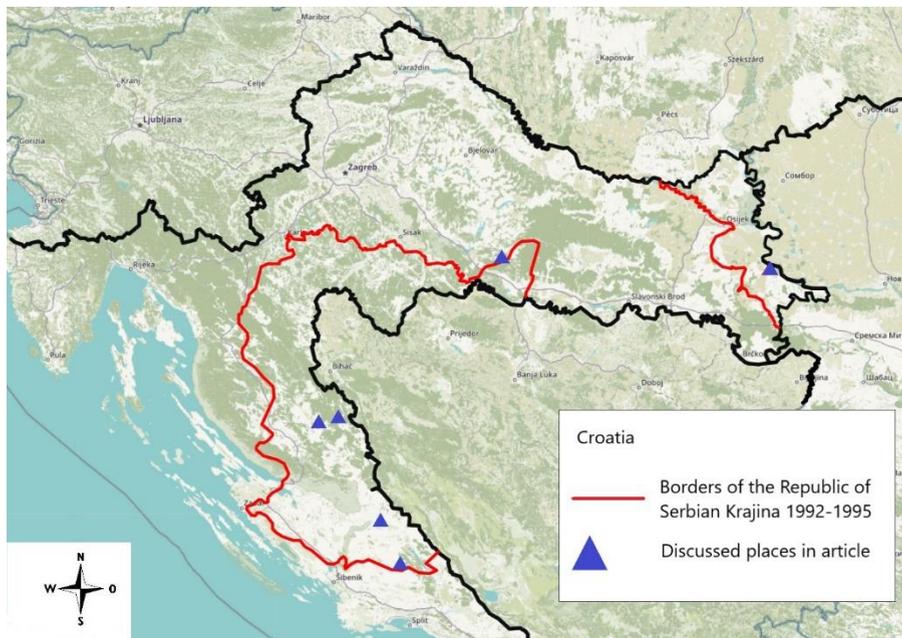


Figure 1: © OpenStreetMap contributors, edited by the author.

The water tower in Vukovar

The eastern Croatian town of Vukovar is most known for its shoe manufacturer, Borovo, and the water tower, which is standing at the

banks of the Danube river. Vukovar is in a remarkably ethnically and religiously mixed area, including (besides Croats and Serbs) Ukrainians, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Slovaks and others. However, the town is also known as 'grad heroja' (town of heroes). It results from the three months Yugoslav People's Army and Serb paramilitary siege between August and November 1991. Consequently, it left the town destroyed and the water tower became a symbol for its victim-based narrative.

In the late 1990s, local authorities had the idea to musealise Vukovar, leaving the city in its destitute state after its peaceful reintegration in 1998. However, despite abandoning this idea, the war became the focal point of the new political and national identity promoted in Vukovar's public space.²⁷ The authorities reinforced this vision by erecting several monuments and memorial museums marking former frontlines. According to my findings, there are at least twelve monuments dedicated to the Croatian War of Independence and additionally seven memorial museums in Vukovar and its periphery. The most important ones are the mass grave and Memorial Centre at Ovčara, Memorial cemetery of the Homeland War victims, Memorial Centre of the Homeland War and the Memorial House of the Croatian Defenders on Trpinja road. As Tamara Banjeglav puts it: "This act of erecting memorial sculptures encircling the city can be seen as the final stage in the creation of what Naef calls a "museum city", a term used to describe "urban centres frozen by their heritagisation".²⁸

Recently, Vukovar remembered for the 30th time its destruction on 18 November 1991. Dejan Jović calls this form of memorialisation a 'war for interpretation of the war.'²⁹ According to Jović, the process of building a long-lasting peace in Croatia was met with resistance from those in whose best interest it was for the war to never finish. Considering the period from 2014 and Vukovar's political changes, Jović's claim certainly proves to be true for Vukovar.

Since 2014, Ivan Penava (leader of the right-wing populist party 'Domovinski pokret' (Homeland Movement)) is the mayor of Vukovar. He strongly pushes his nationalist agenda to strengthen Vukovar's narrative of suffering. In February 2020, the Croatian government passed a new law, which lists Vukovar as 'a special place of homeland piety'. Consequently, the town erected several almost six-metres-high sculptures on every road entering Vukovar. The inscriptions read that 'one is entering Vukovar, the place of special homeland piety'. The sculptures are shaped as the letter 'V', which stands for Vukovar, but also as the symbol for victory, regularly used by the Croatian forces during the 1990s war.³⁰

While there are several articles on memory and memorialisation in Vukovar, I will specifically elaborate on the newest development regarding the water tower. Recently, it became another addition to the several already existing documentation centres in and around Vukovar. Remarkably, the total cost of reconstruction was 46 million Kuna (approx. 6,1 million Euro). Only seven million came from the government, the rest from private donations. On the roof there is a circle with all the seven thousand donator's names and a small plaque with information on Ivan (Marko) Ivanika who represents one of the town's 'heroes'. In 1991, he had been climbing up the tower every day to raise the Croatian flag, until a grenade shell hit him on 5 November 1991. He survived the injury, but eventually died under unknown circumstances. His remains were found in a mass grave near Ilok in 2005. Under the roof, there is a tiny exhibition on six TV screens showing Vukovar's siege.

After the transformation of the water tower into a monument and exhibition centre, authorities also introduced 18 November as a national holiday in Croatia, which resembled 'only' a memorial day before.³¹ The water tower is an unusual example for monuments, as before 1991, it simply functioned as a water supply tower. Only after 1998, it became

such an important symbol for Croatian politics. Since 1998, Vukovar's authorities and veterans' organisations have been continuously nationalising the town, altering public space and its concurrent ideologies.

Despite the efforts, authorities could not entirely erase partisan or Serbian artefacts from the public space. The partisan Memorial Park Dudik, erected by famous sculptor Bogdan Bogdanović (1922-2010), is a commemoration site for partisans killed during World War II. While heavily damaged during the 1990s war, authorities planned to demolish it after the war and transform the space into a football field. Yet it did not happen, because partisan veterans' organisations successfully lobbied to maintain the memorial park. It remains in a decayed³² state, although still used every second Saturday in May for a commemoration organised by the anti-fascist and veterans' and Serbian minority organisation of Croatia.³³

The second site relates to the 1990s war. It is the so-called 'groblje šajkača' (šajkača cemetery) next to the Christian-Orthodox cemetery.³⁴ They named it like this, because of the hats on the graves. Erected on 18 November 1992 on a private property, it remains a controversial spot on Vukovar's map. While Serbs celebrated 'Vukovar's liberation' until 1995 on that specific date, Croats remembered it and still do as the 'fall of Vukovar'. Meanwhile, the hats were removed from the graves. Nonetheless, the site is actively used as a commemoration site by the Serbian minority political party SDSS, sparking further controversies by Croatian War of Independence veterans' organisations.³⁵ To not interfere with the large-scale Croatian commemorations in Vukovar on 18 November, the Serb minority organisation commemorates in a small clandestine service on 17 November.³⁶

To summarise, Vukovar's nationalising process is rather marked by erecting new monuments than by destruction. Namely, the

reconstruction of the town's symbol, the water tower, is a noteworthy transformation of a former utility object into a museum. Consequently, it strengthens the victim-narrative with its exhibition and its preserved 'damaged look'. Nevertheless, the 'šajkača' cemetery and Dudik memorial park prove the divergent commemoration practises. While at Dudik and 'šajkača' the Serb minority political party SDSS (often together with Croatia's Serbian minority organisation) is organising commemorations, they do not take part in other, Croat veterans' or state-organised events.³⁷ Many high-ranking Croatian politicians attend the latter events in Vukovar and consequently not the SDSS organised ones. Given these points, it evidently shows how Croatian politicians in charge pursue their goal to strengthen national identity and distance themselves from any Serb-related and/or partisan commemorations.

Memorial Park Trokut

The next example illustrates the divergence and the dealing with Yugoslav heritage in Western Slavonia. It is quite similar to Vukovar's Dudik memorial park, as it shows the destruction of a national Yugoslav monument and, at the same time, construction a new 1990s war monument adjacent to the ruined partisan monument. The location is halfway between Pakrac and Novska on the E47 highway. During Yugoslav times, it had the name 'Spomen Park Trokut' (Memorial Park Trokut). During World War II and the Croatian War of Independence, several military actions took place in this area. Towards the last battles in April 1945, over 650 soldiers from the 21st Serbian partisan division lost their lives while liberating Western Slavonia from the Independent State of Croatia.³⁸ In 1961, the regime erected a six-meter tall and fifteen-meter-wide monument to honour these soldiers. Additionally, the administration registered it as a national Yugoslav monument in 1973.³⁹ Hence, it showed the importance of the battle to the regime.

In 1991, this place became a focal point again. The memorial park found itself exactly at the Serbian Krajina border. On 19 November 1991, Croatian forces started Operation 'Orkan' (Hurricane) to take control of Serb-controlled parts of Western Slavonia. During the operations, the partisan monument had been destroyed, leaving only the pedestal. Then, in 2009, the authorities decided to erect a new, prestigious monument dedicated to 337 Croatian soldiers from the 1990s war. For this purpose, they commissioned the famous Croatian architect Branko Siladin (*1936) to design it and place it next to the former partisan site.

In 2017, this place received further attention for a commemorating plaque that was moved from Jasenovac to the memorial park. The controversy is sparked by the use of the highly controversial Ustasha greeting *za dom spremni* (for the homeland, ready!), which is on the plaque. This phrase has been used during the time of the Independent State of Croatia. Not only is it a comparable greeting to *Heil Hitler!* or *Sieg Heil!*, but authorities and Jasenovac survivor organisations considered its previous location as inappropriate as it is known for the most notorious concentration camp in South-East Europe. The reason HOS placed the plaque in Jasenovac is that all unit members died in or near Jasenovac between 1991-1995.

The Croatian paramilitary group *Hrvatske Obrambene Snage* (Croatian Defence Forces (HOS)), which regularly uses revisionist symbols, authored this memorial plaque. The group uses the same abbreviation (HOS) as the *Hrvatske Oružane Snage* (Croatian Armed Forces) during the Independent State of Croatia. The plaque is dedicated to eleven members of the Croatian Defence Forces, 1st 'Ante Paradžik' brigade. They named the unit after the right-wing politician and founder of the Croatian Party of Rights and the Croatian Defence Forces, Ante Paradžik (1943-1991). During World War II, Paradžik's father was also a HOS-member.



Remarkable is the organisation's logo, which is similarly assembled as the coat of arms of the Independent State of Croatia. Instead of using the framed Ustasha 'U', they replaced it with the historical Croatian shield. The frame comprises almost the same Croatian interlace as used by the Independent State of Croatia with just minor adjustments like the rounded-up edges.

Figure 2: Coat of arms of Independent State of Croatia. Creative Commons.



Figure 3: The HOS-plaque in Trokut, photo by the author. October 2021.

Then again, the issue with the salute *za dom spremni* is that it is not explicitly banned by law in Croatia. However, Article 39 of the Croatian constitution says that ‘any call for or incitement to war or use of violence, to national, racial or religious hatred, or any form of intolerance shall be prohibited and is punishable by law.’⁴⁰ Remarkably, the Constitutional Court of Croatia has frequently upheld decisions of the lower court’s ruling, treating the salute as an offense against the public order and incitement to hatred.⁴¹

In fact, there is another controversy involving this site. Not only has the plaque been damaged several times, but also led to police surveillance. It included a police car watching the plaque twenty-four hours a day, which led to further discussions. During my field research in early 2018, I witnessed a police car overseeing this place. During my 2021 visit, I observed how the memorial park has now been under video surveillance (See fig. 4).

This example illustrates the value of a contested memorial plaque, which even needs to be protected by the police. This is certainly a unique phenomenon within the researched areas. Another notable fact is that the authorities put so much effort into assembling the monument, but



Figure 4: Memorial Park Trokut. In the foreground, the HOS-plaque. In the background, the new 1990s monument. The ruined partisan monument is behind the trees on the left (not visible). Photo by the author, October 2021.

left it with no information panels, thus excluding any visitor from knowledge about the events.

The memorial park also illustrates how the Serbian community cares for partisan sites. After the memorial park gained that much attention in 2017, the Serb National Council from Pakrac cleared the partisan's monument site, bringing it back to memory.⁴² During that time, other partisan monuments in (former) Serb-majority villages in this area underwent reconstruction as well. This includes the nearby villages Bujavica, Korita and Jagma. In most cases, the restoration includes the addition of an Orthodox cross shaped in Byzantine tradition. The 2011 restored partisan monument in Bujavica comprises a metal cross, which is rather rare. Usually, this kind of cross is chiselled above the inscriptions. The restoration also brings minor changes to the (Yugoslav) inscriptions. While partisan monuments used phrases including 'fight against Fascism', the restored monuments often changed it into 'fight against the Ustasha-regime', clearly naming the perpetrator. Moreover, before the break-up of Yugoslavia, none of the partisan monuments had a cross. In other words, these slight changes on the partisan monuments show the remembrance shift and religious influences. It shifted from a whole-Yugoslav remembrance to a local, religiously shaped commemoration practise.

As can be seen, the memorial park Trokut is an exceptional example comprising two sites - a partisan monument and a lavish and costly 1990s war monument. Given these points, there is a divergent remembrance practise between Croatian veterans' organisations and Croatian Serb associated organisations. The former mostly memorialises the Croatian War of Independence, while the latter strongly maintains partisan heritage sites and monuments. Even though the area around the memorial park Trokut is thinly inhabited since the 1995 Operation Flash, both local veterans' and Croatian Serb organisations vigorously maintain

and/or erect new monuments. This is compelling evidence of nationalising scorched earth.

Sacred architecture in Donji Lapac and Udbina

The next examples deal with the reconstruction of sacred architecture and its impact on memory in Croatia's Lika region. I will show the reconstruction of the Serbian Orthodox church in Donji Lapac and the Roman Catholic church in Udbina. Both small towns are twenty-five kilometres away from each other and its churches share a similar history.

After being destroyed during World War II, the Orthodox community recently rebuilt the church in Donji Lapac, the county with the highest percentage of Serbs in Croatia.⁴³ It is noteworthy that the construction works already began in June 1993, during the time of the Serbian Krajina. However, the church could not be reconstructed on its original site, because Yugoslav authorities constructed an administrative building on it. Therefore, the new church stands at the opposite site of its previous location. Another notable fact is that the reconstruction did not adapt the originally used architectural eighteenth-century baroque style, but a neo-Byzantine style referring to architecture in the Middle Ages. This style derives from the nationalist narrative imposed by the Serbian Orthodox church since the 1980s and is widely used across former Yugoslav countries.⁴⁴ Inside the church there is a list of donators for the reconstruction. From the twenty-two donators, only three are from Donji Lapac and the surrounding villages, whereas a large part comes from Bosnia, Serbia, United States, Canada and England. Furthermore, in front of the church there is a 2014 erected memorial plaque dedicated to the civilian victims of Operation Storm in August 1995. The inscriptions use Cyrillic script and they do not mention any names.

U spomen civilnim žrtvama In memory of the civilian victims
ubijenim augusta 1995. godine killed in August 1995, in Donji
na području Donjeg Lapca. Lapac area.

Vječna pamjat! Eternal memory!

Spomen ploču podižu mještani The residents of Donji Lapac and
Donjeg Lapca I udruženje the Association of Serbian Families
srpskih porodicaa protiv Against Oblivion erected the
zaborava. memorial plaque.

Oktober 2014⁴⁵ October 2014

Such plaques are quite rare and they mostly occur on properties owned by the Serbian Orthodox church or at Serbian Orthodox cemeteries where authorities legally cannot question or remove them.⁴⁶ It is also one of the few memorial plaques erected by the Association of Serbian Families Against Oblivion. Although having their head office in Zagreb, they often rely on information and numbers coming from organisations in Banja Luka and Belgrade. For this reason, the organisation shapes memory practices from a Serbian point of view with a victim based narrative. Surprisingly, the inscriptions do not reveal the actual number of victims (in contrast to Croatian memorial plaques). As shown above, they only generalise the victims. Similar to Vukovar's water tower, the diaspora has also funded the church.

West of Donji Lapac is Udbina. It is not only known for its battle in the historical Krbava-field, where the Ottomans defeated the Croatian ban [nobles] in 1493. It also had a tempestuous history during the twentieth century. Correspondingly to Donji Lapac, the Catholic church was also destroyed during World War II. And again, Yugoslav authorities gave a different purpose to the site. In Udbina, however, they constructed a

hotel. After Operation Storm in 1995, the hotel was abandoned and eventually demolished. In 2010, with the help of the Roman Catholic church, the Church of the Croatian Martyrs has been erected on the historical site of the pre-World War II church. However, they kept the original walls and foundation of the former church and left them visible as a reminder. Similarly to Donji Lapac, they rebuilt the church in a neo-medieval architectural style (again differing from its predecessor). With its looks and symbolic power, it strongly refers to the alleged Croat existence in the 9th century and other historical key events. Above the front entrance there are the dates 879 – 2010. The duke of Croatia, Branimir (879-892), received papal recognition from Pope John VIII in 879. The dates are accompanied by the Latin and Croat inscription 'Martyribus Croatorum – Hrvatskim Mučenicima' referring to the Croatian martyrs. It implies a more than thousand year old way of martyrdom. Furthermore, the church includes traditional Croat symbols like the Croatian interlace above the entrance and on the cross. Inside the church there is the Glagolitic script, a predecessor to the Cyrillic script which implies being older than Orthodox tradition.

Another key evidence is in front of the church. There is a cross with the famous Frankopan phrase 'Navik on živi ki zginje pošteno' (Forever lives he, who dies an honourable death) dedicated to the 'Croatian martyrs'. The phrase appears in Fran Krsto Frankopan's (1643-1671) poem *Pozvanje na vojsku* (Call to Arms). The aphorism is a sacrificial narrative, relating to the seventeenth-century 'Zrinski-Frankopan Conspiracy.' The example is a typical nationalist meta-narrative, referring to a continuous foreign rule since the medieval period and specifically to the parts of the country under Hungarian rule. However, it does not always relate to Hungarian rule, but also to Yugoslavian one.

The cross with its aphorism is a reference to the aforementioned sacrificial narrative. This narrative is significantly strengthened with the lapidarium or 'memorial wall'. It is dedicated to the so-called martyrs of

Croatian history and is right behind the cross. There are 249 stones with supposed Croatian execution sites. They always relate to places where alleged crimes on Croats took place. These include places in today's Austria, Slovenia, Herzegovina and Croatia. Two stones refer to the Habsburg-Ottoman wars in Klis in 1537 and in Senj in 1617. A few also relate to the Croatian War of Independence. Yet a majority is dedicated to World War II and Communist crimes between 1941-1948.

During the Covid pandemic, the narrative of suffering has been reinforced by holding the contested yearly Bleiburg commemoration in Udbina. And as Austrian authorities plan to prohibit the commemorations in Bleiburg, Udbina is now on top of the list to become the new commemoration site.⁴⁷ The recent gathering even brought a new controversial stone to Udbina's 'memorial wall'. It commemorates the victims of Jasenovac between 1941 and 1948, mixing the victims of the concentration camp (1941-1945) with interned anti-communists in the Stara Gradiška camp (1945-1948) near Jasenovac.

The cases in Donji Lapac and Udbina are based on the destruction of the churches in 1942. And yet, the churches' reconstruction serves another purpose — the employment of a specific narrative. While both employ a narrative of victimhood, the church in Udbina does justice to its name, alluding to a thousand-year-old path (or martyrdom) to independence. However, deducing from the memorial stones in front of the church, they put the primary emphasis on the sufferings during World War II. This narrative will be further strengthened if the Bleiburg-commemoration is actually moving to Udbina. In Donji Lapac, the memorial plaque in front of the church commemorates the 1990s war victims of Donji Lapac. However, its use of the Cyrillic script aims to exclude non-readers of Cyrillic and is a form of claiming history. It employs a more subtle way to impose its narrative than the example in Udbina.

Knin and surroundings

Knin, in contrast to Vukovar, is known for Croatia's heroic narrative when in August 1995 the Croatian army executed Operation *Oluja* (Storm), which led to the reintegration of Dalmatia, Lika, Kordun and the Banija regions to Croatia. Knin's fortress where president Franjo Tudjman on 6 August 1995 hoisted the Croatian flag became a symbol of Croatia's independence. Since 2000, the yearly commemorations are held at the fortress, having a different meaning and sparking many controversies among several groups.⁴⁸

Knin has a special meaning for Croatian history, as it had been the king's residence in the eleventh century. Until 1991, the fortress functioned as an archaeological museum. By the time, it slowly shifted to a space honouring and celebrating Operation Storm. On the twentieth anniversary of Operation Storm, the new 'Oluja-museum' opened and presented several war-related objects to the public, establishing a metanarrative about the liberation of Serbian Krajina. On top of the fortress, the museum erected a three-metre-high Tudjman statue, referring to his visit on 6 August 1995. Afterwards, Knin and the fortress developed and multiplied its 'winner-narrative'. The fortress is a place of commemoration as politicians and veterans' organisations celebrate there yearly. However, only in 2020 politicians from the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) in Croatia attended the anniversary celebrations for the first time. Until then, there had not been an understanding between Croat and (Croatian) Serb parties to attend it together. One reason is that the commemorations did not mention any Serb victims at all. In 2021, however, Croatia's Serb representatives did not attend the commemoration in Knin.⁴⁹

Although at first glance this might be a step forward to a mutual understanding and cooperation, the authorities are taking further steps to nationalise Knin's public sphere. In 2015, at the time of the opening of

the ‘Oluja-museum’, city officials and clerics consecrated Croatia’s largest church (Crkva Gospe Velikog Hrvatskog Krsnog Zavjeta). It seats up to 1.100 people and is only the second Catholic church in Knin after the St. Anthony church. It does not carry the same narrative(s) as the church in Udbina, but its grandiose architectural style catches a lot of attention and builds a powerful influence in the public sphere.

The third example in Knin is in its town centre, on the train station’s forecourt. There are two monuments dedicated to the 1990s war. A small one by the Croatian railroad Disabled Veterans’ organisation, which erected it on the first anniversary of Knin’s liberation in August 1996. There is the Croatian coat of arms, with the typical Croatian interlace (see fig. 6). The interlace resembles the letter ‘U’ in the same way it is visible on the first page of the Independent Croatia’s 1941 constitution (fig. 5). Also, the Croatian checkerboard begins with a white field (as it used to between 1941-1945).

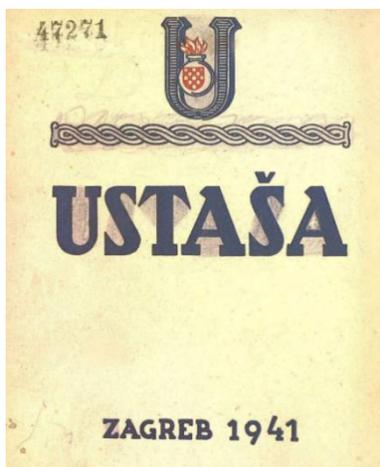


Figure 5: Independent Croatia’s constitution, 1941. Published by ured za promičbu glavnog ustaškog stanka [office for the promotion of the Ustasha-State], Zagreb.



Figure 6:
Monument in Knin
with the 'U'-frame.
Photo by the
author, October
2020.

Just next to it, in 2011, authorities unveiled a monument dedicated to Operation Storm. It is incorporated into the train station's forecourt and comprises a small fountain, plates with information on events preceding Operation Storm and the operation itself. The monument has a chapel resembling the letter 'V', which stands for victory, a commonly used symbol during the war and on various monuments throughout Croatia (See chapter about Vukovar). There are two screens incorporated into the monument, showing original war footage and interviews. Both monuments are immediately visible to people entering or leaving the train station, thus transmitting the image of Croatia's Operation Storm winner-narrative. Almost twenty-seven years after Operation Storm, the controversies regarding the fact that neither the commemoration at the fortress nor the monuments mention any civilian victims at all has not been solved yet.

Although Knin lost more than half of its population compared to 1991, the surrounding villages suffered an even greater loss. These (mostly) vacant villages and remote areas show characteristic memory practises similar to the memorial park Trokut in the previous chapter. Baljci, south of Knin, is such a village. According to the 2011 Census, it has three

inhabitants. Before the 1990s war, it was one of the several majority Serbian villages in this area and was closely located to the southern borders of the Serbian Krajina and at the foot of the Svilaja mountain range. Historically, the village had a mixed Christian-Orthodox and Greek-Catholic population.⁵⁰ However, until World War II, the Greek-Catholic population declined severely. Its only artefact is the ruin of the Greek-Catholic church. There is also a Serbian-Orthodox church from the eighteenth century at the Orthodox cemetery. After being strongly damaged during the 1990s war, former locals reconstructed the church in 2006. At the cemetery's entrance is a 1977 erected partisan monument. The monument's memorial plaque lies shattered on the ground. However, even here, someone put the pieces together and put them in front of the monument. It shows that the monument is still a part of local memory.

Although it does not involve a partisan monument, there is an example where even the Croatian Minister of Interior intervened in unveiling a monument with Serbian inscriptions in the village of Golubić near Knin in 2011.⁵¹ He justified his decision by arguing it could otherwise spark unrest. Besides that, the monument did not get a permission by the authorities to be erected as the land parcel belongs to the municipality. Like in Donji Lapac, the Association of Serbian Families Against Oblivion funded this monument in Golubić. The authorities ordered to remove the monument immediately, but local officials only changed the plaque and removed all the names, as not all were verified and several names were suspected of being members of the Krajina army. Afterwards, the plaque read 'Sjećanje na Golubićane stradale u ratovima' (In memory of Golubić residents who died in wars), thus generalising the memory. And despite not removing the monument at all, there is also no official gathering around the monument anymore.

Due to its proximity to the former Krajina border, the area had been very disputed, claiming many casualties. For this reason, there are many

memorial plaques for Croatian soldiers, especially for those belonging to HOS-units. Between November 1992 and August 1994, several small military operations took place at the Svilaja mountain range. On a difficult to access road between Baljci and Mirlović Polje, there is a memorial plaque dedicated to 'Rafael Vitez Boban', a member of the 9th HOS-division. The inscriptions begin with the letter 'U' standing for Ustasha. The following inscriptions even confirm it: 'Bio si i ostao ustaški sin' (You were and still are an Ustasha son) and the salute *za dom spremni*, which also appears in the memorial park Trokut in Western Slavonia.



Figure 7: Mirlović Polje, photo by the author, October 2020.

In contrast to the HOS-unit in Western Slavonia, they named this one after the high ranking Ustasha general Rafael 'Vitez' Boban (1907-unknown). The additive 'Vitez' relates to the highest military decoration

of the Independent State of Croatia, which Rafael Boban received in February 1945. In the light of the monument in Golubić, authorities did not question the memorial plaque in Mirlović Polje, despite the use of Independent Croatia slogans and the possibility of civil unrest.

Conclusion

After 1995, most of the researched area had been or still is uninhabited. For the government it meant turning the tables, as they took advantage and nationalised the scorched earth. With this in mind, Hobsbawm's quote from the introduction: 'The past gives a more glorious background to a present that doesn't have much to show for itself' applies to the researched area very well. At a later stage, veterans' organisations and the diaspora got involved, which shaped the commemorations and maintained the memory of successfully defending Croatia.

The key conclusion here is the close relation between religion and war, which the reconstruction of sacred architecture has shown. The examples in Donji Lapac and Udbina not only aim to bring back the century-long existence of a certain community into memory, but also combine it with the suffering narrative of war. Another key observation is that even transformed partisan monuments have religious symbols in it. Nevertheless, there are two different streams, each heading in another direction. On one side, memorial practises consist either of state-organised gatherings or civil society actors. Counter-narratives almost do not exist, as they are overshadowed by the official and widely recognised war-narrative. On the other side, there are commemorations at partisan monuments. That phenomenon is very obvious in majority Serb villages. The situation in Donji Lapac and Golubić shows that inscriptions referring to the 1990s war are perceived controversially and are often exposed to vandalism. Under these circumstances, locals in

Serb majority villages use (reconstructed) partisan monuments for memorial services. It is another way of strengthening their identity and (re-)claiming its space.

Although this case study was limited to areas inside or close to the former Serbian Krajina in Croatia, it adds further qualitative data and deepens our knowledge within the field of memory studies. It also proves and confirms existing literature on Croatia's difficulty dealing with its past and its collective memory. This article shed light on several actors in memorialisation processes like private companies, the church, local politics, veterans' organisations, and people from the diaspora. The analysis of the inscriptions and semiotics confirms the influence of the mentioned groups.

Endnotes

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³⁵ I visited the site in 2018 and 2021 and on both occasions there were wreaths. Furthermore, the commemorations were covered by several local news. See: 'Parastos ratnim žrtvama na vukovarskom vojničkom groblju' <<https://arhiva.portalnovosti.com/2010/09/pokrajine-28/>> [Accessed 12/5/2022]; 'Zašto nema reakcije na odavanje počasti na 'groblju šajkača'? 'Agresorske žrtve' postaju važnije, a hrvatske se diskriminiraju' <<https://narod.hr/hrvatska/foto-josic-zasto-nema-reakcije-na-odavanje-pocasti-na-groblju-sajkaca-agresorske-zrtve-postaju-vaznije-a-hrvatske-se-diskriminiraju>> [Accessed 12/5/2022].

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