Jasenovac and the Persistence of the Past

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ACCESSING CAMPSCAPES: INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR USING EUROPEAN CONFLICTED HERITAGE

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Unlike the locations of historical events that can be interpreted from a temporal distance, there are certain sites of memory which transcend their historical authenticity and instead seem to be continuously persistent and fundamentally tied to communal life. In the context of Croatian and Southeastern European history, the Jasenovac concentration camp is an example of a “past that does not pass”. As a contested and simultaneously iconic lieu de mémoire, Jasenovac embodies an important idea of something historical which cannot be seen solely as a history, but rather contains something beyond ‘ordinary history’; it possesses a different nature, something provoking strong emotional responses. Its particular importance could be ascribed not only to the extent of suffering endured by its victims when the camp was still operational, but also to the role it plays in the collective remembrance of both Croats and Serbs, other neighbouring countries, and of Jewish diasporas worldwide. During the war, Jasenovac was the largest complex of concentration, incarceration, forced labour and extermination camps in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), where between 1941 and 1945 the Croatian Ustaše brutally slaughtered Serbs, Roma, Jews, and Croats opposing the Ustaše regime. And yet, the collective trauma of Jasenovac is largely rooted in the fact that no common memory has been formed by the various ethnic and national groups whose forebears were killed in the camp. Emerging from disagreements over historical interpretations, recurring questions about the forms of commemoration and the conflicts arising from the collective memories of Croats, Serbs, Jews and Roma,render Jasenovac a genuinely controversial and contested place of remembering, whose past is very much alive in the present.

Throughout the history of the camp and of the memorial, Jasenovac has served as a theatre of national conflicts and misappropriations, especially with regard to manipulations pertaining to the number of victims. Until today, the number of fatalities at the Jasenovac camp remains the most contentious issue and is still unresolved. Lists of the names of victims from both Yugoslavia and Croatia in the Second World War created by various governmental bodies in Yugoslavia often differ considerably, and fall within an excessively broad range from complete minimization to megolomaniacal claims. Even though the list of victims created by the Jasenovac Memorial Site consists of 83,145 names, extremist Croatian nationalism still finds incentives for a revisionist downsizing of the number of victims to a few thousand, including claims that Jasenovac was merely a labour camp rather than a site of mass killings. Serbian nationalists, in turn, still tend to highly overstate the number of victims of Jasenovac, referring to 700,000 deaths – a number scaled up in

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2 The camp consisted of 5 subcamps. Although gas chambers were not operated in Jasenovac and the camp complex functioned in a way different to the extermination centres at Belzec, Sobibor or Treblinka, over 80,000 of its inmates were systematically exterminated in mass executions. Excessively heavy forced labour and malnutrition were also used as extermination methods at the camp.

5 The public revisionist debate around Jasenovac in Croatia is most salient in parts of Catholic communities. One of the most recent debates was inspired by an interview in which the head of the Archdiocese Archives in Zagreb, Dr. Stjepan Razum, claimed that Jasenovac was not an extermination camp but merely a labour and temporary transit camp. In the same interview, he added that there was no proof of mass executions in Jasenovac during WWII but that there are indications of post-war executions conducted by the communists. This pattern of historical revisionism, which denies WWII crimes at Jasenovac, is institutionalized through an association named the Society for Investigating Three Jasenovac Camps (Društvo za istraživanje trostrukog logora Jasenovac). See HR Svijet, Dr. Stjepan Razum: Nema dokaza za masovne ustaške zločine u Jasenovcu, ali ima za partizanski, http://www.hrsvijet.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=33778:stjepan-razum-skrivanje-istine-o-beogradskom-konc-logoru-i-nametanje-lai-o-jasenovcu&catid=74:knjigozori&Itemid=348 (accessed 1 October 2017).
In order to understand why Jasenovac is contentious on the historical and symbolic level, the complex interplay of wider national and ethnic developments throughout Croatian history, both before and after the Second World War, should be taken into account. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918), of which Croatia was part, it had merged into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1941), the state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Kingdom was torn by cross-ethnic conflicts and was constantly on the edge of collapse. Hitler succeeded in occupying it in just 11 days. With the support of the Axis powers, the collaborationist NDH was established in April 1941 on the territory of present-day Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, partially, Serbia. The Jasenovac camp was the site of many of the crimes committed by the Ustaše, a radical Croat nationalist movement led by Ante Pavelić, developed during his exile in Italy in the 1930s and sanctioned by Hitler and Mussolini. The Ustaše carried out the ‘local’ Holocaust against Jews and Roma [in the NDH] as well as genocide against Serbs (who account for the most deaths in the NDH), and political crimes against Croat antifascists and other opponents of Ustaše racial ideology.

6 The most prominent authors of the thesis of 700,000 Jasenovac victims were Milan Bulajić and Antun Miletić. See Milan Bulajić, Ustaški zločini genocida i suđenje Andriji Artukoviću 1986. Godine, Vol. 1-4, Beograd: 1986/1987; Antun Miletić, Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac 1941-1945: Dokumenta, Vol. 1-2, Beograd: 1986/1987. Furthermore, Vojislav K. Stevanović, a close ally of Slobodan Milošević’s politics and the president of the Association of University Professors and Scientists of Serbia (Udruženje sveučilišnih profesora i znanstvenika Srbije), claimed in February 1991 that ‘in the crime of genocide perpetrated by the Croatian ultranationalists, the Serbian nation lost over two million innocent victims simply because they were Serbs’. Quoted in Ozren Žunec, Goli život I, Demetra, 2007, 399-400.
Vjeran Pavlakovic and Mila Dragojevic rightly observe that the Second World War on the territory of the NDH and Yugoslavia was not a clear-cut struggle between foreign occupiers and a revolutionary guerrilla movement. It could be better described as a multisided civil war. The Ustaše terror, its extreme violence, mass arrests and persecutions of rival ethnic and religious groups directly fuelled subsequent uprisings. By the end of the war, the majority of Croats had also joined the resistance movement led by the Communist party and Josip Broz Tito. After his victory in May 1945, the new Yugoslavia was established as a Socialist Federation. In the immediate postwar years (1945-1948), the state adopted a harsh Soviet-style economic model and equally harsh methods of dealing with political opponents, who were sent to prisons or concentration camps. Yet after the Tito-Stalin (Yugoslav-Soviet) split in 1948, and the end of the subsequent Informbiro period in 1955, the country developed a distinct state socialist system. It witnessed unusually high levels of civil liberties and high economic growth. Nevertheless, Tito’s regime was based on a highly centralised commemorative culture, which exerted strong control over the official narrative of the war. Jasenovac came to symbolize the glorious antifascist struggle, captured in the slogan of “Brotherhood and Unity”.

As a result of divergent war experiences, traumas and losses suffered during the war and its immediate aftermath, various citizens’ groups in Yugoslavia perceived this deeply politically inflected concept in very different ways. In official discourse, however, it captured first and foremost the antifascist partisan struggle, and implied recognition and honouring of only one victim group: political opponents of the Ustaše regime. At the same time, those who died “on the other side” were marginalized and downplayed. This pertained also to civilian victims of the Ustaše regime and those of interethnic violence. Aimed at silencing Croat-Serb hostilities, which had found their most brutal expression at the Jasenovac camp during the war, the state’s politics of memory built upon a rigid and selective remembrance marked by an intentional blurring of the identities of both victims and perpetrators. Soon after Tito’s death in 1980, the idea of “Brotherhood and Unity”, which defined the Jasenovac narrative, began to dissolve – a fact that served to antagonize rather than to unify. The late 1980s saw nationalism gradually becoming the dominant political ideology in the Yugoslav republics, something that was epitomized in the aggressive politics of Slobodan Milosevic. This political context allowed the legacy of the Second World War to become a prime subject of manipulation. The promotion of selective readings of the past – especially those pertaining to Jasenovac camp – and a rewriting of the number of its victims played an important role in the identity politics behind the war in Croatia in the 1990s (Croatia’s ‘Homeland War’). According to Vjeran Pavlakovic, the state socialist suppression of historical truths, manipulation of memories, and their role in reawakening fears and hostilities tamed after the Second World War, could, to some extent, be considered one causal factor of the wars that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Its aftermath has, nevertheless, not resulted in a process of coming to terms with national pasts critically. As the cornerstone of the official Yugoslav narrative, the antifascist struggle has been gradually challenged or even denied while nationalist narratives have begun to proliferate. Conflicting memories of victims of mutual violence (perpetrated by the Ustaše, Partisans, or Chetniks) are effectively being silenced again.

Shaped by its relentless hold on unresolved national pasts that still haunt the present, Jasenovac continues to have a pervasive presence in


Croatian and Serbian historical, cultural and political discourses. And the very fact that Jasenovac remains the main subject (and trigger) of memory wars defines its historical and symbolic meaning(s). As much as it carries the memory of the Second World War, it also conveys and embodies the many histories of all subsequent periods, from the early postwar years until today. Paradoxically, its decades-long role as a symbol of antifascist struggle, which resulted in serious constraints on historical investigations into the crimes perpetrated at the camp between 1941 and 1945, and the propagandistic rounding up of numbers of its victims (initially, in order to justify repatriation requests from Germany), transformed Jasenovac into a symbol of manipulation and division. This plays out in the cruel ‘number games’ that until this day fuel conflicts between Croats and Serbs – in the Milosevic era, the latter made direct political use of the early postwar count that was never scientifically verified and declared all 700,000 Jasenovac victims as Serbs. The camp was thus framed as a reference point for past and present collective losses and suffering inflicted by the Croats. This is foregrounded to an even greater degree by the spatial division of the terrain of the former camp, located on two sides of the River Sava – a national border established in 1990, which nowadays draws the boundary between Croatia and Republika Srpska, a predominantly Serbian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the accession of Croatia to the European Union in 2013, this border further separates, politically and symbolically, the 28th EU member state from the other countries in the former Yugoslavia.

Located on two sides of the River Sava and framed by two distinct, physically separated memorial landscapes – the Jasenovac Memorial Site in Croatia and Donja Gradina Memorial in Bosnia – the space of the former camp consequently embodies the excess of meanings attached to Jasenovac, where conflicting and irreconcilable narratives proliferate. On the Croatian side, in an area almost devoid of material remains of the camp that was made into a memorial site as early as 1968, there is a permanent museum exhibition that opened in 2006, which centres
around a list of individual names of Jasenovac victims. Based on the concept of “the victim as an individual”, it displays 277 glass boards inscribed with personal details of 83,145 individuals identified to date. Established in the 1980s, the Donja Gradina Memorial, in turn, brings to the fore the mass character of death that unfolded at the camp. The memorial landscape encapsulates the biggest mass killing and mass burial site of the Jasenovac complex, with more than 150 marked and unmarked graves, which still contain human remains. The on-site museum provides detailed accounts of atrocities committed at the site. Until today, the boards placed in the central area of the memorial inform visitors that 700,000 people were murdered at the camp.

These two radically different spatial and museological approaches to the camp could be considered reflections of dominant, historically and culturally specific ways of framing mass political violence: while the first builds upon the approach developed in/for victim-oriented contemporary ‘Western’ Holocaust museums, the second immediately brings to mind strategies employed at the concentration and extermination camps of Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, or Majdanek. Yet in the politics behind both – the individualization of death at the Jasenovac memorial site, which ensures that the focus on the victims somewhat eclipses the attention paid to (Croatian) perpetrators, and its ‘massification’ at Donja Gradina, which forefronts mass violence perpetrated at the camp and to a certain extent blurs distinctions between various victim groups – prove all but innocent. Instead, they embody and further perpetuate the ambiguity of the persistent and unresolved past that clings to Jasenovac.

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