

# Lokalna sjećanja na ratno nasilje: komemoracije Drugoga svjetskog rata u Gospiću

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## Local Memories of Wartime Violence: Commemorating World War Two in Gospić

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How do dominant state narratives influence commemorative practices in local communities in different historical periods? We address this question by carrying out a study of World War Two commemorations in Gospić in two distinct periods of a political regime transition. The study is based on the documents from the archive of Gospić, articles from the local paper, existing scholarly publications on this area, as well as reports from state institutions and non-governmental organizations. We also photographed standing monuments and graveyards dating back to World War Two, or collected archival images and documentation of those that were removed or destroyed, in a fifty-kilometer radius around Gospić. We show how the narratives, symbols, and rituals that formed part of commemorations of World War Two violence changed when competing political actors attempted to establish their political legitimacy or gain political support.

**Keywords:** commemorative practices, collective memory, World War Two, Yugoslavia, Gospić, Lika

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Wartime violence leaves in its wake scores of the dead, some of whom are commemorated and buried with pomp and circumstance, their graves adorned with perceptible tombstones, while others remain buried under a blanket of nature – the sprouting lilacs in the springtime, in T. S. Eliot’s imagery – as an inconvenient reminder of what once occurred on the forgotten fields of death. While many of those who died in wars are commemorated as victims and heroes, the associated commemorative discourse and rituals may continue to reflect the local community’s and broader societal divisions (Bucur, 2009). As David Blight writes in his extensive study of the commemorations and the persisting divisions over the question of racial equality in the aftermath of the American Civil War, it is the unsettled meaning of the past cycles of violence that transforms wartime commemorations into “a set of rituals whereby the dead continue to mingle among the living – in small stone monuments, symbolic bloody shirts, terrorists’ white hoods, patriotic songs and speeches, veterans’ fraternal bonds, women’s Memorial Day committees, and ultimately, in the tangible form of election ballots” (2003: 97).

We build on this scholarship in our attempt to examine the relationship between the state and local communities’ memories of past cycles of violence. In this study, we make a distinction between state-level and local-level commemorative practices and discourses. The distinction between the two is not in the content or the symbolism, but in the direction of influence. Thus, the state-level commemorative practices are initiated and influenced by the political elites at higher levels of state

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers of Contemporary Issues, the staff at the Croatian State Archives in Gospić, the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ) and the University of the South for the Faculty Development grant and the Barclay Ward grant that made this research possible.

administration who are outside of the local community, while the local-level commemorative practices originate either more formally in the local community leadership or more informally in the commemorative practices of local residents. The content of commemorative practices may or may not coincide between the two levels of analysis, and our study examines how dominant state narratives influence commemorative practices in local communities in different historical periods. More specifically, how did the Yugoslav state's strategy of reconciliation and state building based on the socialist ideology manifest itself in the area of Gospić, the largest town in the multiethnic Lika region of Croatia? We carry out a study of World War Two commemorations in this community in two distinct periods of a political regime transition – the period following World War Two, during which the ruling regime consolidated its power, and the period of political liberalization beginning with 1980s and ending with inter-ethnic conflict and political violence following the first multiparty elections in 1990. We conceptualize a transition broadly, as “an interval between one political regime and another,” entailing a change in the government structure of a political system and/or a degree of openness and inclusiveness of a political system (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 6-8). The direction of the transition may be either toward greater inclusiveness and competition or toward a more authoritarian political system (Dahl, 1971; Linz and Stepan, 1978).

We show how the narratives, symbols, and rituals that formed part of commemorations of World War Two violence in Gospić changed during two periods of regime transitions in the twentieth century as competing political actors attempted to establish their political legitimacy or gain political support. The period following World War Two can be characterized by efforts of political leaders to emphasize collaborative facets of Serb-Croat relations during World War Two (embodied in the slogan “brotherhood and unity”), while de-emphasizing ethnic identities of the victims. These dominant narratives started to change in the period from 1980 to 1990. Civilian victims of interethnic violence began to be acknowledged and commemorated more openly in the context of the rising tensions along ethnic lines and significant political changes occurring both in Croatia and in the broader region of Southeast Europe, enabling the remembrance rituals to be hijacked by the emerging nationalist elite.

One reason for selecting Gospić and Lika as a case study was that this was a multiethnic region with a history of ethnic violence, both during World War Two and in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> World War Two on the territory of former Yugoslavia was not a clear-cut struggle between foreign occupiers and a revolutionary guerrilla movement, but a multisided civil war which included a systematic persecution of rival ethnic and religious groups for over four years (Hoare, 2006; Pawlowitch, 2008; Ramet, 2007; Ramet and Listhaug, 2011; Tomasevich, 2001). The area of Gospić, and Lika more generally, was a microcosm of this wartime complexity, as former neighbors from the same towns or nearby villages took arms against each other as a result of their divided allegiances between the Ustaša (a radical

2 In the 1990s, Gospić was a strategic city during the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995, or *Domovinski rat* in Croatian), where the Croatian Army and various paramilitary formations clashed directly with the insurgent Serb military and paramilitary forces of the self-proclaimed *Republika Srpska Krajina* (RSK), as well as the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), which provided military support to the rebel Serb side. Two prominent incidents involved massive civilian victims including both Croat and Serb ethnicities. On 13 October 1991, Serb paramilitaries killed around forty, mostly Croat, civilians in Široka Kula and surrounding villages. Between 16 and 18 October 1991, around a hundred civilians from Gospić, most of whom were local ethnic Serbs, were rounded up, taken to a remote area, and killed by Croatian military and police formations, presumably as a reprisal for the earlier massacre in Široka Kula.

Croat nationalist movement and terrorist organization which collaborated with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy), Partisans (a communist-led guerrilla resistance movement fighting against the Ustaša regime, the Axis powers, and other fascist collaborators), and Četniks (local insurgents led by pre-war politicians who promoted a Greater Serb agenda that included horrific reprisal attacks against the Croats in general and Partisans in particular and later collaborated with Fascist Italy).

Throughout this study, we made use of documents from the archive of Gospić, articles from the local paper (*Ličke novine*, which was published as *Lički vjesnik* in the 1980s), existing scholarly publications on this area, as well as reports from state institutions and non-governmental organizations. We also photographed standing monuments and graveyards dating back to World War Two, or collected archival images and documentation of those that were removed or destroyed, in a fifty-kilometer radius around Gospić.

## 2. Collective Remembrance and Commemorative Practices

We situate our study theoretically and conceptually in the literature of collective memory and collective identity formation (Ballinger, 2003; Blight, 2003; Brown, 2003; Bucur, 2009; Cappelletto, 2005; Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Karge, 2009; Kertzer, 1988; Nora, 1989; Todorova, 2004; Wertsch, 2002; Winter and Sivan, 1999). In this work, we follow James Wertsch in defining collective memory as a socially constructed “mediated remembering,” or “as a form of mediated action, which entails the involvement of active agents and cultural tools” (2002: 13). The actors we outline are political leaders in the new political regime who engage in the “construction” of the dominant commemorative discourse or narrative in order to legitimize their political power (Halbwachs, 1992). “Remembrance” is a term that more accurately refers to the commemorative processes this paper addresses rather than collective memory, because in these processes, the agency, or “action of groups and individuals in the light of day” play a critical role (Winter and Sivan, 1999: 6). Rather than a “passive memory,” which consists of personal recollections that are not communicated or expressed, personal memories matter only “when people enter the public domain and comment about the past – their own personal past, their family past, their national past, and so on – they bring with them images and gestures derived from their broader social experience” (Winter and Sivan, 1999: 6).

Commemorations, along with other political rituals such as rallies, parades, anniversaries, and other mass gatherings, are symbolic public activities that political elites attempt to use to convey their values. David I. Kertzer has written on the prevalence of political rituals, replete with emotional, historical, and national symbols, in various political systems (1988: 2-3). Additionally, the commemorative speech plays a key role in political rituals, and as Titus Ensink and Cristoph Sauer have shown in their discourse analysis of the Warsaw Uprising commemoration, “without a speech, a commemoration cannot come to pass” (2003: 29). In short, the focus of analysis is on the processes of memory formation, such as commemorative practices. By examining commemorations of traumatic events from World War Two we can see how the various administrations adopted different strategies in constructing narratives of that violence, either as examples of Serb-Croat cooperation or as nationalist arguments against multiethnic coexistence of the two peoples.

The scholarship on commemorations honoring certain individuals as heroes or victims suggests that decisions regarding the content and symbolism of remembrance practices may be more likely a product of a combination of the official state policies toward commemorations and memory traces of actual survivors' experiences passed onto future generations in their respective families and local communities (Blight, 2003; Bucur, 2009). This study builds on this notion, emphasized in Maria Bucur's work, that "memory is *always* local" (Bucur, 2009: 3, emphasis in original). Thus, we examine the extent to which local memory traces, or remembrance processes, in the area surrounding the Croatian town of Gospić, such as commemorations of past waves of violence and family narratives, conform with or deviate from the official state policies of a particular political regime that was in power at the time. We particularly focus on comparing two periods in Croatia's history, the period from 1945 to 1980 and the period from 1980 to 1990, when the official policies changed following the death of Josip Broz Tito and the ensuing political and economic crises destabilized the regime.

### 3. Background: Local Violence in World War Two

After the Axis invasion and dismemberment of Yugoslavia in April 1941, Hitler and Mussolini enabled the Ustaše to establish the Independent State of Croatia (NDH – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) on the territory of what is today Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Ustaša regime in Zagreb wasted little time in defining its vision of the Croatian nation-state, rapidly issuing decrees and racial laws (such as the Law on Aryans and non-Aryans enacted on 30 April 1941), stripping Serbs, Jews, Roma, and eventually their political opponents of all of their rights. Mass arrests, persecutions, murders, forced conversions to Catholicism, and deportations followed in the atmosphere created by the newly installed dictatorship. Although apologists of the Ustaše argue the repressive measures were justified because Serbs were rebelling against the state, there is evidence that mass atrocities against Serb civilians in Veljun, Gudovac, and other places in the regions of Lika, Kordun, and Banija took place in the spring of 1941, before any organized uprisings led by communists or Četniks had taken place (Goldstein, 2008: 263-67). It was the Ustaša terror against Serbs that directly fueled the subsequent uprisings.

In the Lika region, Ustaša massacres of Serbs reached their macabre apogee in the summer of 1941. In the horrific aftermath of this violence, the antifascist Partisans had to work exceptionally hard to repair Serb-Croat relations and forge a multiethnic guerrilla movement in the struggle for the "national liberation of the Croat people" (Irvine, 1993: 78). While many Serbs participated in the Partisan movement, others joined the Četniks (especially in the border region between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina), who committed their own atrocities against Croat and Muslim civilians. Interethnic relations had been tense during the interwar period, marked by periods of resistance against the royal Yugoslav regime (such as the Ustaša-led "Lika uprising" of 1932) followed by brutal reprisals by the Serb-dominated gendarmerie, assassinations, and violence against Croat civilians (Jareb, 2006: 462-464). Gospić thus became a hotbed of Ustaša recruitment even before 1941, particularly after the return of Croatian émigrés such as Jure Francetić who were engaged in propaganda activity throughout Lika (Jareb, 2006: 516-517).

Following the declaration of the NDH on 10 April 1941, Gospić quickly became one of the most notorious Ustaša garrisons in the new state. Already in May, an internment camp was established in the town, and by 25 June Serbs, Jews, and anti-regime Croats who had been arrested all over the NDH arrived in Gospić and were transferred to extermination camps in Jadovno (on the foothills of the Velebit mountains on the outskirts of town) and Slana on the nearby island of Pag.<sup>3</sup> Although mass killings of Serb males of military age had accompanied the widespread arrests in the first three months of the NDH, the murder of Serb civilians regardless of age or gender increased dramatically in July. According to Ivo Goldstein, in July the Ustaše killed nearly 900 Serbs in direct attacks on villages and towns (in other words, in addition to those who died in the concentration camps) throughout Lika, while another 1,755 lost their lives the following month in the Gospić district (*kotar*) alone (Goldstein, 2008: 266-367).

Facing extermination, Serb villagers desperately began organizing an armed resistance against the Ustaše. Villages south of Gospić, such as Divoselo and Čitluk, fought back, which provoked even harsher Ustaša reprisals whenever they could round up the civilians who had fled into the woods and hills. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ, *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*) had been planning for an armed uprising since April, but it was the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June that served as the spark for the formation of the first Partisan unit in Croatia, in a forest near the industrial town of Sisak (Anić, 2005: 20-21). Other acts of resistance spread across Croatia, especially in Zagreb, where the communists had many members and sympathizers.<sup>4</sup> On 4 July, the day subsequently celebrated as Veterans' Day (*Dan borca*), the Central Committee of the KPJ issued a call for an armed uprising throughout Yugoslavia. The KPJ, numerically small but experienced in illegal activity, used the Serb uprising to eventually forge a guerrilla resistance movement capable of taking power and carrying out a communist revolution. In the early stages of the antifascist resistance, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, such as the Croat Marko Orešković, were sent into Lika to convince the peasants that only a unified movement of both Serbs and Croats could defeat the Axis occupiers and their domestic collaborators (Pavlaković, 2014: 323-324).

But it was not only the KPJ that sought to direct the spontaneous Serb insurgency. The mass uprising that began on 27 July, the date subsequently celebrated as Croatia's Uprising Day, involved a small number of KPJ members, but also many Četniks. The towns of Srb and Donji Lapac, located in isolated valleys along the Una River, served as the staging area for the Serb uprising against the Ustaša regime, in coordination with Bosnian Serbs in Drvar. Rumors of the Ustaša massacres of Serb civilians across Lika and around Gospić earlier in the summer had reached the valley. In early July, an Ustaša unit under the command of Vjekoslav Maks Luburić carried out a number of attacks against Serbs in Suvaja, Bujanj, Osredak, and Nebljusi (villages near Srb and Donji Lapac), driving the local population "on an irreversible path towards

3 One of the most well-known of the Gospić camps, Jadovno, was operational for a relatively short period, from 25 June 1941 until 21 August 1941 (Deverić and Fumić, 2008: 43-44). As is the case with many of the extermination sites from World War Two, especially when the perpetrators dumped the bodies into karst pits, the number of victims of Jadovno and other camps around Gospić are hard to determine exactly and continue to provoke debates. Research by Đuro Zatezalo in the 1980s identified over 10,000 victims by name, while victims' organizations claim that the true number is between 20,000 and 40,000, the majority of whom were Serbs (Novosti, 1 July 2011, p. 20). See also the official website of the victims' organization at: [www.jadovno.com](http://www.jadovno.com). Meanwhile, the right-wing press published several articles that claim all the victims were actually Croats killed by Partisans in 1945 (Hrvatski list, 30 June 2011, pp. 12-13).

4 Out of a population of 300,000 at the beginning of the war, about 50,000 individuals actively participated in the National Liberation War (Šimunković and Delač, 2013: 11).

an uprising” (Damjanović Danić, 1972: 44-45; Goldstein, 2007: 125-126). On 27 July, Serb peasants in Srb and in Drvar organized a mass uprising, nominally under the command of a local KPJ cell, attacking all symbols of the NDH regime and ambushing Ustaša and Domobran forces sent to restore order.

Although the uprising in Srb was commemorated as a Partisan and communist rebellion, a significant number of the rebels fell under the influence of Četniks, who took advantage of the weak communist influence to come to a ceasefire agreement with Italian commanders shortly after the uprising.<sup>5</sup> More problematic for interethnic relations were the subsequent atrocities they committed against the Croat and Muslim civilian populations and the destruction of settlements such as Kulen Vakuf and Boričevac.<sup>6</sup> Yet it was precisely the events of 27 July, which would form the central commemorative event in Croatia promoting brotherhood and unity in the post-World War Two period.

Lika remained bitterly contested territory for the rest of the war. Even though the Partisan movement steadily grew in strength, and was able to draw more Croats into its ranks, Gospić remained an Ustaša stronghold up until the final months of the NDH. According to the memoirs of a Partisan veteran of the Second Primorsko-Goranska Shock Brigade, a unit that saw extensive action in Lika, in mid-1943 the Gospić garrison held five thousand troops and was second in size only to the capital, Zagreb (Mance, 2012: 149). The Partisan Fourth Army, which was advancing rapidly north to seize Rijeka and Trieste from Italy, finally shattered Gospić's remaining defenses on 4 April 1945. While this date was added to the commemorative calendar as a moment of liberation, the victorious Partisans meted out harsh punishment against real or suspected collaborators, predominantly Croats, whose fates would remain a taboo subject for the next forty-five years.

#### 4. Commemorative Practices in the Aftermath of World War Two

The legitimacy of the post-war socialist regime was based upon the memories of the National Liberation Struggle (NOB, *Narodnooslobodilačka borba*), as World War Two was referred to in the SFRJ. The socialist regime opted for a commemorative culture, which tightly controlled the narrative of the war, in which the victims were marginalized while Serb-Croat cooperation was emphasized. This was so because the newly installed regime under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito on the territory of Croatia had to contend with healing badly damaged interethnic relations after four years of fighting, in addition to securing a complete monopoly on power and crushing the remaining collaborationist forces.<sup>7</sup> The question that we take up in more depth in this paper, however, is how this top-down strategy of reconciliation and state building based on the socialist ideology played out *locally* in the area of Gospić.

5 For example, one of the leaders of the 27 July uprising, Đoko Jovanić, not only admits that pro-Četnik elements among the rebels killed Croat civilians and burned villages, but that the KPJ's control over the revolt were minimal (Jovanić, 1963: 123-124).

6 For a nationalist perspective on the events of 27 July 1941, see Dossier Boričevac by Josip Pavičić (2012). Historian Max Bergholz has shown how the innocent victims killed in Kulen Vakuf in the summer of 1941 were never commemorated because they were murdered by Serb insurgents who later joined the Partisans and even held important postwar political positions (2010).

7 It was also committed to promoting the aims of the national movement within Croatia, envisioned during World War Two as an autonomous and sovereign state in a federalist Yugoslavia, that were elaborated at the founding meeting at the State Anti-fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH, *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*) (in June 1943, while Andrija Hebrang was still at the head of the Communist Party of Croatia (KPH, *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*). However, he was removed in 1944, and Vladimir Bakarić was placed as the secretary of the KPH. Bakarić was more committed to closely following Tito's policies during this period of "consolidation" and "centralization" of political power under the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) (Irvine, 1993: 141-251).



On the national level, on 3 August 1945, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Croatia discussed the challenges in repairing Croat-Serb postwar relations and noted that some 60,000 people had attended the first Uprising Day commemoration on 27 July 1945 (Vojnović, 2005: 83).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they reflected upon the fact that over 7,000 individuals attended the ceremony when authorities transferred Marko Orešković's bones to a crypt in the town of Korenica, and many of them were crying. A Croat Partisan from Lika, Orešković had been murdered by Četniks in October 1941 while trying to repair Serb-Croat relations in the region. He was immortalized in a poem that was engraved on the monument that stood over his grave in Korenica (Figure 1):

*Drug je Marko hrvatskoga roda,  
Al je majka srpskoga naroda.*

Comrade Marko is a Croat by birth,  
But he is [like] a mother to the Serbian people (Barković, 1953).

Figure 1. Engraving on the Marko Orešković Monument in Korenica



Source: Photo by authors, June 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to the situation in Slavonia, one member of the Central Committee reported that the main tasks were “to eliminate chauvinism and create brotherhood and unity among Serbs and Croats (...) both Serbs and Croats feel insecure” (Vojnović, 2005: 84).

The emphasis on the “brotherhood and unity” discourse between Croats and Serbs illustrate how the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Croatia was not only well aware of the inter-ethnic animosity in certain parts of Croatia but also that this was seen an important task of the Party, as well as state leaders and representatives, in order to prevent any further escalation of intolerance along ethnic or religious lines.

Rather than building a commemorative culture based on the victims of war, the majority of whom were killed because they were Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Jews, or other ethno-national identities, the socialist regime’s culture of memory was centered on celebrations dedicated to the elements of the Partisan war that served to reinforce the values of the new Yugoslav society: brotherhood and unity, and nurturing the revolutionary tradition (Jambrešić-Kirn, 2006: 166). Gal Kirn and Robert Burghardt, writing about the abstract memorials created during the peak of socialist modernism in the SFRJ, note that

[t]he memorial objects represented the universalism of the Partisans, who where the only social force that rejected the logic of nationalism, and with that the very logic of ethnic cleansing imposed by the fascist forces. The abstract monuments generally provoked an opposition from nationalist ideologues, who criticized these monuments because they did not truly show what happened at the specific [sites of memory] (Kirn and Burghardt, 2012: 15).<sup>9</sup>

Although both national and local practices in building monuments and establishing the commemorative calendar closely held to these values during the socialist period, the exact wording on memorials, the events and the individuals local communities chose to remember, and discourse of speeches held at commemorative manifestations were often negotiated and modified to fit the specific situations.

Standard monuments listed two categories of war casualties – fallen Partisans and victims of fascist terror. Those killed fighting on the “wrong side” (or killed in postwar reprisals) were completely erased from the official culture of memory. On 6 July 1945 the Yugoslav Ministry of the Interior issued an order to destroy all graveyards and monuments of the occupiers and collaborators. Historian Zdenko Radelić argues that this “disrespect for the traditions of the culture of death and the humane principles of equally honoring all the victims resulted in the strengthening of divisions between the two conflicted sides and fostered hatred and a desire for revenge on the defeated side” (2011: 227). The text on the monuments erected around Gospić in the 1950s and 1960s reveal how the narratives on local monuments became increasingly standardized as the regime took a greater interest in wresting the culture of memory away from local collective remembrances. For example, the monument in Kruškovac (built in 1956), where Ustaša units killed several hundred civilian fleeing from Divoselo and other villages, described how the victims “died in unnatural agony” at the hands of “Ustaša criminals.”<sup>10</sup> In Mlakva, another village near Gospić, locals had organized the erection of a monument a year earlier that contained even more graphic descriptions of violence: “On 4. VIII.

9 The trend of building large, abstract Partisan monuments began in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s immediately before the disintegration of the Yugoslav state (Kirn and Burghardt, 2012: 15; Karge, 2014).

10 HR-DAGS, fond 206 (Spomenici NOB-a 1948-1963), box 3, “Kruškovac,” (Croatian State Archives in Gospić). The inscription on the monument states that “907 men, women, and children were killed,” while a detailed article about the event published in 1989 suggests that “after the three-day orgy of killing by the Ustaša villains” a total of 426 civilians lost their lives (Rajčević, 1989: 227).

1941, Ustaša criminals massacred and burned 270 innocent patriots and victims in this village.”<sup>11</sup> A decade later, the texts on newly erected monuments were more ambiguous about the perpetrators and focused more on the unified struggle of Croats and Serbs. One memorial on the outskirts of Divoselo erected on Veterans’ Day in 1964 celebrated the Partisan defense of the village in November 1941 from an “attack by traitors,” which was described as “the strongest hymn of freedom, the hymn of brotherhood and unity of Serbs and Croats.”<sup>12</sup> Another monument dedicated on the same day in Smiljan featured the following poetic inscription:

One living spark  
 Turns everything into a flame, brotherhood and unity  
 Opens the sunny path forward.  
 One living spark  
 Entwined the brotherly hearts  
 Croats and Serbs, Serbs and Croats  
 And led them to freedom.<sup>13</sup>

The inscriptions on the memorials were hardly uniform, but there is a noticeable shift on local monuments around Gospić by the mid-1960s in how mass violence against civilians was described and an increased emphasis on Croat-Serb cooperation that continued up through the 1980s (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Damaged monument in Barlet, near Gospić



\* An example of a typical local monument dedicated to fallen Partisans and civilian victims. The inscriptions read “We must protect the brotherhood and unity for which the fighters from this heroic village gave their lives” and “We must never forget the fallen fighters and what they did for the new socialist Yugoslavia.”

Source: Photo by Vjeran Pavlaković, June 2012.

11 HR-DAGS, fond 206 (Spomenici NOB-a 1948-1963), box 3, “Mlakva,” (Croatian State Archives in Gospić).

12 HR-DAGS, fond 206 (Spomenici NOB-a 1948-1963), box 3, “Divoselo,” (Croatian State Archives in Gospić).

13 HR-DAGS, fond 206 (Spomenici NOB-a 1948-1963), box 3, “Smiljan,” (Croatian State Archives in Gospić).

The shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not accidental and it was a response to the challenge to the one-party Yugoslav socialist regime from both the liberalizing and the ethno-national political movements across the country. As the decades passed and an increasing number of Yugoslav citizens belonged to the generation that did not directly experience the events of World War Two, the ritualization of the official narratives of the war became more important for the regime. This was emphasized even more during times of crisis such as the Croatian Spring in 1971, the movement supported both by the anti-communist nationalist-oriented diasporas and by domestic dissidents to the communist regime, when even some local veteran branches in Gospić area sided with the “nationalistic and chauvinistic” Croatian Party leaders. As Savka Dabčević Kučar recalls in her memoirs, it was precisely at the Uprising Day commemoration on 27 July 1971 that Serb members of the Yugoslav People’s Army mobilized, in her words, “a Greater Serbian meeting” in order to put pressure on the Croatian Communist leadership (1997: 337-8).

In response to these local or societal challenges to the dominant political regime, at the 7th SUBNOR<sup>14</sup> Congress held in June 1974, the leadership issued a statement noting “that the traditions of the National Liberation War and the experience of the socialist revolution represent an inexhaustible source for the education of present and future generations,” as well as a basis for “the development and deepening of brotherhood and unity of the nations and nationalities” in Yugoslavia.<sup>15</sup> Responses to the ethno-national movements did not only come from the top, but also from local communities. For example, veterans in the Gospić area commented in local papers that they would continue to oppose strongly all attempts to revive nationalism and that they intended to form local commissions where requests and complaints could be submitted in order to avoid future negative incidents and to promote veterans’ rights.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in 1975, the commemorative discourse of local officials emphasized the special role that Lika and the area around the city played both in the resistance and in the struggle against the “occupiers and domestic traitors.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the residents of Lika made up a significant proportion of SUBNOR, as it was estimated that 12 percent of Lika’s population, and in some counties, a quarter of the population, were members of the SUBNOR in 1978.<sup>18</sup> By highlighting the participation in the resistance movement by local villagers across Lika, particularly those from Smiljan and Divoselo, the discourse of local officials aimed at promoting the victorious position of the dominant regime.

Meanwhile, the local commemorative culture downplayed the local victims who were on the “wrong side” of the struggle, such as the predominantly ethnic Croats who were not sympathizers of the Partisans and those who identified with or took part in the Ustaša movement. However, certain local collective remembrances presented interpretations of the past that clashed with the official narrative of regime,

14 Alliance of Veteran Organizations of the National Liberation War (SUBNOR, Savez udruženja boraca narodnooslobodilačkog rata).

15 English translation by Radio Free Europe of a Tanjug press release (21 June 1974), p. 1. See also *Borba*, 20 June 1974, p. 1.

16 Program rada komisije španskih boraca za 1978. godinu [Meeting Agenda of the Commission of Spanish Veterans in 1978] in HR-DAGS, fond 104 (Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a, Odbor zajednice općina 1973.-1982. [Association of the Veteran Organizations of the National Liberation War 1973-1982]), box 10, Croatian State Archives in Gospić.

17 *Ličke novine* (15 April 1975), p.2.

18 HlZvjestaj o radu Odbora SUBNOR-a ZO Gospić za četverogodišnji mandatni period (februar 1978-februar 1982) [Report on the Work of the Committee of the SUBNOR (Association of the Veteran Organizations of the National Liberation War)] in HR-DAGS, fond 104 (Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a, Odbor zajednice općina 1973.-1982. [Association of the Veteran Organizations of the National Liberation War 1973-1982]), box 10, Croatian State Archives in Gospić.

which would subsequently result in the intervention by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> In contemporary Gospić, for instance, the former Liberation Day is commemorated as Victims of Gospić Day, when the victims of Partisan repression are remembered.<sup>20</sup> In this role reversal, it is the Partisans who are represented as the perpetrators of crimes, rather than as liberators. This example shows that the collective memories of the victims were not erased but remained alive within the private sphere or in local communities; their ongoing suppression by the regime only fueled resentment and feelings of injustice.

In summary, one characteristic of the commemorative practices during this period in the area of Gospić was not only the inability to challenge the official state-level narratives of World War Two, but also the marginalization of entire categories of victims. Although sites of interethnic massacres were usually memorialized with a monument, the inscriptions were often vague as to the identity of the victims and perpetrators, and were not part of the official commemorative calendar. It could be concluded that during this period the top-down narratives and commemorative practices influenced the local-level practices, and there was a great degree of overlap between the state and the local discourse and practices.

## 5. Politicization of Contested Memories and a Prelude to War

The death of Tito in May 1980 sparked the beginning of both a political liberalization and a political crisis, accompanied by an unprecedented economic instability, which in part contributed to the unraveling of the Yugoslav state a decade later. After the death of Tito, the Federal government of the Former Yugoslavia realized that it would not be able to pay off the foreign debt in the amount of 20 billion dollars and started negotiating with international organizations about delaying the re-payment (Goldstein, 2008: 595). In the same period, some signs of liberalization of Croatian society and political system were evident, for instance, in the opening of new media outlets, such as the Zagreb Youth Radio and the Split-based Weekly Dalmatia, which were not supported by the ruling Communist Party (Goldstein, 2008: 609). In this period of liberalization of the 1980s, Croatian communists were even more ideologically rigid than the communist leaders in Serbia, and especially in Slovenia, in the pursuit of one of their main goals to curtail nationalism (Goldstein, 2008: 613). Thus, the regime in Croatia relied even more on state holidays and commemorations of World War Two to maintain legitimacy, while the economic crisis, the weakening of European communism, and the rise of nationalism continued to expose these political rituals as attempts to keep the Party in power.

In the region surrounding Gospić, these efforts manifested themselves in the repeated assurances of the representatives of the Communist Party in 1989 that despite the concerns of some leaders at the national level, local inter-ethnic relations were stable.<sup>21</sup> Yet, while Yugoslavia languished in a decade-long economic crisis, political uncertainty and rising ethnic tensions spread across Croatia and to the region of Lika, often fueled by rumors and unnamed agitators. For example, the local paper reported on a series of “symbolic” incidents as the political situation deteriorated, such as the destruction of

19 For example, when a local priest in a Serbian town initiated the construction of a memorial plaque with the names of both Partisans and Četniks who were killed in the war, the authorities reacted quickly to punish this remembrance that stepped outside of the permissible boundaries established by the regime (Bergholz, 2008).

20 Gospićko-senjska biskupija: Gospić: Dan gospićkih žrtava [Gospić: The Day of Gospić Victims], [www.gospicko-senjska-biskupija.hr/ogulin/2334.html](http://www.gospicko-senjska-biskupija.hr/ogulin/2334.html) (7 April 2010).

21 Lički vjesnik (1 March 1989), p. 1.

a monument to People's Hero Anka Butorac and a plaque dedicated to Croat victims that a number of right-wing parties had erected.<sup>22</sup> Letters from readers printed in *Lički vjesnik* paper during this period also reflect the uneasiness some local residents felt towards the revival of seemingly resolved issues from World War Two. For instance, a resident on the Bosnia-Herzegovina side of the border, around 80 km east of Gospić, sent a letter to the editor in response to the explosion of nationalist euphoria prompted by the Serbian celebration near Knin of the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo.<sup>23</sup> He was equally critical of flags depicting the *šahovnica*, Croatia's red-and-white checkerboard coat of arms, as well as those with the Serbian double-headed eagle and four letters "S" in Cyrillic (*ocila*) "because of the memories these symbols evoked, and because of blood, suffering, and destruction that had been committed by those who had carried these symbols."<sup>24</sup> The power of symbols is evidenced by subsequent events; in the summer of 1990 Serb police officers in the Krajina region led by Milan Martić refused to "wear Ustaša insignia on their uniforms," i.e. *šahovnica* badges, which served as a pretext for their rebellion against Zagreb (Silber and Little, 1995: 98).<sup>25</sup>

Despite the regime's attempts to prevent the rise of nationalism, in the region of Lika, some signs of inter-ethnic political competition with elements of nationalism began even before the first multiparty elections in 1990. For instance, as early as 1988, as Žunec points in his study explaining the Serb rebellion in Croatia, illegal meetings among Serbs in southern Lika and northern Dalmatia were organized with a goal to create a political strategy of the Serb population in Croatia in anticipation of the first multiparty elections (2007: 259). This trend intensified in anticipation of the first multiparty elections in 1990, with the formation of local headquarters of the two parties representing respective ethnic groups – the SDS (*Srpska demokratska stranka*, Serbian Democratic Party) and the HDZ (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, Croatian Democratic Union) – when the parties begin to call on their followers to turn away from the "dogma of the false ideology" of the past.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, in Gospić, the local SDS was organized on 26 May 1990, while the local HDZ was formed on 8 April 1990 (Barić, 2005: 55-6).<sup>27</sup> The SDS deliberately played upon the traumatic memories from World War Two, which had persisted alongside the more positive narratives of Serb-Croat cooperation through the Partisan resistance, in order to mobilize the Serbs in Lika during this period of political uncertainty. For example, at the founding assembly of the Gospić branch of the SDS, "nearly every single speaker

22 *Lički vjesnik* (27 October 1989), p. 7; *Lički vjesnik* (15 September 1990), p.1. The "decapitation" of the Butorac monument was merely a prelude to the destruction of several thousand monuments in Croatia during the war.

23 The commemoration on the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo was organized in Dalmatian Kosovo, by the church Lazarića, near Knin on 9 July 1989, and it is notable by the highly-politicized atmosphere in which political messages seeking political and cultural rights of Serbs in Croatia were voiced, while some individuals even displayed Četnik symbols (Barić, 2005: 44; Radelić et al., 2006).

24 *Lički vjesnik* (1 August 1989), p. 12. Even though Serbs associated the *šahovnica* exclusively with the Ustaša, it was a historical Croatian heraldic symbol that remained in use through the socialist period as mentioned above (Grakalić, 1990: 35-36; Senjković, 1995: 78; Tanner, 1997: 35).

25 See also transcripts from the trial of Milan Martić (IT-95-11), notably the testimonies of Lazar Macura and Ratko Ličina in August and September 2005, [www.un.org/icty/cases-e/index-e.htm](http://www.un.org/icty/cases-e/index-e.htm). In February 1991, the arrival of twenty-eight newly graduated police officers in Gospić wearing the *šahovnica* instead of the communist red star was significant enough to be noted in a JNA report (Rupić, 2007: 90).

26 *Lički vjesnik* (15 April 1990), p.3. Scholars have already provided detailed analyses of the emergence of political parties in Croatia after 1989 and the events leading to the Serb rebellion against Zagreb (Barić, 2005, Goldstein, 2010, Ramet et al., 2008, Tanner, 1997).

27 Slobodna Lika: "Miroslav Petry: Ma gdje je bio Milinović dok smo mi osnivali HDZ" ["Miroslav Petry: Where Was Milinović While We Were Forming the HDZ?"] [http://slobodnalika.com/novosti/11964\\_miroslav+petry++ma+gdje+je+bio+milinovic+-dok+smo+mi+osnivali+hdz+.html](http://slobodnalika.com/novosti/11964_miroslav+petry++ma+gdje+je+bio+milinovic+-dok+smo+mi+osnivali+hdz+.html) (11 January 2012).



mentioned the Jasenovac [concentration camp],” which was also referred to as the biggest Serb city in Croatia because of the number of victims allegedly murdered there.<sup>28</sup> Afterwards the participants of the political meeting went to lay wreaths at the memorial of the Jadovno concentration camp, described below.<sup>29</sup> In February 1991, the SDS organized another rally attended by several thousand people in the Jasikovac memorial park, which likewise emphasized the party’s efforts to link their political program with the collective remembrance of Serb victimization in Gospić.<sup>30</sup>

The foothills of the Velebit mountain range above Gospić hid the unmarked graves of thousands of victims of the Jadovno extermination camp, which existed for just a few months in the summer of 1941. A few simple monuments marked the location of the camp, and commemorations in the 1970s focused primarily on youth competitions and military maneuvers, while both victims and perpetrators were left vague in the commemorative speeches. For example, in 1973 several thousand young pioneers and other citizens gathered at the former location of the camp and listened to the speech by Milan Rukavina, the vice president of the Croatian Parliament Executive Council (i.e. Government), who reflected upon the nature of the camp and its victims:

[Y]ou are here to honor and remember the tens of thousands of men, women, and children who were thrown into pits and abysses across the Velebit mountain range for one single reason: because they hated fascism and they rose up against the enemy and the quisling forces. In Jadovno everyone who rose up against fascism and refused to acknowledge the occupation was killed, these were all patriots and were of all nations and nationalities (...)<sup>31</sup>

The official narrative defined the Ustaša crimes within the scope of the antifascist struggle even though the vast majority of the victims were civilians who had nothing to do with the resistance movement.

In the 1980s, as the focus shifted to the victims, local groups complained openly that Jadovno had been marginalized and that the memorial space needed to be expanded. In an article from 1985, the author calls for the creation of a committee to introduce a new approach to commemorating the victims that was significantly different from the official narrative:

Forty years of peace and freedom have passed since the end of World War Two, which witnessed the darkest slaughterhouses of human kind and the never before seen genocide, barbarity, and bestiality of the dark forces of fascism and their bloody henchmen, Ustaše and Četniks. From the end of the war until today there were efforts to properly mark this memorial place, but unfortunately these all ended in meager symbolic actions (placing a few memorial plaques, the occasional visit, and some other minor activities).<sup>32</sup>

28 Lički vjesnik (15 June 1990), p. 3. The local intelligence services estimated that two to three thousand people attended the rally, while the same day about 1,500 citizens were at another rally organized by the right-wing Croat party HSP in honor of the 167th birthday of Ante Starčević, known as “the Father of the Homeland,” but no incidents were reported.

29 Lički vjesnik (15 June 1990), p. 3. According to Žunec, SDS founder Jovan Rašković and his associates had decided to form a political party while visiting a mass grave of Ustaša victims near Donji Lapac on 27 January 1990 (2007: 425).

30 Lički vjesnik (1 January 1991), p. 3.

31 Ličke novine (15 June 1973), p. 2.

32 Lički vjesnik (15 November 1985), p. 1.

The initiative resulted in numerous articles and memoirs of camp survivors in the following years, as well as the partial construction of a monument near one of the karst pits (Šaranova jama) in 1988 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Monument near Šaranova jama in Jadovno, June 2012



Source: Photo by authors, June 2012.

While in many respects it was necessary to fully remove the veil of silence that had lasted decades and to liberate the memory of the victims from the ideological straightjacket of the Party, the resurgence of victimization narratives in the 1980s would prove to be fertile ground for the emerging nationalist elites in Serbia and Croatia who manipulated these collective memories for a new cycle of violence. In October 1991 the city of Gospić and the surroundings were sites of massacres of civilians of both Serb and Croat ethnicities, which continue to represent new opportunities for politicization of both victims of violence and heroes of wars, contributing to a persistently problematic inter-ethnic reconciliation in the region (Karačić et al., 2012, Pavlaković, 2010, Pavlaković, 2009). The effects of the 1990s' violent conflict in this region are most evident when looking at demographic changes from 1980s through the recent period. In 1981, the population of Gospić was 31,263, with 28,018 who declared ethnic identity, while there were 18,585 Croats and 9,283 Serbs, and the remaining number comprised other ethnic minorities and those who declared themselves as Yugoslavs.<sup>33</sup> In 1991, the

33 1981 Census of SFRJ, provided by Goran Penev at the Institute of Social Science in Belgrade (<http://www.idn.org.rs>).



population was 29,049, with 18,613 Croats, 8,976 Serbs, and the remainder who declared as one of other ethnic minorities or Yugoslavs.<sup>34</sup> In 2001, out of the total of 12,980 inhabitants, the number of Croats was 12,050, while the number of Serbs was 625, revealing a catastrophic demographic loss due to war and migration, resulting not only in the overall decrease of the population, but also in ethnic homogenization of the population of Gospić.<sup>35</sup>

As shown in this section, during the period of democratic opening, or liberalization of the Yugoslav socialist regime at the state level in the 1980s, some changes compared to earlier years in the local commemorative practices included the local initiatives to commemorate victims of World War Two violence that had not been commemorated before, emphasis on the ethnicity of victims, and the destruction of monuments associated with the dominant state narratives of the National Liberation War. Local initiatives to politicize commemorative practices in preparation for the first multiparty elections were embraced by some local residents, but not by all, as evident in the letters expressing concern regarding the increasingly ethno-national nature of political discourse surrounding the local commemorative practices in the area of Gospić. The memorialization of interethnic violence in World War Two shifted from an emphasis of the brotherhood and unity narrative to one of victimization, contributing to the new cycle of bloodletting that engulfed Lika and the rest of Croatia in 1991.

## 6. Conclusion

While many scholars of commemorative practices and culture in the context of the former Yugoslavia tend to take a state-level perspective, we shift our analysis to the local level by studying changing commemorative practices in the Croatian town of Gospić in the period following the World War Two and during the period of liberalization in the 1980s. In our approach, we build on the research showing that the commemorative processes are actually a combination of the official state commemorative policies and local communities' memory traces.

We find that, in the period immediately following World War Two, the socialist regime promoted a narrative of "brotherhood and unity" in Gospić. What was striking for this earlier period, given that the region experienced very high levels of violence during World War Two, was that the mention of victims was minimal, while only Partisan victims or civilian victims of fascism were mentioned. The most significant change in the commemorations beginning in the late 1980s was the focus on the victims of the World War Two. Not only did victims' ethnic identities become a prominent theme, but also previously unrecognized victims of Partisan violence were acknowledged. As the socialist monopoly over commemorative rituals such as Uprising Day (27 July) unraveled, it became clear that they were based on distortions, which further undermined the entire Partisan narrative of World War Two. This created space for revisionist histories of both the Ustaša and Četniks that cast them in a positive light as anticommunists for either Croats or Serbs, respectively, and created a repertoire of ethnically exclusive symbols to be wielded as Yugoslavia spiraled into war. Even though

34 1981 Census of SFRJ, provided by Goran Penev at the Institute of Social Science in Belgrade (<http://www.idn.org.rs>).

35 For Croatian census information, see the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, online at [www.dzs.hr](http://www.dzs.hr). The numbers for the 2011 did not show any dramatic shifts: out of total of 12,745 inhabitants of the Gospić municipality, there were 11,860 Croats and 609 Serbs (See the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2011 Census, [www.dzs.hr](http://www.dzs.hr)).

the commemorations and monuments ceased to imbue the ruling party with political legitimacy, generations had grown up with terrifying and bestial images of Ustaša and Četniks as the “Other” – images used by the wartime media to dehumanize the opponents on the other side of the front lines.

Our findings raise important questions that merit further study and analysis. Do the commemorations change the way people viewed the past (i.e. victimization or cooperation), or were they a reflection of the changing attitudes among citizens of Gospić? How do commemorative events influence dominant narratives? To what extent do such practices shape people’s understanding of their own identities, or their sense of belonging, and lead to greater distrust toward those “other” groups presented as perpetrators of violence? These questions are particularly relevant for the present-day Gospić, where, over the course of our fieldwork, we observed a new wave of commemorative practices in the aftermath of the violence that occurred in the early 1990s, such as cenotaphs to the fallen Croatian soldiers along the road near the city, new symbols of the Croatian statehood on the graves in the city cemetery, and the complete absence of commemorating Serbian victims from Gospić. Our initial findings from Lika indicate that commemorative practices are not solely a reflection of national-level politics, but that the political changes on the national level after World War Two provided distinct opportunities for the expression of local experiences and remembrance processes. In some cases, these commemorative practices occurred spontaneously, while in others, state and local political leaders organized them. Understanding the interaction between commemorative practices and diverse community narratives is particularly critical in efforts of post-conflict communities to rebuild trust and mutual respect, two elements of a successful reconciliation.

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## Lokalna sjećanja na ratno nasilje: komemoracije Drugoga svjetskog rata u Gospiću

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Kako dominantni državni narativ utječu na komemorativne prakse u lokalnim zajednicama u različitim povijesnim razdobljima? Ovom pitanju pristupamo provodeći studiju komemoracija Drugoga svjetskog rata u Gospiću u dva različita perioda promjene političkog režima. Studija se temelji na dokumentima iz gospićkog arhiva, člancima iz lokalnih novina, postojećim znanstvenim radovima o ovom kraju, kao i izvješćima državnih institucija i nevladinih organizacija. Uz to, fotografirali smo očuvane spomenike i groblja iz Drugoga svjetskog rata ili pak prikupili arhivske snimke i građu onih koji su uklonjeni ili uništeni u promjeru od pedeset kilometara oko Gospića. Članak pokazuje kako su se narativi, simboli i rituali koji su činili dio komemoracija nasilja iz Drugoga svjetskog rata promijenili kada su suprotstavljeni politički akteri pokušali uspostaviti vlastitu političku legitimaciju ili zadobiti političku podršku.

**Ključne riječi:** komemorativne prakse, kolektivno sjećanje, Drugi svjetski rat, Jugoslavija, Gospić, Lika