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Exhibiting Jasenovac: Controversies, manipulations and politics of memory

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Abstract

The Jasenovac Concentration Camp prevails as one of the most potent symbols that continues to fuel ideological and ethno-national divisions in Croatia and neighboring Yugoslav successor states. We argue that mnemonic actors who distort the history, memory, and representations of Jasenovac through commemorative speeches, exhibitions, and political discourse are by no means new. The misuses of the Jasenovac tragedy, vividly present during socialist Yugoslavia, continue to the present day. Drawing upon the history of mediating Jasenovac as well as recent examples of commemorative speeches and problematic exhibitions, this article highlights some of the present-day struggles surrounding this former campspace.

Key Words

campspaces, Croatia, former Yugoslavia, Jasenovac, memory politics, World War Two

In April 2019, as in the previous three years, Jewish, Serb, and antifascist organizations in Croatia boycotted the official annual commemoration for the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp.¹ While the Croatian government commemorated the final breakout of the Jasenovac prisoners on 14 April, the informal commemoration of Jewish, Serb and antifascist organizations took place two days earlier. The organizations boycotting the official commemoration stated that they were not satisfied with the government's inaction regarding historical revisionism and Holocaust denial that they believed were in-

creasing in Croatian society.² Ongoing debates about the Second World War in Croatia include the rehabilitation of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH),³ disputes about communist repression, the role of religious communities during the war, and above all, competing victimization narratives between Serbs and Croats. Many of these discussions, which play a key role in shaping collective memories in Croatia, are centered on Jasenovac. Jasenovac prevails as one of the most potent symbols that continues to fuel ideological and ethno-national divisions. As we argue below, mnemonic actors

1 The Ustaša regime established the Jasenovac concentration camp system in 1941 and attempted to destroy the evidence of its existence in the spring of 1945, immediately prior to the victory of the communist-led Partisan forces. The annual commemoration takes place on the closest viable date to 22 April, the day in 1945 when the remaining prisoners attempted a final breakout.

2 Slobodna Dalmacija 2019 (12 April 2019): <https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/598497/dramaticni-govor-ognjena-krausa-u-jasenovcu-zasto-nitko-nije-reagirao-na-ustaski-dernek-u-splitu-do-kad-ministre-policije-i-premijeru-neka-se-kazne-oni-koji-negiraju-zrtve-ndh> (accessed on 1 July 2019).

3 The Ustaša (plural: Ustaše) movement, after the Croatian word for “insurgent”, declared the NDH fascist puppet state on 10 April 1941 after the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded and occupied by the Axis powers. This radical Croatian separatist movement was dedicated to the violent destruction of the Yugoslav state and was alternatively supported and suppressed by Mussolini's Italy before being brought to power by Nazi Germany. For overviews in English see Ramet (2007) and Yeomans (2013).

who distort the history, memory, and representations of Jasenovac through commemorative speeches, exhibitions, and political discourse are by no means new. The misuses of the Jasenovac tragedy, vividly present during socialist Yugoslavia, continue to the present day. Drawing upon the history of mediating Jasenovac as well as recent examples of commemorative speeches and problematic exhibitions, this article highlights some of the present-day struggles surrounding this former campspace.

Jasenovac is a site of memory where the dominant narrative is not easily converted into political memory by the state, but rather is frequently contested by multiple actors. At the heart of these contestations are rival interpretations of the nation- and state-building processes invariably linked with the wars of the last century, and the problematic categorization (and mediation) of victims and perpetrators from these conflicts. Since Croatia's entry into the European Union in 2013, various Croatian governments shifted the emphasis of their commemorative speeches from being part of the European Holocaust remembrance paradigm to allowing space for revisionist interpretations and even silencing of the commemoration (Pavlaković 2019). In 2014, right-wing Croatian nationalists established the Society for Research of the Triple Camp Jasenovac (*Društvo za istraživanje trostrukog logora Jasenovac*) to challenge the official statistics of the Jasenovac Memorial Site. These revisionists have sought to minimize the numbers of victims and the nature of the Jasenovac camp, alleging it was only a labor camp during the NDH and that the majority of victims were Croats killed by the communist authorities at the site after 1945 (Ivezić 2014; Razum and Vukić 2015; Vukić 2018; Pilić and Matković 2021). Historian Slavko Goldstein (2016) published a scathing reaction to these false allegations that showed how the revisionist circles in Croatia distorted the truth about Jasenovac in order to rehabilitate the Ustaša regime.

While the cultural memory of Jasenovac has sparked numerous polemics within Croatia, politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia have used it as part of their diplomatic arsenal. Historical revisionism regarding the Jasenovac camp has continued for over 75 years, with rival ethno-nationalist interpretations feeding off each other. With the endless discussion centered around the number of victims, Croatian nationalists and revisionists continue to thoroughly minimize the number of camp fatalities, while Serbian nationalists and revisionists continue to excessively exaggerate that number (Geiger 2013, 2020; Geiger and Grahek Ravančić 2018;

Goldstein 2018; Cvetković 2019). Despite all the evidence proving that the excessive figure of 700,000 victims propagated in socialist Yugoslavia simply cannot be scientifically confirmed, officials in Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS) entity in BiH continue to insist on the debunked and exaggerated figure. Historians in both Croatia and Serbia have compiled lists of individuals killed in the concentration camp, which contain from 84,000 (Jasenovac) to 89,000 (Belgrade) victims listed by name and surname.⁴ The work of the Jasenovac Memorial Site and other scientific institutions, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum,⁵ estimate 80,000 to 100,000 total victims in the camp, although the number of Serbs, Jews, and others murdered by the Ustaše in the NDH are of course much higher. Yet, the debate over the number of victims is not the biggest problem, but rather that Jasenovac is being used to drive nationalist agendas as it had been done in the years prior to the wars of the 1990s. Namely, the Bosnian Serb political leadership has increasingly used the cultural memory of Jasenovac to perpetuate ethnic distance from Croats and Bosniaks. In the narrative reproduced in the RS, Serbs are the only true anti-fascists and victims, while Croats and Bosniaks are exclusively associated with the Ustaše, even though both Croats and Bosniaks significantly contributed to the Partisan movement and were likewise victims of Ustaša concentration camps.

On 5 May 2019, the highest government officials from Serbia and the RS (member of the BiH presidency Milorad Dodik, President of the RS Željka Cvijanović, and Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić) attended the commemoration for Jasenovac victims in Donja Gradina, the biggest mass killing field of the concentration camp located across the Sava River on the territory of RS.⁶ The commemoration included a speech by Gideon Greif, an Israeli historian and the commemoration's special international guest, best known for his research on Auschwitz-Birkenau and the *Sonderkommando*. In 2018, Greif published a book on Jasenovac, using the sensationalist title *Jasenovac: Auschwitz of the Balkans*. Greif's book relies on cataloguing the various horrors and atrocities that the Ustaše committed, even though he does not speak or read Serbian and has previously not worked on NDH camps. For example, he lists fifty-seven types of killing the Ustaše "invented", concluding that Jasenovac was more brutal than Auschwitz, the archetype of Nazi genocide.⁷ Moreover, at the commemoration in 2019, Greif stated that "in the system of Jasenovac camps, 500,000 Serbs, 80,000 Roma, 32,000 Jews, and tens of thousands of antifascists

4 Individual List of Victims of Jasenovac Camp conducted by Jasenovac Memorial Site, Croatia, <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6711> (accessed on 23 July 2019); Individual List of Victims conducted by Museum of Victims of Genocide, Belgrade, <https://www.muzejgenocida.rs/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

5 The US Holocaust Memorial Museum (2019) estimates between 56,000 and 97,000 victims, online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090916030858/http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005449> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

6 A memorial site at Donja Gradina was established in 1975 as part of the Jasenovac Memorial Site (Croatia), but after the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia, Jasenovac Memorial Site in Croatia and Donja Gradina Memorial Site in the RS were spatially and administratively divided into two independent institutions.

7 Ekspres, 7 February 2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/politika/hrvatska-ima-genocidnu-proslost> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

of different nationalities lost their lives.”⁸ Patriarch Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church went even further in his speech, suggesting that “the most objective researchers consider that this number has crossed 1 million.”⁹ Supported by speeches of Greif and Patriarch Irinej, the political leaders of Serbia and the RS not only perpetuated the almost mythical number of victims (which moreover visually dominates big panels exhibited at Donja Gradina Memorial Site), but they also announced the construction of a new memorial complex at Donja Gradina that will inevitably continue the international conflicts over the past rather than contributing to a common understanding that will prevent future wars.¹⁰

The manipulations and misuses of Jasenovac’s tragic past originated at the end of the Second World War and permeated socialist Yugoslavia. However, the distortions reached a new level in the second half of 1980s. A delegation of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art (SANU) visited the Jasenovac Memorial Site on 11 and 12 October 1985 in order to examine the permanent exhibition, which had been created in 1968. The delegation consisted of two academy members, Vladimir Dedijer and Miloš Macura, Colonel General Đuro Meštrović, historian Milan Bulajić, and Colonel Antun Miletić (Miletić 1987). During that visit, Dedijer expressed dissatisfaction with the permanent exhibition, concluding that the documents displayed at that exhibition did not reflect the extent of suffering and mass crime committed in Jasenovac. As a result, in 1988, the second permanent exhibition of the Jasenovac Memorial Site was presented, centering around a frieze with large photographs depicting the crimes perpetrated at the camp and photographs of murdered and massacred dead bodies.¹¹ As observed by former director of Jasenovac Memorial Site Nataša Jovičić, the film “The Gospel of Evil,” which had also been shown in the first permanent exhibition, was screened in the movie hall of the museum, confronting every visitor with the footage as they passed through. By today’s standards, this cannot be considered to be appropriate educational-museological material for understanding the topic of genocide and mass violence, but rather a propaganda film (Jovičić 2006, 295–296). Additionally, a travelling exhibition from the Jasenovac Memorial Site entitled “The dead open the eyes of the living” was shown in the late 1980s to Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) soldiers, many of whom would fight in the wars accompanying Yugoslavia’s disintegration (van der Laarse 2013). This travelling exhibition included graphic images of Ustaša atrocities and child victims.¹² According to Jovičić, “the photographs of the travelling exhibition

were conceptualized with the clear goal of connecting the Second World War crimes with actual political tendencies of ‘separatism’ in the Socialist Republic of Croatia in the 1990s” (Jovičić, undated, 15). The overemphasized and accentuated atrocities and crimes of Jasenovac camp were also described in the military weeklies *Borba* and *Narodna Armija* published during the late 1980s.

Both exhibitions, the second permanent exhibition and its travelling exhibition, are examples of how Serb nationalists instrumentalized and misused the cultural memory of the Jasenovac concentration camp, playing upon the traumas of the Croatian Serb population as justification for rejecting Croatian independence during the political crisis that engulfed Yugoslavia. The activities of the Jasenovac Memorial Site, including its problematic permanent exhibition, were also used for the abovementioned aims on behalf of SANU, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and other nationalist groups in Serbia as evidence of the collective guilt of Croats for the crimes of the Ustaše. After 1990, the traumas and myths of Jasenovac were mediated and reproduced in numerous newspapers, articles, and television programs that sought to conflate the new democratically elected government of the first Croatian president Franjo Tuđman with the NDH. In May 1991, Serbian Patriarch Pavle opened the Church *Sabor* (Assembly) not in Belgrade, but in Jasenovac, where he celebrated a holy liturgy on the fiftieth anniversary of the suffering of the Serb people in that camp (Ramet 2006, 349). Not only was the Second World War past blurred with the present, but Jasenovac was used to highlight the religious differences between Serbs and Croats and served as a warning that the two peoples could never live together again. Patriarch Pavle’s liturgy at Jasenovac followed numerous reburials of Ustaša victims in 1990 and 1991 who were removed from sealed mass graves under the watchful eye of television cameras (Pavlaković 2013). By late 1991, Croatian Serb rebels backed by the JNA were engaged in a war against the nascent Croatian state, undoubtedly at least partially fueled by the fear and hatred stirred up by propagandistic representations of the Second World War traumas epitomized by, and exhibited in, Jasenovac.

Moreover, the historiography dealing with the issue of Jasenovac underwent a number of different phases, beginning with the state-controlled historical discourse during socialist Yugoslavia. At the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, historians in both Croatia and Serbia engaged in new, independent research, but the interpretations were strongly influenced by the predominant na-

8 See RTS (2019) – Dan sećanja na žrtve ustaškog zločina u Donjoj Gradini, 5 May 2019, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/3510496/dan-secanja-na-zrtve-ustaskog-zlocina-u-donjoj-gradini-.html> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

9 See RTS coverage of the 2019 Donja Gradina commemoration at <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/3510496/dan-secanja-na-zrtve-ustaskog-zlocina-u-donjoj-gradini-.html> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

10 Glas Srpske, 22 December 2018, https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/Dodik-Vucic-Podrska-izgradnji-novog-memorijalnog-kompleksa-u-Donjoj-Gradini/275711 (accessed on 2 July 2019).

11 JUSP Jasenovac archive; Zbirka fotografija – friz muzejskog postava, inv. broj 82–100, stara signatura.

12 JUSP Jasenovac archive, Predmet: Dragoje Lukić i Antun Miletić, Tematsko kompozicioni plan sa materijalizacijom stalne postavke memorijalnog muzeja “Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac 1941.–1945.”, Zapisnici, sekundarna građa, nesređeno.

tionalist atmosphere. Although in the early 2000s historical research included comparative studies that drew upon a body of international Holocaust and genocide studies scholarship, in the past decade there has been a new wave of reactionary revisionism. Since there was virtually no independent historical research on Jasenovac that could yield a broader consensus among researchers until after 2000, perhaps a better term for the 1945–2000 period would be *historical manipulations*, as epitomized by the abovementioned exhibitions. In contrast, a new wave of drastic 're-interpretation' of Jasenovac's history appeared in the last decade, which can be described as genuine historical revisionism, since it challenges facts around which there is already overwhelming consensus among experts (Odak, Benčić Kužnar and Lucić in press).

A good example of the latter was the recent exhibition "Jasenovac – The Right Not to Forget", which was organized by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and shown at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York on 25 January 2018. The main author and lead curator of the exhibition "Jasenovac – The Right Not to Forget" was Greif, the Israeli historian who spoke at the Donja Gradina commemoration in 2019. The exhibition embodied a series of historiographical mistakes, without using the archival sources from the Jasenovac Memorial Site – the biggest collection related to the Jasenovac concentration camp with more than 10,000 documents, objects, photos, and testimonies. In fact, the Jasenovac Memorial Site, which has been doing scientific research for over fifty years, was not even contacted by Greif and his team. The texts in the exhibition panels were framed in such a way to directly compare Jasenovac to the most infamous Nazi extermination camps. For example, one of the introductory panels was titled "Jasenovac – the most brutal and most notorious out of the total of eight extermination camps," implying that Jasenovac was worse or more systematic than Auschwitz, Chelmno, or Majdanek, although gas chambers were never used in Jasenovac. An analysis of the photos presented on that panel shows that the photo of a naked man does not represent a prisoner from Jasenovac, but rather a prisoner from Majdanek during the liberation. A smaller photo on the same panel shows the barbed wire from Auschwitz, and not from Jasenovac.¹³ On the panel "Jasenovac magnum crimen," the exhibited photo did not depict events from Jasenovac, but rather German crimes committed against Partisans in Istria.¹⁴ The same photo was also exhibited in the described second permanent museum exhibition in the Jasenovac Memorial Site in 1988, although already 30 years ago the authors knew that the photo did not refer to crimes committed in Jasenovac (Mataušić 2008).

In addition to the other factual and interpretative errors, one of the most problematic aspects of the exhibition, which led to a diplomatic scandal between Serbia and Croatia, was the panel that emphasized the figure of 700,000 victims. When the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs condemned the attempt of "misusing the United Nations for manipulation and the placement of false data" according to which organizers were forced to remove "the crudest forgeries," including the panel with the exaggerated number of victims, the United Nations disassociated itself from the exhibition.¹⁵ Among the "crudest forgeries" was a photo of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, which the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to remove from the exhibition. Archbishop Stepinac's role during the NDH remains contested to this day, since he publicly supported the Ustaša regime while at the same time saving many people whose lives were threatened by that same regime. The photo of Stepinac had been added to the exhibition even though the mixed Serbian-Croatian commission on Stepinac's beatification (consisting of scholars from both countries) was still meeting, inappropriately suggesting that he was unequivocally a perpetrator before the commission had issued its report.

Although there is no doubt that the tragedy of Jasenovac needs to be remembered and researched scientifically, this particular exhibition, which legitimately proved as propagandistic and reflective of significant lack of knowledge, intended to provoke greater division among the Yugoslav successor states rather than foster reconciliation. The nationalist rhetoric at the Donja Gradina commemoration and the production of exhibitions that distort historical facts are themselves problematic, but the most troubling are similarities with the propagandistic second permanent museum exhibition at the Jasenovac Memorial Site. It is difficult not to notice parallels with the memory politics of Slobodan Milošević's Serbia that ultimately led to the tragic wars in Croatia and BiH in the 1990s.

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13 Nataša Mataušić, Internal Report on UN exhibition sent to Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in February 2018, within the Croatian delegation of IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance).

14 Nataša Mataušić, *ibid.*

15 Dnevnik.hr, Dačić se oglasio o izložbi o Jasenovcu: "Ona je uperena protiv zločinaca i onih koji žele da se to zaboravi i izbriše", 26 January 2018, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/ivica-dacic-se-oglasio-o-izlozbi-jasenovac-pravo-na-nezaborav---504467.html> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

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