The Role of Memory Politics Related to the Second War in the Dissolution of Yugoslavia (1985-1995)

Introduction

My project at the Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives examined cultural and political references to the Second World War and the Ustasha movement in Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s. References to the Second World War and the Ustasha were made too often in the media during the Yugoslav Wars for it not to catch the attention of experts working on the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Scholars such as Robert M. Hayden, Bette Denich, Branimir Anzulovic, and Damir Mirković produced early studies on the relationship between memory and rising nationalism and escalation of the war in Yugoslavia. However, their works were severely criticized for being influenced by wartime propaganda, political bias, lack of clear conceptual framework and limited usage of sources due to their unavailability at the time. Later studies, produced by Vjeran Pavlaković, who shows much needed nuance in his analysis of different mnemonic agents in Croatia, and Stef Jansen who has written an innovative study of memory shifting the focus from macro to micro level, also show a more critical approach by arguing that the supposed existence of historical trauma should be further deconstructed.

In my analysis I split the memory politics related to the Ustasha movement from 1980 until the present day into four distinct waves according to chronology, variety of mnemonic agents and differing political aims. The first wave (1980-1986) focused on the discussions about the “hidden past” in Yugoslavia with the aim of discrediting the master-narratives of “Brotherhood and Unity” which idealized the Partisan struggle. The second wave (1986-1995) marked the period in which history was instrumentalized in order to mobilize and reinforce national identities and in the latter phases it was used for warmongering. For example, in late 1991 Serbian nationalist propaganda reinvented the image of the Ustashe and projected it onto all Croats - depicted them as a genocidal nation. This served the purpose of arousing fear among Serbs in Croatia and partially activated a spiral of ethnic security dilemmas.

The third wave of memory politics related to the World War II lasted from 1995-2010 in which initially the end of the war, and consequent change of regimes in both Croatia and Serbia, brought a significant ease of tensions between the two countries and the reliance on memory politics lost its appeal and political functionality. Croatia’s process of accession to EU provided incentives for bipartisan consensus on quelling the revival of pro-Ustasha revisionism.

After it was clear that Croatia would enter the EU the incentives to keep the (neo) Ustasha rhetoric in Croatia under the lid was lost, and the new far-right movement was forged which used anti-communism and implicit pro-Ustasha attitudes as a common vessel of pushing their political values into the political arena. This triggered the most recent wave of memory politics related to the history of the Ustasha movement which started in 2010 and is still taking place. Range of different, newly created conservative and far-right NGOs, part of war veterans’ organizations, radical elements within the Catholic church and a group of revisionist historians, are all using memory politics as a populist strategy to discredit their political enemies and challenge the state institutions.

**Research at the Open Society Archives**

Year 1986 marks a major departure from the first wave of memory politics (1980-1986) related to the Second World War and signifies the beginning of the new phase due to several reasons. In 1986 the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) was published in which the authors argued that “excluding the period of the existence of the Independent State of Croatia [1941-1945], the Serbs in Croatia were never more threatened in Croatia than they are now.” One of the authors of SANU memorandum, historian Vasilije Krestić, wrote an influential paper titled “On the Genesis of the Genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia” which was published the same year. In it he implied that the cause of genocide against the Serbs should not be ascribed merely to Ustashe, but to the Croatian nation as such. He argued for a longue duree approach and claimed that “it is certain that the genesis of the genocidal actions against the Serbs in Croatia should be found… in 16th and 17th century when the Serbs started to settle the Croatian lands.”

When the war in Croatia began Krestić would become one of the proponents of ethnic cleansing, publicly stating in October 1991 that he is “deeply convinced that the coexistence between Croats and Serbs is not possible” and if the territories in Croatia are not ethnically cleansed into purely Croatian and Serbian ones then “we will have a permanent war.”

Another turning point in 1986, which is often overlooked, was the beginning of the trial of Andrija Artuković, minister of the interior in the first Ustasha government in the Independent State of Croatia. Artuković managed to escape to the United States of America after the second world war and evaded extradition to Yugoslavia due to Cold War context and various legal maneuvers. His trial was one of the most publicized in the history of Yugoslavia and it was followed by press from all Yugoslav republics.

Dubbing him the “Eichmann of the Balkans,” or “Himmler of the Balkans,” the press closely followed all stages of the trial from his extradition from the US to the personal stories of witnesses. Artuković’s trial aroused unprecedented interest for history of the Independent State of Croatia and the Ustasha movement. Many historians, journalists and ordinary citizens started to visit the archives in record numbers. Production of knowledge related to the trial would escalate in the coming years.

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10 The trial of Andrija Artuković was analyzed through the following archival files: HU OSA 300-10-4:2/1, HU OSA 300-10-4:2/2, HU OSA 300-10-4:2/3, HU OSA 300-10-4:2/4, HU, OSA 205-4-80: 6/5, HU OSA 205-4-80: 6/6
12 HU OSA 300-10-04, Box 2, A.V., Vladar života i smrti, 2,
Even though Artuković was convicted to death (he died of natural causes in 1988) due to war crimes, he was not tried for genocide because the United States could only extradite him according to the legal conventions which were valid in the US. The US was not a signatory of the genocide convention in 1986, it only ratified it in 1988. Therefore, Artuković would not be able to be extradited if he was charged with genocide. This sparked a controversy during and after the trial when certain commentators argued that this was a form of hiding the true nature of the Ustasha genocide against the Serbs during the Second World War. One of the most ardent supporters of such thesis was a historian Milan Bulajić who later argued that

The Ustashi Minister of Interior who in 1986 was extradited from the USA, was not tried in Zagreb for the crime of genocide of the Serbs, Jews and Gypsies but only as a war criminal. At Zagreb trial in 1986 which was to have been the Yugoslav Nuremberg, the Ustashi Minister Artuković was tried to crimes that never happened and not for the crime of genocide for which he was personally responsible. The representative of the Vatican and the high Catholic clergy in Croatia did not condemn the Ustashi genocide, they did not hold responsible the Catholic priests who as sworn Ustashi were personally responsible.15

The issue of collaboration of the Catholic clergy with the Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia outlined one of the first publicly visible points of divisions in relation to memory politics in Croatia and Serbia. Some of the Croatian journalists argued that despite the trial of Anrtija Artuković the Croatian nation nor the Catholic Church as such can be responsible for the genocide committed against the Serbs during the Second World War, supporting their claims by numbers of Catholic priests which supported or participated in the Partisan movement.16

The trial of Andrija Artuković was taking place at a critical moment when the Communist Secret Service of Croatia was reporting that the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church was making an alliance with the Serbian nationalists in Serbia and Croatia. The aim of that alliance, according to the reports, was to provoke incidents between the Croatian Serbs and the authorities of the Republic of Croatia in order to mobilize the Serbs for a massive armed uprising.17 One of the key tools in this mobilization was memory politics. For example, on the 1st of October 1987 the Serbian Orthodox Church newspaper Pravoslavlje had written that Yugoslavia should be divided into an “Eastern Orthodox-Byzantine sphere of influence” and “western Roman Catholic sphere of influence,” because

the two incompatible worlds sharply differ from one another in religion, culture, historical development, ethics, psychology and mentality, and therefore previous conflicts that culminated with massacres in the Second World War could be repeated.18

Sensationalist press coverage of the Artuković trial and the overproduction of historical and popular books related to the Independent State of Croatia, which followed after the trial, gave rise to the reliance on images of World War II mass atrocities as effective mobilization

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16 HU OSA 300-10-04, Box 2, Folder 1, Marinko Ćulić, Trnaesti dan suđenja ratnom zločincu Andriji Artukoviću: Teret bezumlja, Večernji list, ponedjeljak, 5.V.1986.
17 Vjekoslav Perica, Balkan Idols, 153.
18 Ibid.
tool by instilling fear into the local Serbian population. The trial of Artuković resonated with the wider population which is evident from frequent references to it at political gatherings. For example, when Franjo Tuđman visited the predominantly ethnic Serb town of Benkovac on the 18th of March 1990 a protest was organized by the local Serbs. They chanted at Tuđman and his party supporters “Ustashe, Ustashe,” “Down with Tuđman and Artuković,” “You will not slaughter us as you did in 1941,” “Serbia, Serbia,” “You rose up to slaughter us,” “You came to our land and you plan to take it from us.” The rhetoric was further fueled from nationalist press in Belgrade. For example, in an article in the NIN newspapers, issued in March 1990 it was stated that:

“Every fifty years someone remembers that Serbs who are living here should be discriminated, proclaim them for something else or exile them from Croatia (…) Today we are coming near to the end of another fifty years period, when Franjo Tuđman is rejuvenating Pavelić’s ideas from fifty years ago about an ethnically cleansed Croatia, about a genocide against the Serbs. About Croatia, cleansed of Serbs. But, Tuđman does not have Hitler and Mussolini to back him, as Pavelić did.”

One of the principal agents involved in the production of knowledge dating back to Artuković trial and fueling the propaganda in the 1990s was a historian Milan Bulajić. He was involved in multiple Serbian state-sponsored projects such as production of historical TV documentaries, historical books, photo-monographs, etc. Depicting himself as an objective historian, Bulajić’s editions from early 1990s reveal his political and ideological aims. For example, in a photo-monograph he edited in 1991 he argued that:

The visual perceptions of the truth of the horrible crime of genocide between 1941-1945 is important so that the tragic events in Yugoslavia in 1991 may be understood. In the new Independent State of Croatia people are being dismissed from their jobs, their homes set fire to, the first victims are paying with their lives, as in 1941, only because they belong to the Serbian nation. The basic purpose of the systematically imposed and imported crisis in Yugoslavia, again as in 1941, is the dismemberment of the Yugoslav state… In May 18, 1941 Pope Pius XII received the head of the Ustashi Independent State of Croatia at the time of the genocide of the Orthodox Serbs, Jews and Gypsies. On May 26, 1991 Pope John Paul II received the Croatian Democratic Community leader Dr. Franjo Tudjman at a time of the existing sovereign Yugoslav state…. The strengthening of democratic forces in the world is constantly followed by the danger of the revival of the forces of Fascism, Nazism and other forms of totalitarianism and domination over the free human spirit. This is the real meaning of this photoalbum.

In another publication issued in 1994 Bulajić noted that: “In the discussions about a political solution to the Yugoslav crisis, about the maps dividing Croatia, the Serbs Republic and Republic of Serbian Krajine the question of the status of Jasenovac must be posed – Jasenovac, the Ustasha death camp. It must not be allowed that Jasenovac – the Ustasha death camp – is destroyed by the transformation of administrative boundaries into international boundaries.”

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future territorial settlement between Republic of Croatia and Serbia, Bulajić suggests that the sites of historical suffering of Serbs should not be incorporated into the Croatian boundaries.

Audio-Visual Materials (News, Documentaries and TV shows)

Bulajić also participated as a consultant in the making of the documentary movie “Genocide against the Serb people in Croatia, 1941-1991” produced in 1991 by RTS (Radio-Television of Serbia).23 The documentary incorporated many different interpretation ranging from long-term ones - reaching back to the 16th century, and Bulajić’s own interpretation that the emerging war in Croatia was taking place because “the denazification of Croatia has not been carried out,” after the Second World War. The long-term explanations found in multiple documentaries produced by RTS replicated Vasilije Krestić’s thesis that “the genocidal idea about the destruction of Serbs, about Greater Croatia cleansed of all non-Catholics survived all states, political and social systems. As a red thread which connects Ante Starčević, Eugen Kvaternik, Mihovil Pavlinović, Josip Frank, Frano Supilo, Stjepan Radić, Ante Pavelić and Franjo Tuđman.”24 These “nationalists” were in alliance with the Catholic Church and the Vatican which was depicted as fundamentally anti-Serbian and anti-Yugoslav.

Paradoxically, these long-term explanations imply that there was nothing particular about the Ustasha movement – it simply followed a normal path of development of Croatian nationalism. Yet this is where the idea of state independence becomes of prime importance. The argument implies that if Croats do not have an independent state, and if they are held in check by another nation or supra-national body then they would not have the tools to conduct the genocide again. If Croatia was independent in 1941 and committed genocide, it shall do so again. Therefore, any form of Croatian political independence becomes unacceptable as long as ethnic Serbs inhabit its territories.25 The only possibility for Croatian independence is if the areas where Serbs form a majority are excluded from it – mainly the Krajina region. In many documentaries aimed at foreign audience Krajina is described as a historic Serbian land which was used as a buffer to save Europe from the Turkish invaders. It is described as ethnically pure, although in reality more than a third of residence were Croats by ethnicity. Serbian nationalist propaganda emphasized that the Krajina region was Croatian only because of Josip Broz Tito who is described as a Croatian nationalist who manipulated the borders of Krajina and included it into the Republic of Croatia.

In many videos the reburials of victims of the Ustasha terror are being shown, many pits into which the victims were thrown were opened and their bones were transferred to graveyards in special processions. These processions turned from sacral and religious events into political events – one of the most publicized being the Prebilovci reburial.26 The reburials of victims from 1941 were used to draw direct analogies between the Ustasha and the events of 1991. In a news report titled “Zločini Ustaških formacija na Srpskim narodom – Vukovar 19.11.1991” doctor, Branimir Aleksandrić, from the Institute for Forensic Medicine at the Medical University of Belgrade pointed to the bodies found after the Serbian forces entered the city, arguing that: “We have seen here three persons with smashed heads, these injuries have the

23 HU OSA 350-1-1, Beta SP NTSC #42 / No. 1.
25 HU OSA 350-1-1, Beta SP NTSC #42 / No. 1.
26 See for example, HU OSA 304-0-16, VHS #160 / No. 1, “Here are Our Children...” See also HU OSA 350-1-1, Beta SP NTSC #42 / No. 1. For a scholarly analysis see Robert M. Hayden, “Recounting the Dead: The Rediscovery and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late – and Post-Communist Yugoslavia,” in Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism, ed. Rubie S. Watson, (1994): 167-184.
characteristics of the dull mechanical weapon, it reminds me of the use of the big hammer, and it did not surprise me at all – the Ustashe were doing the same in 1941. Together with my colleagues from the institute for the forensic medicine, I’ve been exploring those deep caves in Herzegovina from where brought out the bones and the skeletons of the murdered Serbs.”

Many news reports confirm the effectiveness of propaganda related to memory politics. This became especially evident in 1995 after the Croatian military operations Flash and Storm when enormous numbers of Serb civilians fled the Republic of Croatia quoting the fear of the “Ustashe” as one of the key reasons. The effectiveness of such propaganda has also been established by the ICTY in the case of Gotovina and Markač in 2012.

**Croatian Propaganda**

Faced with accusations of reviving fascist Ustasha regime – Croatian propaganda responded with producing documentaries and TV program aimed particularly at foreign audience. In order to counter the narratives of the Serbian nationalists, Croatian propaganda materials also resorted to the long-term explanation of the conflict. For example, in the documentary “Help Croatia. What is Croatia, anyway?” the narrator emphasized that four centuries ago “Croacia opened their land to Serbian people running from Turkish conquerors. Thousands of Serbian families found a heaven on the Croatian edge of the European civilization. Meanwhile, the lands of Serbia and other Balkan nations, remained for centuries as heart of the Turkish colonial empire. The vestiges of the Turkish domination remain to his day.” Croatian documentaries emphasized the Croatian belonging to the West while Orientalizing the Serbs. For example, in “Help Croatia. What is Croatia, anyway?” the narrator noted that

“While listening to Mozart and Verdi, Croatia apparently did not fully appreciate, the implication of Serbia’s development under Turkey – especially, the insatiable desire for a Greater Serbia to be carved out of the crumbling Turkish empire.”

In another Croatian documentary, produced in the US but directed by a Croat Jakov Sedlar, titled “Legacy of Genocide: The Serbian Death Squads!” Serbs are described as corrupt, aggressive and lazy – all of the qualities which they adopted due to exposure to prolonged Ottoman influence. The documentary further Orientalized and essentialized the Serbs by reducing them to an inherently aggressive nation prone to ethnic cleansing and mass murder. At the same time Croats are depicted as peace-loving and traditionally pro-Western. The issues related to the Ustasha movement was either avoided or quickly skimmed through – not a single Croatian documentary intended for foreign audience, analyzed in the OSA collections for the purpose of this fellowship, mentioned the genocide against the Serbs during the Second World War. Croatian documentaries intended for foreign audience emphasized Croatian support for the antifascist struggle, while at the same time accusing the Serbs of being rampant antisemites and enthusiastic collaborators in the Holocaust.

Faced with accusations of revitalizing fascism the Croatian propaganda tried to depict Slobodan Milošević as the first fascist in Europe after 1945. In one of the documentaries the narrator pointed out that “in 1987 a Nazi type Fuhrer – Slobodan Milošević came to power. He

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27 HU OSA 305-0-16, VHS #53 / No. 1  
28 HU OSA 350-1-1 VHS PAL #379 / No. 3  
29 HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #73 / No. 1  
30 HU OSA 350-1-1, Beta SP NTSC #65 / No. 1
blamed the other nations for the misfortune of the Serbian people, he manipulated Serbian pride, and insisted that the Serbs should be on the peristyle – uber alles – above all.”

Similar narratives were propagated in Croatian media intended for domestic audiences. For example, a political TV show titled “Kako misliti o Hrvatskoj?” [What to think of Croatia] produced in 1991, was completely dedicated to the comparison between the Nazi Germany and contemporary Serbia. The TV show was hosted by Slaven Letica and included guests such as Veton Surroi (journalist and opposition leader from Kosovo), Zdravko Tomac (Croatian politician), Mislav Kukoč, Rastko Močnik (Slovenian sociologist), Ivo Žanić (Political Scientist).

Some documentaries which tried to challenge the nationalist propaganda from both the Serbian and Croatian side in the period of 1991-1995 were also produced. For example, a documentary “Jasenovac” produced by Lordan Zafranović in 1993. Zafranović tackled the issue of the largest death camp in the Independent State of Croatia which was the object of manipulations from both the Serbian and Croatian revisionist sides and abused by the propaganda apparatus during the 1990s. Zafranović’s documentary analyzes the Independent State of Croatia and the Ustasha movement with certain deficiencies but in a sober and objective way. Most importantly he tries to de-ethnicize the issue of collaboration during the Second World War Yugoslavia and points out to the role of ideology and not ethnicity as the main root of the conflict. His narrative is an attempt at revitalization of the policy of “Brotherhood and Unity” which was by and large completely absent from the Serbian and Croatian state-sponsored media in 1993 when his documentary was produced.

Collections and Materials from the Open Society Archives:

The Trial of Andrija Artuković:

HU OSA 300-10-4:2/1
HU OSA 300-10-4:2/2
HU OSA 300-10-4:2/3
HU OSA 300-10-4:2/4
HU OSA 205-4-80: 6/5
HU OSA 205-4-80: 6/6

Audio-Visual Materials (news, documentaries and TV shows):

HU OSA 304-0-16, VHS #160 / No. 1, “Here are Our Children...”

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #45 / No. 1, “Heather Felsinger: Genocide Against the Serb People in Croatia, 1941-1991” (1991)

31 HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #73 / No. 1
32 HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #1051 / No. 1
33 HU OSA 350-1-1, Beta SP #184 / No. 1
HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #184 / No. 1, “Jasenovac” (1993)


HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #322 / No. 1, “Jasenovac” (1995)

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #470 / No. 5, “Pressure from the Right.”

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #967 / No. 1, “Croatia Today News Magazine” (1991)

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #987 / No. 4, “Special program of the Croatian Parliament” (1991)

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #1051, No. 1, “What to think of Croatia?” (1991)


HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #489 / No. 1, “Various News Reports: Primarily from Bosnian Serb TV” (1993)

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #517 / No. 1, “Various News Reports [17/42]” (1994)


HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #928 / No. 1, “Evening News” (1991)

HU OSA 350-1-1, BetaSP NTSC #989, “Fiftieth Anniversary of WWII and Interview with Tuđman” (1991)


HU OSA 350-1-1, VHS PAL #237 / No. 1, “These Are Our Children” (1991)

HU OSA 350-1-1, VHS PAL #293 / No. 1, “Blood and Belonging: The Road to Nowhere” (1993)


HU OSA 350-1-1, VHS PAL #65, No. 1, “Genocide Committed on the Serbian People” (1991)

HU OSA 350-1-1, VHS PAL #56 / No. 1, “Massacre in Croatia & Bosnia” (1993)

Library Material:

