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# The Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar

## Abstract

In this article, the author uses the history of the city of Mostar to illuminate the relationship between collective memory and a changing social and political paradigm. Indeed, the author writes about the history of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery, a necropolis/monument built in 1965, to show how a dramatic rupture of the dominant social and political paradigm reflected on the material state of the monument. The introduction gives a short historical overview and establishes the importance of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery for those studying collective memory. In the analysis, the author separates the life of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery into three stages and describes the relationship between the citizens of Mostar and the monument. In the conclusion, the author sums up the connection between a shifting collective memory and the treatment of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery.

## Keywords

Partisan Memorial Cemetery, Mostar, collective memory, collective identity, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Introduction

During my studies at the United World College in Mostar from 2012 to 2014, I visited the Partisan Memorial Cemetery site many times. I saw it in a ruinous, wrecked state. Instead of it being a public park facilitating socialization of all citizens of Mostar, it was a place visited mostly by groups of young people at night, who aimed to drink alcohol. At first, I thought it was just another socialist monument left to ruin, but I was oblivious to the fact that it contained

remains of fallen soldiers. This fact indicated to me how strong processes of memory change are and how consequential they can be. With the change of the political and societal paradigm in the 1990s there came a change in memory so strong, that citizens of Mostar abandoned their dead.

The Partisan Memorial Cemetery is located in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina on the slopes of Bijeli Brijeg. Bojan Bogdanović – the architect of the monument – chose the hillside location of the memorial in order to create a “city of the dead” overlooking the city of the living. The soldiers who died during the National Liberation War (Second World War) and were buried at the site (around 500<sup>1</sup> of them) were supposed to exist side by side with the city of the living, the city for which they had laid down their lives.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the monument was to give the dead a permanent place of rest and to construct and perpetuate “the adequate politics of remembering in Yugoslavia of the time, bearing in mind that the space [of the memorial] is an anchor for the topos of the Partisan as a hero of socialism and the memory of the National Liberation War as the foundations of [Yugoslav] statehood.”<sup>3</sup> The Partisan Cemetery is relevant for the purposes of examining how the memory of a site changes, and the consequences that such a process brings, because it has been itself a subject of this process since the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The site was in disrepair for a long time, completely neglected and almost forgotten. Even though the monument looks like the usual abandoned monument from the Yugoslav era, the Partisan Memorial Cemetery is special because it contains the remains of fallen soldiers. Furthermore, the soldiers buried in the cemetery were women and men in their 20s, Mostar’s youth that fought in the Second World War. The very same people that took care of the cemetery since its construction up until the War in Bosnia, meaning the citizens of Mostar, completely neglected it and left it to ruin within a few years after the war started.

The Partisan Memorial Cemetery was built in 1965 and opened to the public by Josip Broz Tito.<sup>4</sup> Up until the 1990s, it served as a memorial place where annual ceremonies were organized to celebrate the liberation of the city from Nazi forces. It also served as a public park where people came to socialize and enjoy a great view of the city of Mostar. At the start of the War in Bosnia, the site was bombed, shelled and vandalized. Serbs, Muslims and Croats became enemies once again. As the war progressed, the fighting in the city continued mostly between its Muslim and Croat populations. Muslims

<sup>1</sup> A number of sources that I read cited different numbers of known and unknown soldiers who were buried at the site. The numbers ranged from 500 to 800.

<sup>2</sup> „The Partisan Necropolis: Mostar’s Empty Stare,“ Failed architecture, accessed on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, <https://failedarchitecture.com/the-partisan-necropolis-mostars-empty-stare/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kristina Ilić and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, “Cultures of memory, landscapes of forgetting: The case study of the Partisan memorial cemetery in Mostar,” *Studia ethnologica Croatica* 29/1 (2017): 75.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 81.

predominated on the east side of town, Croats on the west side.<sup>5</sup> During the war, and for many years after, the monument had been left to ruin. This started to change in the 2000s, with two major efforts to repair the monument, one in 2010 and one in 2018. The following pages will examine how the memory of the monument has changed and how these changes have affected its material state.

## Analysis

The life of the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar can be divided, so far, into three parts. The first, from 1965 to 1992, was the part during the Yugoslav state when the memorial was built and maintained. It served the purpose imagined by its architect Bojan Bogdanović and the one the communist regime wanted. Bojan Bogdanović saw the memorial as a place that would remind everyone of the sacrifice of the young soldiers of the Partisan Army. He saw the 1960s as a peaceful time, distant from the troubles of war, in need of reminders of the antifascist fight. He also liked the idea of giving the young soldiers a symbolic place of rest from which they could look upon the future they helped build. In an essay on the Partisan Cemetery, Bogdanović wrote the following: “And I thought that the fallen Mostarian antifascist fighters, all still boys and girls so to say, have the right, at least symbolically, to the beauty of dreams.”<sup>6</sup> The architect’s views and inspiration do not seem to have been political and the monument did not outwardly glorify the communist regime. Still, “the design and the construction of the monument complex were dictated from the top of the political hierarchy with a clear ideological message, which legitimized the incumbent political system by invoking the heritage of the National Liberation War.”<sup>7</sup>

The intertwined nature of the antifascist fight of the Second World War Yugoslav Partisans and the communist regime that was established in the immediate aftermath of the war, makes it difficult to view them as two separate factors.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this fact that would come to haunt the memorial in the future. After the war, communist Yugoslavia became a dictatorship unable to deal with its own internal problems except by suppressing them. Many people associated the Yugoslav state with political persecution as well as mass killings that happened after the Second World War, when the communist regime undertook what they called “the final confrontation with the enemy of the people”. The thousands of out-of-court killings targeted many actual war criminals from the Second World War, but also many innocent people. On top

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>6</sup> „The Partisan Necropolis: Mostar’s Empty Stare,” Failed architecture, accessed on June 2nd 2019 <https://failedarchitecture.com/the-partisan-necropolis-mostars-empty-stare/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ilić and Škrbić Alempijević, “Cultures of memory, landscapes of forgetting,” 81.

<sup>8</sup> Even though this perception is mostly the result of communist propaganda, it is also difficult to deny that communist leaders played a major part in building and organizing the antifascist resistance.

of that, the 1990s came with a complete rupture of the Yugoslav mantra of „brotherhood and unity”. Since the attack on Vukovar, the majority of Croats had started to view the Yugoslav name and symbols as synonymous with the Serbian war of aggression. The Yugoslav state lost its last bit of legitimacy, and along with it went most things associated with Yugoslavia. This brings us to the second part of the Partisan Memorial’s life – the period during the 1990s.

“In terms of time, manifestations of forgetting are most noticeable during breaks in history, when there is a shift in political system subsequent to which the historical imagery is fundamentally redefined in order to reshape the collective identity.”<sup>9</sup> During the 1990s wars in Croatia and Bosnia, most things associated with Yugoslavia gained a negative connotation. The red star, the Yugoslav Army, the “brotherhood and unity” motto and many other symbols, including the antifascist fight during the Second World War became unwanted parts of history. All this was true, despite the fact that Croatian President Franjo Tuđman defended the antifascist fight and insisted that it was a legitimate part of Croatian history. Nevertheless, the more one moved from the center to the right of the political spectrum, the more one would find complete denunciations of everything that included the Yugoslav name. In the 1990s, The Partisan Memorial Cemetery found itself on the west side of Mostar, surrounded by Croats for whom it lost any positive association. During the Yugoslav state, “none of the groups [Croats, Serbs and Muslims] had strong dominance over the other two in the urban space [of Mostar]”<sup>10</sup>, but after the 1990s war, the situation turned around. All the negative feelings accumulated by the Croats between 1945 – 1990 about the Yugoslav project, rose to the surface after being suppressed for so long. These feelings were strengthened by the fact that the Yugoslav name was being used by Milošević’s forces, who waged a war of aggression on the Croatian people. The need to gather solely around Croatian identity gave rise to the need to “erase those history layers which contributed to the cohesion and unity and promoted sameness within different ethnic groups in the city, from social memory. This primarily relates to the antifascist heritage within the city and the reminders of life during socialism.”<sup>11</sup> In a paper on Mostar called “Projection of symbolic spaces into contested places” Sanja Puljar D’Alessio from the University of Rijeka wrote the following: “...the public space in Mostar became a symbolic battleground in a continuation of war through other means. The symbolic repositioning of the local pluralistic and urban identity can be noticed in the attribution of certain city symbols (The Old Bridge, partisan inheritance) and public spaces to one or the other national group in the city.”<sup>12</sup>

By discarding the Yugoslav past, citizens of west Mostar also discarded the Partisan Memorial Cemetery. It did not matter that Croat Partisans were

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<sup>9</sup> Ilić and Škrbić Alempijević, “Cultures of memory, landscapes of forgetting,” 74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>12</sup> Sanja Puljar D’Alessio, “Projekcija simboličkih prostora u sporna mjesta,” in *Mjesto, nemjesto*, ed. Jasna Čapo and Valentina Gulin Zrnić (Zagreb: The Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 2011), 229.

buried there. What mattered more than the distant fight against fascism was the fight against Serbs and Muslims. How could the Croat population maintain and preserve such a quintessential Yugoslav monument when they were fighting those who were an integral part of the Yugoslav identity? Among other factors, the lack of nuanced leadership capable of untangling the connection of the 1990s Yugoslav army and the 1941 – 1945 Yugoslav Partisans led to the victory of the radical narrative that everything Yugoslav had to be forgotten.<sup>13</sup>

The process of memory change in the minds of citizens was followed by physical vandalization with graffiti, and destruction with explosives or by hand. Many of the stones with the names of fallen Partisans were overturned or broken. Ustaša insignia, like the capital letter “U” or the Nazi swastika were sprayed over the stone walls. Messages telling communists that they are not welcome there, or declaring the site a part of Croatia, could also be found. Aside from political messages, the site was plagued by many broken glass bottles, plastic bottles, plastic bags and other byproducts of teenage drinking parties. The memorial remained in that state until groups of antifascist war veteran associations decided to intervene.

The third part of the life of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery came with the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following the reduction of radical hatred, there came initiatives to restore the Partisan Cemetery to its original state.<sup>14</sup> After years of being left to the mercy of vandals, teenagers and natural elements, in the year 2000 a board for the restoration of the monument was formed.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in 2006 the monument was placed on the list of the National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>16</sup> With the help of the Governments of Holland and Norway the monument was restored between 2008 and 2010.<sup>17</sup> Despite these efforts, the funds to have a permanent security guard and surveillance cameras were not there. Within two years, the monument would be yet again in urgent need of repair and cleaning efforts. Unfortunately, nothing but systematic efforts by the local and federal government could permanently re-

<sup>13</sup> The study “Cultures of memory, landscapes of forgetting: The case study of the Partisan memorial cemetery in Mostar” done by Kristina Ilić and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, conducted interviews with the local Mostar youth and found that “every narration about the Partiza [the memorial] today included a mention of the 1990s war events, and the subsequent division of the city on the basis of ethnicity, as a decisive factor in the recent practices of (non)use or experience of the memorial complex in daily life” (op. cit., 83).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to write here that the efforts to repair the monument were not unanimous and that there was even one initiative to remove it completely.

<sup>15</sup> „The Forgotten,” YouTube, accessed on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Uc-stQm-A&list=PL3DFB71DBFDDAB945&index=9>.

<sup>16</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina Commission to Preserve National Monuments, accessed on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, [http://old.kons.gov.ba/main.php?id\\_struct=50&lang=4&action=view&id=2778](http://old.kons.gov.ba/main.php?id_struct=50&lang=4&action=view&id=2778).

<sup>17</sup> „The Memorial works of Bogdan Bogdanović: Their condition and situation as of 2012,” Andrew Lawler, accessed on June 2<sup>dn</sup> 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/5227153/The\\_Memorial\\_works\\_of\\_Bogdan\\_Bogdanovi%C4%87\\_Their\\_condition\\_and\\_situation\\_as\\_of\\_2012](https://www.academia.edu/5227153/The_Memorial_works_of_Bogdan_Bogdanovi%C4%87_Their_condition_and_situation_as_of_2012).

store the monument and help it stay clean. The most recent efforts were made in 2018 when the memorial was again cleaned (the graffiti removed, and stonework repaired) and made presentable.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, the efforts to clean the Partisan Memorial came from groups and associations of World War Two war veterans and antifascists. However, the Croat mayor of Mostar, Ljubo Bešlić, did give a portion of the funds for the 2008-2010 restoration, as well as the one in 2018. In an interview he gave in 2012, he made it clear that he supported the restoration of the memorial site, but he attributed its devastation to criminal behavior. He negated that fascism lived within the city of Mostar and blamed journalists for trying to spin the narrative in that direction.<sup>19</sup>

What lies in the future for the Partisan Memorial Cemetery is difficult to foresee. Certainly, the last restoration was the most systematic and promising one, especially since surveillance cameras were installed<sup>20</sup>, but if the Croat population of west Mostar does not reembrace the site, then its future is at best dubious. From what I have been told by friends who live in Mostar, the memorial again serves the public mostly as a place for outdoor socializing, which is a good sign.

### Conclusion

The Partisan Memorial Cemetery's memory went from reminding the citizens of Mostar about the antifascist fight of the Second World War to reminding Croat citizens of west Mostar about the Yugoslav past they hated. War times are often a zero-sum game. It's us or them. It is my impression that this dynamic played a crucial role in the discarding of the Partisan Memorial by the mainly Croat population of west Mostar. Almost overnight, right-wing elements, previously suppressed by communists, had the perfect opportunity to hijack the struggle against Milošević's forces to delegitimize everything Yugoslav, including the antifascist fight. In the war-torn 1990s, most Croats in Mostar conformed to, or did not openly oppose, such views. At that time, it became necessary to construct a different narrative for a different political and social environment. A key part of that narrative was to forget the Yugoslav past. Not even the antifascist fight of the Second World War was a legitimate part of history worth remembering.

In conclusion, it should be underscored that the Partisan Memorial Cemetery is an excellent case study for anybody trying to understand how forces of history influence memory. The more than 50-year long life of the memorial acts as a canvas for the ever-evolving painting that is the history of Mostar. From socialism to democracy, from Yugoslavia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the city and its necropolis have undergone major change. It is my opinion that,

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<sup>18</sup> "Obnovljeno Partizansko groblje u Mostaru," YouTube, accessed on June 2nd 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugMJPF10fGQ&t=271s>.

<sup>19</sup> "The Forgotten," YouTube, accessed on June 2nd 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Uc-stQm-A&list=PL3DFB71DBFDDAB945&index=9>.

<sup>20</sup> "Vraća se stari sjaj Partizanskom, vratili se i turisti," YouTube, accessed on June 2nd 2019, <https://www.bljesak.info/kultura/flash/partizansko/234042>.

in democratic societies, all troubles are evident and out in the open, because there is no single authority imposing the “right” narrative. During communism, problems were swept under the rug. To a casual observer such a society might seem healthier, however, the very opposite is true. The process that the memorial has undergone since the 1990s, no matter how messy, seems to be leading towards a promising future. There, in that future, the Partisan Memorial Cemetery will be a cultural and architectural pride of the city, liberated of all ideological ties. Only then will the fallen antifascists look upon the city that flourishes and dream in peace.

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