

**RED STARS, BLACK SHIRTS:  
SYMBOLS, COMMEMORATIONS, AND CONTESTED  
HISTORIES OF WORLD WAR TWO IN CROATIA**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper examines how various commemorative events have taken on new meanings and significance in post-communist Croatia. Politicized rituals at various “sites of memory” (Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*) symbolize the divided social memory and contested histories of World War Two. The nationalization of victims, and the manipulation of the *number* of victims, particularly at the emotionally powerful sites of Jasenovac and Bleiburg, characterizes the commemorations and debates surrounding them. In the context of Croatia’s painful post-communist transition, bloody war for independence, and challenging democratization process, World War Two commemorations have been illustrative of how political rituals reflect (as well as influence) Croatian society’s understanding of the recent past and national identity. The challenge for ensuring a stable democracy in Croatia is in building a consensus regarding the past, or at least creating an atmosphere of open dialogue rather than the violence seen throughout the twentieth century.

## I. Introduction

The arrival of spring in 2008 heralded a new commemorative cycle in Croatia, stirring the ghosts of the past and transforming ceremonies meant to honor victims of war into political debates and forums for contested historical narratives of World War Two. On April 20, 2008, at the Jasenovac memorial site, former partisan and concentration camp inmate Ivo Fumić thundered that the Catholic Church in Croatia had not only supported the pro-fascist Ustaša regime, but in fact “was the last bastion that defended that system.”<sup>1</sup> Croatian president Stjepan Mesić also used the Jasenovac commemoration to lash out at political opponents he accused of “homogenizing the nation on a platform of war crime denial,” i.e., those individuals who continue to rehabilitate the Ustaša movement.<sup>2</sup>

Fumić’s incrimination of the Church, and Mesić’s tacit approval of the accusation, provoked a heated debate in the Croatian public and media for weeks. One month later, in front of a massive crowd – including some individuals in Ustaša uniforms – at Bleiburg, Bishop Slobodan Štambuk countered by calling on former Partisans to “be brave, admit your crimes, and ask for forgiveness from the [Croatian] people.” He was referring to the summary executions of the Ustaša regime’s armed forces by Josip Broz Tito’s victorious army.<sup>3</sup> Even as Croatia continues to make significant progress towards a future in the European Union, the historical conflict between Partisans and Ustaše is seemingly more alive than ever, fueled by emotional commemorative events and spilling into parliamentary debates, newspaper headlines, and popular culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech by Ivo Fumić, Representative of the Jasenovac Camp Inmates, at the Jasenovac Memorial Site, April 20, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Stjepan Mesić, President of Croatia, at the Jasenovac Memorial Site, April 20, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Speech by Slobodan Štambuk, Bishop of Hvar, at Bleiburg, May 17, 2008, aired live on Croatian state television.

In the former Yugoslavia, and specifically in Croatia since 1990, the legacy of World War Two remains a divisive issue, which has influenced Croatia's relations with its neighbors, the development of domestic politics, and more broadly the understanding of Croatian identity and history. This "deep division in [Croatian] society – into red and black,"<sup>4</sup> was exacerbated by the war that accompanied Yugoslavia's disintegration in the 1990s, a war that was in part provoked by communist suppression of historical truths, manipulated memories, and reawakened fears of the tragedy of World War Two.

In Croatia, the legacy of World War Two had two significant consequences for the course of events following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. First of all, the new democratic government of President Franjo Tuđman sought a "national reconciliation" between the antifascist (communist-led Partisan movement) and pro-fascist (Ustaša movement) factions of the Croatian national corpus. In practice, this meant the rehabilitation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH, the state founded by the Ustaše in 1941) and demonization of Tito's Partisans, and antifascists in general. Secondly, in an attempt to preserve Yugoslavia (and later carve out a Greater Serbia), Belgrade engaged in a propaganda campaign both internally, sowing fear of a renewed Ustaša state among Croatia's Serbs, and internationally, in order to discredit Croatia's government by portraying it as fascist.

Croatian national unity lasted through the war years (1991–1995), but the irreconcilable interpretations of the past once again erupted after the war's conclusion.<sup>5</sup> Although Croatian society struggled with the divided social memory of the violent twentieth century in the political

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<sup>4</sup> Theologian Josip Grbac, interviewed in *Novi list* (Rijeka), January 14, 2007, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Historian Dušan Bilandžić noted in his memoirs that in the early 1990s Croats formed "a united front for an independent and democratic Croatia...divisions into fascists and antifascists practically disappeared. Without that unity, the defense of Croatia would have been absolutely impossible." Later, however, he observes: "It appears the platform of national reconciliation did not succeed. Conflicts between so-called Partisans and so-called Ustaše have

arena, music and art, the educational system, historiography and hagiography, and the media, the most visible and symbolic articulation of this has been at the annual commemorations of World War Two.

The symbols displayed at these ceremonies, including the communist red star or the black uniforms of the Ustaše, highlight the so-called “red-black” divide in Croatia. Commemorations of the victims of war, past battles, and key historical dates stimulate the memory of the past considerably more than the debates between historians and other scholars. Moreover, commemorations, as a form of political ritual, are often in the service of the reigning political order, and reflect the current ideological climate in the country. They, along with the construction (and destruction) of monuments, the (re)naming of schools, other public buildings, and streets, and the use of certain historical/ideological symbols, are part of the panoply of visual transformations of Croatia’s physical, as well as socio-political, topography since 1990.

This paper examines how various commemorative events have taken on new meanings and significance in post-communist Croatia. Politicized rituals at various “sites of memory” (Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*)<sup>6</sup> symbolize the divided social memory and contested histories of World War Two. The nationalization of victims, and the manipulation of the *number* of victims, particularly at the emotionally powerful sites of Jasenovac and Bleiburg, characterizes the commemorations and debates surrounding them.<sup>7</sup> In the context of Croatia’s painful post-communist transition, bloody war for independence, and challenging democratization process,

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flared up.” Dušan Bilandžić, *Povijest izbliza: Memoarski zapisi, 1945–2005* (Zagreb: Prometej, 2006), pp. 473, 492–493.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” in *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7–24.

<sup>7</sup> For literature on the manipulation of World War Two victims in Croatia, see Vladimir Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga* (Zagreb: Globus, 1992); Igor Graovac and Dragan Cvetković, *Ljudski gubici Hrvatske 1941.–1945. godine: Pitanja, primjeri, rezultati* (Zagreb: Zajednica istraživača Dijalog, 2005); and Marko Grčić, ed., *Bleiburg: Otvoreni dossier* (Zagreb: Start, 1990).

World War Two commemorations have been illustrative of how political rituals reflect (as well as influence) Croatian society's understanding of the recent past and national identity. The challenge for ensuring a stable democracy in Croatia is in building a consensus regarding the past, or at least creating an atmosphere of open dialogue rather than the violence seen throughout the twentieth century.

## II. World War Two Commemorations Since 1990

The victory of Tito's Partisans after World War Two led to a monopoly over the writing of history in Yugoslavia. It was a white and black interpretation of the conflict, known as the National Liberation Struggle: the Partisans were heroic and morally pure, whereas all occupiers and collaborators were *a priori* guilty of the most heinous crimes. This narrative became the cornerstone of the newly reunited, socialist Yugoslavia. The NDH had been an authoritarian, pro-Nazi and pro-fascist state with racial laws that had committed numerous war crimes,<sup>8</sup> but the communist led-Partisan movement was also responsible for crimes during and after the war, committed in the name of revolution. But the selective memory of the communist regime suppressed the nuances of the traumatic war years.

During the communist era, the regime strictly controlled all commemorative events. Commemorations, along with other political rituals such as rallies, parades, anniversaries, and other mass gatherings, are symbolic public activities that were often used by the political elite to construct a grand narrative of a nation's history. Renata Jambrešić-Kirin, writing on the politics

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<sup>8</sup> For details on the Ustaša regime, see Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (Zagreb: SN Liber, 1978); Tvrtko Jakovina, "The Independent State of Croatia in Hitler's Axis System," in Tea Benčić Rimay (ed.), *Jasenovac Memorial Site* (Jasenovac: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2006); and Sabrina P. Ramet, "The NDH – An Introduction," in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 7, no.4 (December 2006).

of memory related to World War Two, concludes that “the Yugoslav animators of cultural memory” were important in “affirming the political order, the ideology of brotherhood and unity, and the legitimacy of the ruling party, while repressing the problem of interethnic conflicts.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to the introduction of “new rituals, commemorations, and burial ceremonies,” the socially constructed memory of World War Two involved monuments and memorials, history books, films, the cooption of the artistic community and youth organizations, and the complete ideological conformity of the educational system.

Even though the commemorations, staged remembering, and public rituals related to World War Two have been overshadowed by the war in the 1990s and commemorations related to it, the once central ceremonies of the Partisan struggle and the formerly illegal memorializations of the Ustaša side have been given new meanings and significance. Presently the Day of Antifascist Struggle (June 22) is the only official holiday (*blagdan*) related to World War Two, while the Memorial Day of Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence, celebrated annually in Bleiburg on the closest Saturday to May 15, has the lesser status of a memorial day (*spomendan*).

Other commemorations are not recognized as holidays, but are financed by the state, such as the ceremony at Jasenovac. In the spring of 2008 it was precisely a debate over holidays that sparked “another division into Ustaše and Partisans in the Sabor”, when leftist deputies proposed that the Jasenovac commemoration receive the status of a memorial day.<sup>10</sup> Members of the HDZ in the parliament rejected the proposal on the grounds that antifascism already had an official holiday, June 22, and that there was no reason for a second one.

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<sup>9</sup> Renata Jambrešić-Kirin, “Politička sjećanja na Drugi svjetski rat u doba medijske reprodukcije socijalističke kulture,” in Lada Čale Feldman and Ines Prica (eds.), *Devijacije i promasaji: Etnografija domaćeg socijalizma* (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2006), p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> *Jutarnji list* (Zagreb), May 14, 2008, p. 9.



Since the 1990s, antifascist commemorations were no longer public displays of loyalty to the communist regime, but rather sought to reinforce “European” values, protest against intolerance and ethnic war, or rally the opposition against the increasingly authoritarian Tudman regime. Other commemorations drew attention to both civilians and soldiers who were killed by the communists and who had not been given appropriate recognition, as enemies of the state, after 1945. This recognition of forgotten victims, however, in many cases actively rehabilitated the Ustaše and blurred the line between innocent victims and those who had died fighting as Nazi allies. The three examples below illustrate how the memorialization of World War Two has changed in the dynamic political climate in post-communist Croatia.

***Table 1: Main Commemorations Related to World War Two in Croatia***

<b>Date</b>	<b>Commemoration</b>	<b>Notes</b>
January 27	International Holocaust Remembrance Day	
April 10	Founding of the NDH	Never commemorated officially
April 22	Jasenovac	Closest Sunday
May 9	Victory over Fascism Day	Also commemorates ZAVNOH
May 15	Memorial Day of Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence (Bleiburg)	Closest Saturday (formerly closest Sunday, but recently changed to allow more clergy to attend)
May 25	Tito’s Birthday	Also day of youth
June 22	Antifascist Struggle Day	Counter-commemoration at Jazovka
July 27	Antifascist Uprising Day (former)	Had been celebrated during communist Yugoslavia
September 9	Day of the Croatian Navy	Counter-commemoration on 18 September
September 25	Pazin Declaration	Unification of Istria, Rijeka, Zadar, and islands with Croatia

***a. April 10 – Commemoration of the Radical Right***

Even though in the 1990s many Partisan commemorations were forgotten or discontinued, there were generally few efforts to directly commemorate the Ustaša regime,

especially not at the state level. The exception was April 10, the day in 1941 Ustaše in Zagreb declared the Independent State of Croatia. The Croatian Party of Rights (HSP – *Hrvatska stranka prava*), revived in February 1990, quickly became the strongest party on the right-wing political scene and publicly commemorated April 10; glorified Pavelić; and used Ustaša iconography. The HSP was a vocal critic of the Tuđman and the HDZ, calling for even more extreme measures against Serbs and enemies of the state, and was so radically anticommunist that they rejected all vestiges of the former system.

For the HSP, April 10 was considered the “founding of the Croatian state,” and by celebrating it challenged Tuđman, who, despite being a Croatian nationalist, nevertheless had ensured that state continuity in the constitution was derived from the Partisan struggle, not the NDH. The commemorations of April 10 had functioned as a mobilizing force in the 1990s for a political option that ultimately did not have widespread support in Croatia. Right-wing parties, namely the HSP during the first decade of Croatian independence, used the April 10 anniversary to criticize the way Tuđman handled the war, promote their extreme nationalistic (i.e., anti-Serb) policies, and rehabilitate the pro-fascist Ustaša movement.

In the early 1990s supporters of the HSP gathered near the party’s headquarters in Zagreb to protest the HDZ’s legal actions against the HSP leadership. In 1994 the HSP organized an annual commemoration, titled “The Truth and Lessons of April 10”, in the elite Zagreb hotel *Esplanade*. Anto Đapić, the HSP president, denied that the NDH was based on any ideology, “rather exclusively on the desire for a Croatian state.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he stated that the HSP “would not reject [commemorating] April 10, because it does not reject Croatia in its historical and natural borders, nor does it reject Orthodox or Muslim Croats, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Zemun,

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<sup>11</sup> *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Split), 11 April 1994, p. 4; *Večernji list* (Zagreb), April 11, 1994, p. 4.

Vukovar...”<sup>12</sup> On April 10, 1997, Đapić used the fifty-seventh anniversary of the founding of the NDH to campaign for local elections, prompting the *New York Times* to chastise Croatia for its “dangerous extremism.”<sup>13</sup> The newspaper’s correspondent noted the HSP openly used Ustaša iconography during its rally in Split, and interviewed the editor of the independent weekly *Feral Tribune*, who revealed that “these neo-fascist groups, protected by the state, are ready to use violence against their critics.”<sup>14</sup>

The HSP toned down its rhetoric after 2000 in an attempt to modernize into a party that would be acceptable to Europe, and public commemorations of April 10 have all but disappeared. Commemorations that explicitly celebrated the NDH were possible during the social and political turmoil after 1990, but democratization, the normalization of the political climate, and the process of EU integration pushed them even further into the margins of modern Croatian society.

### ***b. Victory over Fascism Day – An Antinationalist Protest***

Whereas in Western Europe May 8 is Victory Day in Europe (the date Nazi Germany surrendered) is celebrated, the Soviet Union and other former communist countries in Europe commemorated Victory over Fascism one day later. This was also the case in communist Yugoslavia and in the Yugoslav successor states. Under Tuđman, this holiday, like many other ones associated with the antifascist victory in World War Two, lost its significance in lieu of other dates associated with the Catholic calendar or Croatian statehood. While this commemoration was not completely forgotten (Tuđman was after all a former Partisan general),

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<sup>12</sup> *Slobodna Dalmacija* (April 11, 1994), p. 4. The opinions expressed by Đapić mirrored Ustaša conceptions of the ethnic and political borders of the Croatian state, with pretensions on Bosnia and parts of Serbia.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times* (April 28, 1997), p. A14.

it took on new meanings, especially in the capital city of Zagreb.

In September 1990, the Square of the Victims of Fascism (*Trg žrtava fašizma*) in Zagreb became the Square of Croatian Great Men (*Trg hrvatskih velikana*), an act which ethnologist Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin observed “not only symbolized the return of Croatian historical symbols, but also the giving up of reverence for the victims of the antifascist struggle.”<sup>15</sup> Every year, individuals protesting the degradation of Croatia’s antifascist movement gathered in the square on May 9, demanding the return of its former name and demonstrating against ethnic intolerance, hatred, and the Tuđman regime’s increasing authoritarianism.

A commemoration which had become routine in the 1980s once again had meaning and sparked a new generation to become politically engaged. Antifascists also used the May 9 commemorations to condemn the rehabilitation of the Ustaše and use of Ustaša symbols. During a rally in 1993, organizers told the crowd that “it is not possible to join Europe with Pavelić and the Ustaše, but only with the Partisans and antifascism.”<sup>16</sup> In May 1999, violence actually erupted between antifascists and “anticommunists” at the square, vividly illustrating how deeply divided Croatia was over its World War Two past.<sup>17</sup>

The following year, after Tuđman's death and the electoral defeat of the HDZ, Zagreb's city council decided to restore the name to the Square of the Victims of Fascism, and the site and date lost the symbolic power of protest that it had in the 1990s. Victory over Fascism Day returned under the aegis of the Croatian state, no longer inflaming ideological passions to the same degree as other ceremonies.

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<sup>14</sup> *New York Times* (April 12, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin, “O konstrukciji tradicije u naše dane: Rituali, simboli i konotacija vremena,” in *Narodna umjetnost*, no. 29 (1992), p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Vjesnik* (Zagreb), 10 May 1993, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Vjesnik* (11 May 1999), p. 3.

### *c. Antifascist Struggle Day – Commemoration and Counter-commemoration*

As mentioned above, despite the introduction of new holidays and the sustained attack on Croatia's antifascist legacy in the 1990s, Tuđman had been a Partisan general. Therefore not all Partisan commemorations were extinguished, but some, such as the Antifascist Struggle Day (*Dan antifašističke borbe*), were changed to reflect the newly reasserted Croatian sovereignty. Namely, under communist Yugoslavia, each republic commemorated its particular day of uprising against fascism. As historian Drago Roksandić notes, there was a "hierarchy" in these commemorations, beginning with Serbia on July 7 and Montenegro July 13, while Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina celebrated July 27, commemorating the massive popular uprising by Serbs against Ustaša terror.<sup>18</sup> However, the decision for this latter date was motivated more by politics than historical truth. A group of communists in Brezovica (near Sisak), consisting of mostly Croats, formed the first Partisan unit on June 22, 1941 after hearing of Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union and quickly began sabotage activities against the Ustaša regime. Roksandić argues that there was a silence in communist Yugoslavia about the June 22 date because of predominant political myths that Serbs were the carriers of the National Liberation Struggle, whereas Croats remained saddled with the guilt of the Ustaše.<sup>19</sup>

The decision to emphasize July 27 over June 22 in many ways epitomized how the historical narrative of World War Two in Yugoslavia was constructed and the (subordinate) role Croats and Croatia had in that narrative. A Zagreb newspaper declared that the change of dates "was not only paying off the debt to historical truth, but was a significant liberation of Croatia from the spiritual, cultural, and political oppression that it tolerated for more than seventy

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<sup>18</sup> Drago Roksandić, "Shifting References: Celebrations of Uprisings in Croatia, 1945–1991," in *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 258–259.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259–271.

years.”<sup>20</sup>

Reasserting June 22 as Croatia’s proper day for commemorating the resistance to Axis occupation was important in that it challenged communist distortion of the past without rejecting the antifascist legacy, unlike many of the other revisions that had taken place. Yet it was not until Stjepan Mesić was elected in 2000 that the Croatian president presided over the Antifascist Day commemoration, which was key moment in restoring respect for the antifascist past in Croatia. Since the fall of communism, Antifascist Struggle Day has served to emphasize European values and the fact that Croatian participation in the Partisan movement ensured Croatia a place on the side of the victors of World War Two.

The right-wing, however, continues to protest this state holiday. The HSP declared that “the bandits’ anniversary does not warrant any celebration,” in line with their assertion that all antifascists had inherently fought against a Croatian state.<sup>21</sup> Counter-commemorations are still held at Jazovka, a mass grave containing the victims of Partisan post-war liquidations; some three thousand people attended the ceremony in 2007, demanding that the Sabor “not call June 22 Antifascist Day, but instead to change it to Četnik-Partisan Uprising Day, alter the holiday in the constitution, and correct a historical injustice.”<sup>22</sup>

#### ***d. Comparative Commemorations and Controversies***

The politicization of World War Two commemorations is not a phenomenon unique to Croatia or Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, or even Europe, but the combination of ethnic war and

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<sup>20</sup> *Večernji list* (April 27, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Roksandić, “Shifting References,” p. 271. A recent article in a right-wing weekly, *Hrvatski list*, featured the headline “Once and for all: Ustaše were for Croatia, communists and their followers are always for Yugoslavia.” *Hrvatski list* (Zadar), July 24, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Jutarnji list* (June 23, 2007), p. 2.

the collapse of communism amplified the echoes of past traumas. In Western Europe, the revision of how World War Two was to be commemorated occurred during the turbulent cultural and political events of the sixties, when internal conflicts and local accountability for the fate of Jews was no longer deliberately “forgotten.”<sup>23</sup> Yet questions of how victims and perpetrators could be commemorated still sparked controversy for decades after the war, such as during former American President Ronald Reagan’s visit to the German military cemetery in Bitburg in May 1985.<sup>24</sup>

In formerly Soviet-occupied Europe, especially the Baltic countries, the fall of communism and the end of censorship encouraged some politicians, historians, and veterans of pro-Nazi regimes to rehabilitate fascist collaborators who were recast as anticommunists. The removal of a monument to Soviet soldiers in Estonia escalated tensions between that country and Russia, as well as provoking demonstrations by Estonia’s Russian minority who felt that act symbolically confirmed their status as second class citizens.<sup>25</sup> The memories of World War Two in Asia, in particular regarding the Nanjing Massacre<sup>26</sup> and Japanese commemorations at the Yasukuni Shrine,<sup>27</sup> also entered into the political realm and negatively affected Chinese and Japanese bilateral relations.

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<sup>23</sup> Frank van Vree, “The Politics of Public Memory: The Commemoration of the Second World War in a Historical and Comparative Perspective,” in Titus Ensink and Christopher Sauer, eds., *The Art of Commemoration: Fifty Years after the Warsaw Uprising* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Company, 2003), pp. 232–233. See also See Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Max Paul Friedman and Padriac Kenney, eds., *Partisan Histories: The Past in Contemporary Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Francesca Cappalletto, ed., *Memory and World War Two: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> See Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> *New York Times* (April 28, 2007), online version at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>26</sup> Daqing Yang, “The Malleable and the Contested: The Nanjing Massacre in Postwar China and Japan,” in T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama, eds., *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 50–86.

In contrast to the examples mentioned above, Croatian commemorations of World War Two, whether pro- or anti-communist, were often blended with more recent memories of Croatia's war for independence. Participants at both sets of commemorations emphasized the continuity between Croatian antifascism or Ustaša nationalism and the Homeland War, each side claiming the war in the 1990s was the logical result of *both* ideological movements of the 1940s. Another aspect of the World War Two debate in other European countries has been over the Holocaust, specifically regarding local participation and collaboration in the deportation of Jews. This has been reflected in the amount of attention paid to memorials and the "memory industry" of the Holocaust.<sup>28</sup>

In Croatia, however, the most fervent clashes have erupted not over the Ustaša regime's destruction of the Jews in the NDH, but between Serb and Croat narratives of the past. For example, during discussions over the renovation of the Jasenovac memorial, Serb organizations worried that by transforming Jasenovac into a Holocaust memorial – the United States Holocaust Museum was cited as a model of the new museum at Jasenovac – the true nature of the Ustaša regime and its victims, i.e., mostly Serbs, would be covered up.<sup>29</sup>

The divisions between red and black are thus not simply historical debates, but an understanding of Croatian identity, interethnic relations between Serbs and Croats, the interpretation of the recent past, and a collection of symbols (both visual and verbal) that permeates popular culture, politics, and public space. While the radicalization present during the

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<sup>27</sup> *New York Times* (October 18, 2005), p. A11. Beijing called erstwhile Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, where fourteen war criminals are buried among the rest of the country's war dead, a "serious provocation to the Chinese people."

<sup>28</sup> David Cesarani, "Holocaust Controversies in the 1990s: The Revenge of History or the History of Revenge?" in David Cesarani, ed., *After Eichmann: Collective Memory and the Holocaust since 1961* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 78–87.



Homeland War has lessened as Croatia draws closer to the European Union, World War Two commemorations continue to be focal points of divergent national and ethnic narratives. Every spring the cycle of commemorations, explained in greater detail below, sparks new polemics over the traumatic past.

### III. Commemorating the Red and Black – Jasenovac and Bleiburg

Whereas the other commemorations described above, both official and unofficial, provide a glimpse into the red-black divisions in Croatian society, the two sites of memory that inspire the most passionate polemics are Jasenovac and Bleiburg. The Jasenovac commemoration is dedicated to the victims from the Ustaša state's most notorious death camp, where tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and antifascist Croats lost their lives.<sup>30</sup> Just as Auschwitz gradually came to symbolize the key experience of World War Two in Europe, Jasenovac epitomized the horror of state-sponsored murder and racial laws on the territory of the former Yugoslavia from 1941–1945.

The second commemoration, near the town of Bleiburg on the Austro-Slovenian border, memorializes the thousands of Croatian and Bosnian Muslim soldiers, i.e., Ustaše and Domobrani (Home Guards, the regular NDH army), and civilians who were handed over to the Partisans and liquidated in the final days of the war.<sup>31</sup> These two antipodal ceremonies, both

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<sup>29</sup> *Identitet* (Zagreb), no. 94 (January 2006), pp. 10–11. Other intellectuals outside of Serb associations involved in the Jasenovac museum, such as Slavko Goldstein and Zorica Stipetić, likewise agreed that the new memorial should not be seen as a place where Jews were the only victims.

<sup>30</sup> Some recent books on the history of Jasenovac include Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941–1945* (Zagreb: Kameni cvijet, 2003); and Rimay, ed., *Jasenovac Memorial Site*.

<sup>31</sup> Two recent books on Bleiburg with diametrically opposite interpretations are Juraj Hrženjak, ed., *Bleiburg i Križni put 1945* (Zagreb: Savez antifašističkih boraca i antifašista Republike Hrvatske, 2007); and Josip Jurčević, *Bleiburg: Jugoslavenski poratni zločini nad Hrvatima* (Zagreb: Dokumentijsko informatijsko središte, 2005). Academic Petar Strčić provides an extensive overview of the literature on Bleiburg, including books published by

dedicated to victims of war, involved the manipulation of the numbers of the dead, have been politicized regardless of which government has been in power, and were “nationalized” to fit into competing narratives of World War Two.

### *a. Manipulation of Victims*

Perhaps the most infamous symbol of the NDH era is the Jasenovac concentration camp – in fact a series of camps – established along the Sava River to hold, and often kill, the national and political enemies of the Ustaša regime. The number of victims at Jasenovac has fluctuated wildly over the years. Communist apparatchiks and their nationalist successors, especially in Serbia, channeled the powerful emotions stirred by this site of memory not into a denunciation of only the Ustaša movement, but effectively the imposition of collective guilt on the Croatian people, and moreover, the Catholic Church.

The number of 700,000 victims was considered to be untouchable during communist Yugoslavia, and by the 1980s some scholars inflated that figure to over one million individuals, predominantly Serbs, allegedly killed in the camps alone.<sup>32</sup> The exaggerated numbers served to propagate the “genocidal nature of Croats” theory, suggesting that any independent Croatian state was inherently anti-Serb or that any expression of Croatian nationalism automatically led down the road of Ustaša extremism. The reaction of Croatian nationalists, such as Franjo Tuđman, was to minimize the numbers; even before he became president Tuđman argued that at most 40,000 people were killed in all of the camps in Croatia, a figure he continued to quote in

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the émigré community, in Petar Strčić, “Čemu danas nedoumice oko Bleiburga i Križnog puta,” in Hrženjak, *Bleiburg*, pp. 9–30.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga* (Zagreb: Globus, 1992), pp. 11–12, 44; and Nataša Mataušić, “The Jasenovac Concentration Camp,” in Rimay, ed., *Jasenovac Memorial Site*, pp. 47–48.

the 1990s.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the persistence of widely exaggerated numbers of Jasenovac victims, serious scholarship has determined more credible figures, even though the exact number will never be known. The majority of Croatian scholars agree that the most accurate estimates are between 80,000 to 100,000 victims;<sup>34</sup> researchers at the Jasenovac memorial have so far published the names and nationalities of 72,193 individuals known to have been killed in the Jasenovac camp system. The commemorations, held at both the actual memorial site and across the Save River in Republika Srpska, provoke debates about the number of victims every year.

The counterpart commemoration at Bleiburg represents the eruption of suppressed collective memories after the collapse of the Yugoslav communist regime. For years commemorated only by émigré communities and considered a taboo theme in Yugoslavia, for many Bleiburg symbolizes the “greatest tragedy” of the Croatian people. Bleiburg as a site of memory is important because it is the place where the retreating armed forces of the NDH and accompanying masses of civilians attempted to surrender to the British, and were turned over to the Partisans on May 15, 1945, nearly a week after the Third Reich had capitulated.

Although the central commemoration takes place on Bleiburg field, historian Igor Graovac argues that “neither war nor mass crimes were committed in the actual place of Bleiburg, but rather only a limited number of killings took place, primarily military casualties

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Tuđman, reprinted in *Novi list* (April 23, 1996), p. 21. See the discussion of manipulating the number of Jasenovac victims in Franjo Tuđman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti: Rasprava o povijesti i filozofiji zločinja* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, 1990), pp. 56–58. The notion of collective guilt was one of the central tenets of Tuđman’s challenges to the number of Serbian victims in World War Two, which, according to him, was used to justify a unified Yugoslavia and Serb dominance in key party, police, and military positions in Croatia. Franjo Tuđman, *The Sources, Changes, and Essence of the National Question in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, reprinted in Peter Sugar, ed., *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1995), pp. 330–331.

<sup>34</sup> Mataušić, “The Jasenovac Concentration Camp,” in Rimač, ed., *Jasenovac Memorial Site*, p. 48; and Archive of Javna ustanova Spomen područje (JUSP) Jasenovac, Fond SPJ–Komemoracije, A-745, Slavko Goldstein, “Procjene o priližnom broju žrtava ustaškog logorskog sustava Jasenovac 1941–1945,” April 21, 2005.

suffered during the closing battles against the Allies and the Partisans, who were part of the Allies.”<sup>35</sup> The majority of liquidations and revenge killings took place on death marches through Slovenia, Croatia, and other former Yugoslav republics, even though Bleiburg as a killing field persists in speeches at the commemoration, paintings, and other representations of the event.

In addition to NDH units, thousands of Germans, Montenegrin and Serbian Četniks, Slovenian White Guards, and Cossacks were likewise captured and/or killed. The number of people killed in the battles leading up to the surrender at Bleiburg or liquidated in the death marches afterwards varies greatly and has been subject to considerable exaggeration, from 45,000 to as many as 600,000.<sup>36</sup> As with Jasenovac, the true number will likely never be known, but will continue to fuel rival political and historical interpretations of World War Two.

As in the case of many of the commemorations in Croatia, the national identity of *some* of the victims has trumped, or often blurred, the political identity of those killed at Jasenovac or Bleiburg. At certain moments the victims at the Ustaša’s most notorious concentration camp were characterized as being exclusively Serbs to justify aggression against any independent Croatia, while at other times the memorial site was on the verge of becoming a place for Croat victims of both fascism and communism akin to Francisco Franco’s Valley of the Fallen. Similarly, the victims of Bleiburg were nationalized and became exclusively Croats in the dominant narrative of the commemoration. The truth is far more complex, since Croats and

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<sup>35</sup> Igor Graovac, “Pitanja poslijeratnih žrtava i stradalnika u Hrvatskoj poslije Drugog svjetskog rata,” in Hrženjak, *Bleiburg*, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> For various estimates of victims at Bleiburg, see Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije*, pp. 75–79; Slavko Goldstein, “Bakarić je Tita upozorio da stvari izmiču kontroli,” in *Jutarnji list* (October 27, 2007), online version at [www.jutarnji.hr/clanak/art-2007,10,27,bleiburg\\_goldstein,95851.jl](http://www.jutarnji.hr/clanak/art-2007,10,27,bleiburg_goldstein,95851.jl); Zdravko Dizdar, “Prilog istraživanje problema Bleiburga i Križnih puteva,” in *Senjski zbornik*, no. 32 (2005), pp. 189–190; Vinko Nikolić, “Poslije pola stoljeća – Bleiburg je povijest,” in Mirko Valentić, ed., *Bleiburg 1945–1995: spomenica povodom 50-te obljetnice Bleiburga i*

Serbs (as well as members of other ethnic groups) died at both sites, but the record so far, despite some reconciliatory efforts, has been that the commemorations inflame rather than heal the wounds of interethnic conflict.

### ***b. Jasenovac and Bleiburg under Communism***

During communist Yugoslavia, the commemorations of Jasenovac and Bleiburg were illustrative of how a totalitarian political system monopolized the historical narrative through public rituals. Like all of the other ceremonies dedicated to World War Two, the commemoration at Jasenovac served to legitimate the ruling party, and any questioning of the official narrative or figures was strictly forbidden. Bleiburg, on the other hand, was a taboo topic that was systematically erased from the social memory in Yugoslavia, kept alive in the Croatian émigré community and press.<sup>37</sup> But gradually monuments and organized commemorative spaces developed at both sites, setting the stage for the dramatic events of the 1990s.

Unlike other World War Two camps in Europe which have been preserved and transformed into memorials, no structures remain at the Jasenovac site. The Croatian National Liberation War veterans' organization chose Belgrade architect Bogdan Bogdanović's design of a "Stone Flower" (*Kameni cvijet*), symbolizing "indestructible life", as the central monument. Work on the monument lasted from 1964 until the opening ceremony on July 4, 1966.<sup>38</sup> Construction on a museum was begun in September 1967 and completed in July 1968, the same year the Jasenovac Memorial Area Institution was established to administer the site.

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*Križnog puta* (Zagreb: Quo Vadis, 1995), p. 39; and interview with Vladimir Geiger in *Pogled (Novi list)*, 23 June 2007, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> My own parents, who immigrated to the United States in 1978, had never heard of Bleiburg until they arrived in Ohio, even though my grandfather himself had been liquidated by the Partisans in May or June 1945 as part of the Bleiburg events.

The date for the annual commemoration at Jasenovac, April 22, corresponds with the breakout of the remaining inmates on the night of April 22, 1945, when it became apparent that the camp guards were planning on liquidating everyone still in the camp. Of the six hundred inmates who rushed the guards in the desperate escape attempt, approximately one hundred survived.<sup>39</sup> The ceremony thus celebrated this heroic event in addition to reminding the participants of the horrors of the Ustaša regime and the brutal conditions in the camp.

In the 1970s, communist officials oriented the commemoration towards the youth from all of Yugoslavia, and emphasized the ideological (and not ethnic) identity of those who were killed, in line with the policy of “Brotherhood and Unity.” Historian Zorica Stipetić, who was elected as the president of the Jasenovac advisory board in 2006, agreed that the “communist authorities were consciously selective in their version of history,” but it was not characterized by the hate speech of the 1990s that extended into the commemorative realm.

According to the memorial site’s records, between 1967 and mid-1977, almost 1,500,000 people visited Jasenovac, the majority in organized groups from schools and factories.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Tito himself never visited Jasenovac. During informal discussions with Croatian historians, it has been suggested that Tito was aware of the manipulation of the number of victims at Jasenovac and thus wanted to distance himself from such a myth, or perhaps he merely preferred the pomp and glory of the commemorations at Partisan battlefields, such as Sutjeska and Neretva.

A decade later, the public rituals at the memorial site were taking on significantly more political overtones as Yugoslavia struggled in the post-Titoist era. The official publication of the

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<sup>38</sup> Duško Lončar, *Deset godina spomen-područja Jasenovac* (Jasenovac: Spomen-područje Jasenovac, 1977), pp. 13–14.

<sup>39</sup> Mataušić, *Jasenovac*, pp. 91–98.

memorial site's administration, *Poruke* (Messages), thundered that the advisory board was resolutely against any "falsification" of the number of victims, that is, any suggestion that the sacred figure of 700,000 could be brought into question.<sup>41</sup> Speeches held during the commemoration warned against the "malignant nationalisms" that had made Jasenovac possible, as well as questions about the role of the Croatian nation in the "Jasenovac genocide" raised by the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>42</sup> Serbian scholars published a spate of books on Jasenovac and the NDH, inflaming already increasing nationalist tensions, and the pro-Milošević media systematically associated the leading noncommunist candidate in Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, with Jasenovac and Pavelić after democratic elections were permitted by the ruling party. The memory of Jasenovac, which should have served as a warning against war, was actively contributing to the deterioration of interethnic relations as the Yugoslav state unraveled.

In contrast to the state-sponsored rituals at Jasenovac, individuals paying homage to the victims at Bleiburg and its aftermath often did so at great risk to their lives. The first organized commemoration at Bleiburg took place on All Saints Day in 1952, when three survivors laid a wreath at the graves of Croatian soldiers in the Unter-Loibach cemetery. The same day, six other former NDH officers went to Bleiburg field, where they "made a cross out of the remains of weapons abandoned by the Croatian army and swore an oath to return every year at the same time to honorably preserve the memory of the slain Croatian victims."<sup>43</sup>

The following year Ante Mikrut established the Bleiburg Honorary Platoon (*Počasni bleiburški vod*) to organize the annual commemoration. From the very beginning members of

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<sup>40</sup> Lončar, *Deset godina spomen-područja Jasenovac*, p. 32.

<sup>41</sup> *Poruke* (Jasenovac), vol. 10, no. 1 (April 22, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Danas* (Zagreb), May 7, 1985, pp. 23–24.

<sup>43</sup> Josip Jurčević, ed., *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Zagreb: Klub hrvatskih povratnika iz iseljeništva, 2005), pp. 71–72.

the Catholic Church were involved in the commemorations, notably Reverend Vilim Cecelja from Klagenfurt, and after 1956 the ceremony was supported by the Croatian Liberation Movement, founded by Ante Pavelić that same year.<sup>44</sup> As attendance of the commemoration grew, held annually on Mother's Day, Yugoslav intelligence agents began monitoring, threatening, and even killing émigrés involved with the Bleiburg ceremony. While the Austrian police regularly monitored the events and the authorities occasionally obstructed the commemorations, they were never fully banned.<sup>45</sup>

In 1965, the Bleiburg Honorary Platoon purchased a parcel of land on Bleiburg field and renovated the graves of Croatian soldiers in the Unter-Loibach cemetery, where a marble monument was erected in 1976. A monument on the actual field was erected in 1987, bearing the inscription "In Honor and Glory of the Fallen Croatian Army, May 1945" in Croatian and German.<sup>46</sup> The symbols on the monument include a cross, the Croatian chessboard coat of arms, and the Islamic crescent moon and star, the latter testimony to the fact that many of the soldiers were Muslims from Bosnia, part of the NDH during World War Two.

### *c. Jasenovac and Bleiburg during the Homeland War*

The collapse of communism, the war in Croatia, and the postwar efforts at reconciliation and EU integration all contributed to the changes in the meanings, symbolism, and political significance of the two commemorative events at Jasenovac and Bleiburg. The former, physically occupied by rebel Serbs for four years, underwent several phases during which the identity of the "dominant" victims being honored changed with each new government that

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<sup>44</sup> Jurčević, ed., *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene*, pp. 86–87, 98.

<sup>45</sup> Bože Vukušić, *Bleiburg Memento* (Zagreb: Udruga Hrvatski križni put, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Jurčević, ed., *Čuvari bleiburške uspomene*, pp. 157–158.



controlled the memorial site. Bleiburg transformed from an illegal commemoration attended only by émigrés into a symbolic ritual for all Croats who had sacrificed themselves for the Croatian state, under the aegis of the *Sabor* yet essentially directed by right-wing political forces pushing for a rehabilitation of the Ustaše. Both commemorative spaces have been the center of controversies since 1990, as well as stages for carefully orchestrated performances by post-communist politicians.

In 1991, Serb forces occupied the Jasenovac memorial site, trashed the museum complex, and transported the documents and other exhibition materials into Bosnia-Herzegovina. (Most of this material was subsequently returned to Croatia in 2001 with the help of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC). The Serb para-state in Croatia, the Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK), controlled not only the physical site, but the narrative of the Jasenovac camp, which used to justify the ethnic cleansing of thousands of non-Serbs from the territory of the RSK. At the commemoration on April 24, 1994, Milan Martić, erstwhile president of the RSK and convicted war criminal, declared that “Jasenovac is most certainly the largest Serb city of the dead” and proof that Serbs and Croats could never again live in the same state.<sup>47</sup>

A few weeks earlier, Serb forces prevented a delegation from the Croatian Jewish community and representatives of the Croatian government, carrying wreaths commemorating “all the victims of Jasenovac,” from visiting the site; instead, the delegations threw the wreaths into the Sava River.<sup>48</sup> For the RSK, Jasenovac was to be used exclusively as a symbol of Serb victimization that legitimated the violent rebellion against the democratically elected Croatian government. The RSK’s control over Jasenovac did not last much longer, however, as the Croatian Army swept through the western half of the para-state in May 1995.

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *Srpski glas* (Topusko), April 28, 1994, p. 3.

While Serb nationalists transformed the commemoration at Jasenovac from a legitimating pillar of communist Yugoslavia into xenophobic propaganda, the Croatian public suddenly became aware of, and could openly attend, the commemoration at Bleiburg. In 1990, on the forty-fifth anniversary, the Croatian media reported on the commemoration at Bleiburg for the first time. It was no longer a ceremony of exclusively Ustaša émigrés, but involved politicians from newly formed Croatian political parties and others who arrived from Croatia. The HDZ, which had just won the elections, sent Father Tomislav Duka to hold Mass at the ceremony, where he echoed Tuđman's calls for a "national reconciliation" among all Croats.<sup>49</sup> Despite the rhetoric of reconciling Partisans and Ustaše, from 1990 onwards the commemoration at Bleiburg has remained a bastion of the Croatian right.

Dražen Budiša, from the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSL), told reporters that he left in the middle of the ceremony in 1990 because "it was turning into a manifestation with a number of political messages that our party finds inappropriate, along with iconography that is foreign to us."<sup>50</sup> He was referring to Ustaša iconography, flags, and other materials being sold at the commemoration, symbols which are openly displayed at Bleiburg up to the present day. Former Ustaše, such as Dinko Šakić, a former commander of Jasenovac, openly attended the Bleiburg commemoration. Šakić, who would eventually be extradited from Argentina and put on trial in Croatia in 1998, declared that he was proud to have been an Ustaša and that it was normal for a state to execute its enemies.<sup>51</sup>

Thus from the very beginning of the Bleiburg commemoration's "legalization," the distinction between the homage to victims summarily executed by the Partisans, and the

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<sup>48</sup> *Večernji list* (April 9, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Vjesnik* (May 14, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Danas* (May 22, 1990), p. 21.

rehabilitation of Ustaša soldiers (including members of Pavelić's elite forces and concentration camp guards) who had been killed in battles after refusing to surrender, was blurred. Speeches given at the commemoration sought to put a positive spin on the defeated NDH. Duka suggested that modern Croatian democracy would not have been possible "without the selfless sacrifice" of those killed at Bleiburg, while another speaker insisted that the NDH had been a legitimate independent state.<sup>52</sup>

From 1991 until 1994, the HDZ did not send any high-ranking representatives to the Bleiburg commemoration; Tuđman was, after all, a former Partisan officer. Right-wing politicians did attend, however, and used it for the promotion of their own political agendas despite calls for unity during wartime conditions. In 1993, the HSP delegation came with election posters for their candidate Dobroslav Paraga, while the HSP's vice president criticized the Tuđman government for "commemorating the Holocaust, but not coming to Bleiburg."<sup>53</sup>

#### *d. Commemorations since 1990 (2): Tuđman's Croatia*

The year 1995 marked another shift in the commemorations at both Jasenovac and Bleiburg, as the geopolitical situation in Croatia changed in light of military operations that liberated most the occupied territory by the end of the year. In early May, the Croatian Army retook Western Slavonia, including the Jasenovac memorial site. Former US Ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, led a delegation to the former concentration camp on Victory over Fascism Day, calling for reconciliation even as Croatian soldiers stared across the Sava River at the recently defeated RSK forces that had retreated into Bosnia. While prominent

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<sup>51</sup> *Danas* (May 22, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Novi list* (May 10, 1994), p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Vjesnik* (May 14, 1993), p. 4.

representatives of Serbs who remained loyal to Zagreb expressed doubt at the likelihood of a rapid improvement of Serb-Croat relations, a *New York Times* journalist reporting on the event noted that the Croatian Army left the Serb Orthodox church in Jasenovac untouched, something that would have been unthinkable in 1991, and suggested that even at this “womb of horror, Croats offer a ray of hope.”<sup>54</sup> The RSK press nevertheless lamented that the Croats were now “putting their wreaths on our dead at Jasenovac.”<sup>55</sup> This potent site of memory had once again come under the control of the Croatian government, and Tuđman would quickly seek to use it for his own political purposes.

A week later on the fiftieth anniversary of the Bleiburg tragedy, the *Sabor* took over the organization of the commemoration for the first time. Tuđman realized the political significance of Bleiburg, and even though he never personally attended the commemoration nor did he fully accept the ideology propagated there, decided that it was wiser to control it rather than allow his political opponents to use it against him. The speaker of the *Sabor*, Nedjeljko Mihanović, the highest ranking government official to attend, argued that the Croatian Army in the Homeland War had prevented another Bleiburg from happening at the hands of “Serbo-Communist armed forces.”<sup>56</sup>

The parallels with Milan Martić’s speech a year earlier, when he had stated that the Serb rebellion prevented a new Jasenovac, are striking. Father Sebastijan Golenić, who led the religious services at the ceremony, also compared the events of World War Two to the Homeland War. “With great sadness we remember all of the horrors from fifty years ago,” he told the crowd estimated at 15,000 people, “as well as the red reign of terror, the same as the

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<sup>54</sup> *New York Times* (May 9, 1995), [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>55</sup> *Srpski glas* (May 26, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Vjesnik* (May 15, 1995), p. 3.

current events in our homeland where the dark forces of evil have decided to destroy everything that is civilized.”<sup>57</sup>

The *Sabor* subsequently named the closest Sunday to May 15, the day of the Bleiburg commemoration, as the Memorial Day of Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence. This memorial day thus completed the nationalization of the victims at Bleiburg, and simultaneously associated any Croat who had struggled for an independent state with a commemoration that was laced with Ustaša iconography. The narrative of Bleiburg created at the commemoration by politicians, not historians, was that the victims had been killed by “Serbo-Bolsheviks” only because they were Croats. For example, the *Sabor*’s representative at the fifty-second anniversary in 1997 insisted that the Bleiburg victims “were Croats who fanatically believed in a Croatian state, not an ideology.”<sup>58</sup> The negative aspects of the NDH and the Ustaša movement were being systematically excised at public rituals overseen by the Croatian state.

Tuđman’s conceptualization of the Jasenovac memorial was even more problematic. It was to be the symbolic manifestation of his goal of Croatian national reconciliation, in other words, the unifying of Partisans and Ustaše (and their children) against their common enemy, the Serbs. The successful defense of Croatian independence was to a large degree possible because of national unity during a time of crisis. But the decision to transform Jasenovac into a memorial of exclusively Croat suffering would have been a distortion of the historical record even too excessive for a Croatia awash in nationalist triumphalism after 1995.

Although Tuđman’s plan for Jasenovac was first made public in 1992 and repeated at the Second HDZ Party Convention (October 15-16, 1993), it was after his State of the Nation

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<sup>57</sup> *Slobodna Dalmacija* (May 15, 1995), p. 3.

Address on 1 January 1996 that it seemed likely to be carried out.<sup>59</sup> According to him, “Jasenovac could become a place for all victims of war, which would warn the Croatian people that in the past they were divided and brought into an internecine conflict; warn them to not repeat it, and to reconcile the dead just as we reconciled the living, their children, and their grandchildren.”<sup>60</sup> Tuđman noted Spanish dictator Francisco Franco’s massive monument to the dead from both sides of the Spanish Civil War in the Valley of the Fallen (*Valle de los Caídos*) could serve as a model for the new Jasenovac, although similar memorials mixing the bones of the dead exist in other countries, such as in the New Guardhouse (*Neue Wache*) in Berlin.<sup>61</sup> His plans for reconciliation of the dead also included Croatian historical figures who were buried abroad, such as Ante Pavelić (Spain), Josip Broz Tito (Serbia), and interwar leader Vladko Maček (United States), all of whom he wanted to rebury in Croatian soil; only Maček’s body was actually returned to Zagreb, in 1996.

The proposed transformation of Jasenovac was shelved after an avalanche of protests from Croatian antifascist groups,<sup>62</sup> Croatia’s Jewish community,<sup>63</sup> Walter Reich, the director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum,<sup>64</sup> and fifty-two United States congressional representatives.<sup>65</sup> According to the memoirs of a former foreign minister, Mate Granić, even Vice President Al Gore emphasized the political damage that would result from the Jasenovac

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<sup>58</sup> Speech by Dubravko Jelčić, quoted in *Vjesnik* (May 12, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> See “Oprez pri povlačenje jugo-vojske,” in *Vjesnik* (May 27, 1992), no page number; “Jasenovac – spomen-obilježje žrtvama političkog nasilja,” in *Vjesnik* (November 24, 1993), no page number; and *Feral Tribune* (Split), January 22, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Tuđman, reprinted in *Novi list* (April 23, 1996), p. 21. While Tuđman envisioned Croatian war dead from various sides to be buried at Jasenovac in separate graves, opponents of the idea accused him of “mixing the bones of the dead.”

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Vjesnik* (April 22, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Feral Tribune* (January 22, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Reich, “A Plan That’s Bad to the Bone,” *Wall Street Journal* (April 3, 1996), p. A14.

plan, which finally convinced Tuđman to abandon it.<sup>66</sup>

Two years later, Tuđman was again under pressure over Jasenovac, this time regarding the war crimes trial of former camp commander Dinko Šakić. Despite Tuđman's ambiguity regarding the Ustaša legacy, such as at the Bleiburg commemoration that Šakić had actually attended [see above], in this case he pushed for Šakić's extradition and trial.<sup>67</sup> The Simon Wiesenthal Center, often critical of Croatia's handling of the NDH past, called it "the most successful trial of its kind and the trial which has had the greatest impact on Holocaust consciousness in the post-Communist world."<sup>68</sup>

During Tuđman's watch, both Jasenovac and Bleiburg were placed under the aegis of the Croatian state. However, the man who breached the ideological divide among the Croatian people and took Croatia out of the Yugoslav federation never attended a single commemoration at either site of memory. For him, victory in the Homeland War was his greatest accomplishment, and therefore he preferred to use anniversaries of key moments from the 1990s to make appearances and issue speeches. It was not until after his death in December 1999 that the Croatian political leadership began regularly appearing at World War Two commemorations.

### *e. Commemorations since 1990 (3): Post-Tuđmanism*

Tuđman's death, followed by the HDZ's defeat in parliamentary elections in early 2000, signified an important shift in Croatian politics, as well as the official attitude towards

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<sup>65</sup> *Panorama* (Zagreb), June 3, 1996, pp. 58–59.

<sup>66</sup> Mate Granić, *Vanjska politika: Iza kulisa politike* (Zagreb: Algoritam, 2005), pp. 143–144.

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Šakić trial (which resulted in a twenty-year sentence for crimes against humanity), see Viktor Ivančić, *Točka na U – Slučaj Šakić: Anatomija jednog skandala* (Split: Feral Tribune, 2000). He died in a Zagreb hospital where he had been transferred from prison on July 21, 2008, defiant and unrepentant to the end. *Novi list* (July 22, 2008), p. 4.

antifascism. The new president, Stjepan Mesić, and the coalition government of Ivica Račan, represented a swing to the left after a decade of the nationalist HDZ in power. Although economic reform, integration into Euro-Atlantic organizations, cooperation with the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, and facilitating refugee returns were priorities for the new government, there was also a concerted effort to restore honor to Croatia's antifascist legacy and Partisan veterans.

It was Račan, whose Social Democratic Party (SDP) was the heir to the Croatian Communist Party, who took the first symbolic steps at both Jasenovac and Bleiburg. On April 21, 2002, he became the first prime minister to attend the commemoration under the Stone Flower. Račan gave a short speech in which he emphasized that “by preserving their [victims of Jasenovac] memory, today we are building a Croatia on the strong democratic foundation of antifascism, aspiring for the freedom of every individual and tolerance towards other nations and religions.”<sup>69</sup> When asked by reporters to comment on current events, Račan insisted that it was “very important to liberate places of death such as this from everyday politics,” in other words, rejecting the politicization of these sites of memory.<sup>70</sup>

Yet the presence of a politician at a commemoration of World War Two inevitably politicizes both history and the ritual of remembrance itself. Several weeks later Račan became the first Croatian prime minister to lay a wreath at the Bleiburg memorial. There he issued “a sincere apology and condolences to everyone whose life was in any way affected by the Bleiburg tragedy,” and again insisted that “we will accomplish a lot if we are able to end the politicization

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<sup>68</sup> Simon Wiesenthal Center, News Release – “Sakic’s Death While Still under Sentence is a Model of Justice for Post-Communist Europe” (July 23, 2008), [www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=fwLYKnN8LzH&b=245494&ct=5721909](http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=fwLYKnN8LzH&b=245494&ct=5721909).

<sup>69</sup> Archive of JUSP Jasenovac, Fond SPJ–Komemoracije, A-745, speech by Prime Minister Ivica Račan, April 21, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> *Vjesnik* (April 22, 2002), p. 2.



of Croatian execution sites.”<sup>71</sup> His apology in the name of the SDP came two days after the official commemoration, at which the *Sabor*’s vice president, Zdravko Tomac (SDP), was booed and jeered off the stage when he unsuccessfully attempted to give his speech.<sup>72</sup> Despite the optimistic statements by Račan, Croatia’s World War Two past remained a sharply divisive issue that was annually drawn into the political arena precisely at commemorations such as this one.

Whereas the Bleiburg commemoration was firmly in the hands of the political right (and even used to protest against the left-wing government), President Mesić decided to make Jasenovac the centerpiece of his renewed emphasis on antifascism. Beginning in 2003, when he became the first president to attend the Jasenovac commemoration, Mesić has used the ceremony every year to denounce the rehabilitation of the Ustaše, lash out at political opponents, and reaffirm Croatia’s antifascist and European values. On May 11, 2003, when the Jasenovac and Bleiburg commemorations were coincidentally held on the exact same day, Mesić went to Jasenovac and expressed “his deepest regrets for all the innocent victims who fell at the hands of those who misused the idea of a Croatian state as a justification for murder, theft, and expulsion – regardless of the time or the context.”<sup>73</sup>

The return of the HDZ to power after the 2003 elections did not result in a return to the Tuđman era, as many had feared, but neither was the new government under Prime Minister Ivo Sanader able to fully bridge the ideological divide. In interviews with leading representatives of Croatian antifascist organizations (Ivan Fumić, Vesna Čulinović-Konstantinović) and members of the Serbian National Council (Branka Šesto), I was told that the attitude towards the

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<sup>71</sup> *Vjesnik* (May 15, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Novi list* (May 13, 2002), p. 3. By contrast, the HDZ representatives received considerable applause during the commemoration.

<sup>73</sup> Archive of JUSP Jasenovac, Fond SPJ–Komemoracije, A-745, speech by President Stjepan Mesić, May 11, 2003.

antifascist legacy in Croatia had changed dramatically since the 1990s, especially at the top levels of government.<sup>74</sup> However, at the local level implementation of the Sabor's "Declaration of Antifascism," such as the article calling "for local and state institutions to objectively observe the events of World War Two...and not to equate antifascism with communism," was often ignored.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, the government's funding of the Bleiburg commemoration (including the construction of an altar costing 300,000 euros) at which Ustaša iconography was openly displayed and sold seemed to contradict the commitment to antifascism. Journalist Boris Pavelić, who had frequently covered the Bleiburg ceremony, told me in an interview in 2007 that he noticed less Ustaša symbols than in previous years, but when I attended the commemoration on May 13, 2007, they were everywhere.<sup>76</sup> Despite promises that the Austrian authorities would confiscate any fascist symbols, police officers at the site said that "on this day, we allow the Croats to use those symbols here."<sup>77</sup> That year the Archbishop of Zagreb, Josip Bozanić, led the commemorative service, symbolizing the Croatian Church's close ties with this site of memory. Although Bozanić was the first speaker to mention the horrors of Jasenovac from the podium at Bleiburg, the Catholic leadership in Croatia has continued to avoid the actual Jasenovac commemoration.<sup>78</sup>

During both of Sanader's mandates, the HDZ has generally backed up its antifascist rhetoric with concrete actions regarding Jasenovac. His government financed a renovation of the

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<sup>74</sup> Interviews with the author in Zagreb, Croatia, April–June 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Deklaracija o antifašizmu, April 13, 2005, [www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2005/0971.htm](http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2005/0971.htm). See also interview with Alen Budaj, director of the Margelov Institute, in *Pogled (Novi list)*, April 5, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> Boris Pavelić (*Novi list*), interview with author in Zagreb, on September 18, 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Conversation with an Austrian police officer, Bleiburg, May 13, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Speech by Archbishop Josip Bozanić, Bleiburg, May 13, 2007. Excerpts of speech published in *Novi list* (May 14, 2007), p. 3.

Stone Flower and oversaw the opening of a newly designed permanent exhibition at the memorial site in 2006. The number of visitors to the Jasenovac memorial site has also slowly increased, averaging about 2,500 people a year, although far short of the 300,000 annual visitors recorded in Tito's era.<sup>79</sup> The Croatian political leadership sent a strong message of recognizing the importance of Jasenovac when Sanader, Mesić, and the speaker of the *Sabor*, Vladimir Šeks, all attended the ceremony for the new exhibition.

Although the museum was criticized by some – Ephraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center called it “postmodernist trash”<sup>80</sup> while a member of the Zagreb Jewish community stated that even the Ustaše would have supported such an exhibit<sup>81</sup> – most Croatian commentators agreed that it respected individual victims and did not politicize them as in the past.<sup>82</sup> The museum director, Nataša Jovičić, after winning the Carlo Scarpa award for landscapes in 2007, insisted that the memorial site “needs to be a place of memories and contemplation, certainly not a place of conflict.”<sup>83</sup> The commemoration continues to include religious services from the Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, and Jewish communities without the nationalization of victims which had characterized earlier ceremonies.

Even with the democratization of Croatian society since the Homeland War and immediate post-communist period, the Jasenovac–Bleiburg dichotomy remains susceptible to contemporary political maneuvering. A debate over the funding of the commemorations erupted in April 2008, when the *Sabor* decided to set aside 500,000 kuna (over \$100,000) for the

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<sup>79</sup> Archive of JUSP Jasenovac, Fond SPJ–Komemoracije, A-745, “Izvještaj o posjetiteljima JUSP Jasenovac od 1997. do 2005. godine”.

<sup>80</sup> *Novi list* (November 29, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> *Nezavisne novine* (Banja Luka), December 2, 2006, online version at [www.nezavisne.com](http://www.nezavisne.com).

<sup>82</sup> *Novi list* (November 28, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Novi list* (May 14, 2007), p. 7.

Bleiburg ceremony and only 100,000 kuna (\$20,000) for the one at Jasenovac.<sup>84</sup> This was followed by Ivo Fumić's attack on the Catholic Church at the Jasenovac commemoration several days later, as noted in the introduction, when he accused the Croatian clergy of being pro-Ustaša.

On the one hand this sparked a public discussion about the role of the Church during the NDH and why the Church leadership avoids going to Jasenovac, while on the other hand the Church and right-wing press struck back, accusing the commemoration of being "misused for ideological attacks" against the Church,<sup>85</sup> serving as a political stage for a new Communist Party of Yugoslavia,<sup>86</sup> and even functioning in the service of Četnik politics.<sup>87</sup> Even after the commemorative cycle passed, the announcement by the new SDP president, Zoran Milanović, that he would visit Bleiburg and Tezno (the site of a mass grave in Slovenia) provoked numerous criticism from the left, the Jewish community, and even from President Mesić. The red-black divisions from World War Two continue to obstruct Croatia's past from becoming history.

## Conclusion

The contested narratives of Croatia's World War Two past, the so-called red-black divide in Croatian society, is not simply a debate between historians and other scholars. While some commentators have suggested that the ongoing obsession with Partisans and Ustaše is exclusively a fabrication of the (liberal) media in order to sell papers and ultimately divide the Croatian nation, the political rituals at the sites of memory show that the trauma of the past

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<sup>84</sup> *Novi list* (April 16, 2008), p. 5. Two days after this information was made public, infuriating representatives of Serb and antifascist organizations, the Croatian government decided to increase the funding for the Jasenovac commemoration to 200,000 kuna. *Novi list* (April 21, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Commentary by the editor of the Catholic weekly *Glas koncila* (Zagreb), April 27, 2008, online version at [www.glas-koncila.hr](http://www.glas-koncila.hr).

<sup>86</sup> *Hrvatsko slovo* (Zagreb), May 9, 2008, p. 5. The right-wing press carried stories about Fumić for several weeks after his speech, supporting the Church's initiative to press charges against him.

<sup>87</sup> Private conversation with a historian from the Croatian Institute for History, May 2008.

remains embedded in the political culture of the present. Politicians attend commemorative events where victims fell on both sides of the red-black divide, issue their interpretations of the historical record, and use rhetoric that defines their political identity. Electoral campaigns trade accusations of communist or fascist resurgence.

The divide also extends into popular culture. For example, one of Croatia's most popular singers, Marko Perković Thompson, is continuously in the media spotlight because of some controversial songs with pro-Ustaša lyrics, as well as the presence of Ustaša imagery among his fans. The Catholic Church, a major pillar of Croatian society and identity, has also been embroiled in the clash over the past due to its role in the NDH, the postwar persecution of the Church in Tito's Yugoslavia, and the religious component of most of the commemorative events.

Croatia's complex relationship with World War Two and how to commemorate it must be understood within the context of the transition from communism, and more importantly, the brutal ethnic war that lasted from 1991 until 1995. The Homeland War paradoxically unified the Croatian people and yet simultaneously radicalized the political arena. The violence, war crimes, and injustices of World War Two were often juxtaposed with the events of the 1990s. The suffering at sites of memory such as Jasenovac and Bleiburg quickly became symbols of, and even justification for, a new wave of interethnic bloodletting.

The end of the war meant a normalization of the political atmosphere, but also revealed that the national reconciliation envisioned by Tuđman was not as complete as it may have seemed during the war for Croatia's survival. Tuđman himself embodied many of the elements of the split personality of Croatia, a country that was constitutionally based on antifascism, yet openly tolerated a rehabilitation of the pro-fascist and pro-Nazi collaborative regime. The democratization process after 2000 enabled Croatia to make important strides towards EU

membership, but despite a greater emphasis on economic and social issues among the general public and the political elite, the contested narrative of World War Two continues to permeate all levels of Croatian society.

It is impossible for politics to remain apart from war commemorations, history, and the definition of public space. The impact of the commemorative events described above can be analyzed through the lens of both international and domestic policy. Unlike some other cases, notably bilateral relations between China and Japan, the World War Two commemorations in Croatia have not created serious conflicts with its neighbors. Whereas the commemorations of the Homeland War *do* raise tensions with Serbia every year, the public rituals related to World War Two merely illustrate how that period is remembered differently in each of the Yugoslav successor states. The Croatian political elite, however, are aware that nurturing the antifascist legacy is important for the country's image vis-à-vis entrance into the EU.

In domestic politics, the commemorative cycle has been more divisive, both ethnically and ideologically, than the image presented for Europe. Bleiburg, for example, is a place of exclusively of Croat suffering in the narrative constructed through the commemorations held there, even though Serbs, Slovenians, Montenegrins, and even Russians were among those killed by revengeful Partisans. Yet the nationalist discourse depicts a version of the past in which the victims died only because they were Croats, obscuring the fact that many of them had died in battle as part of collaborationist armed forces.

Moreover, the right-wing continues to label antifascist commemorations as “Serbo-Četnik” revivals, essentially negating Croatia's contribution to the victory in World War Two. The sites of memory are also inevitably ideologically tinged, despite efforts by certain politicians to depoliticize them. Nevertheless, the strengthening of democracy and the positive influence of

EU membership gives hope that the ongoing polemics over World War Two will be expressed through dialogue and discussion, and not the kind of violence that destroyed Yugoslavia in the 1990s.