Tangled memories.

Sarajevo’s Vraca Memorial Park and the reconstruction of the past in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

My aim in this paper is that of presenting the case of a memorial complex in the city of Sarajevo, to explore how remembrance of different events is shaped around one single site, implicitly or explicitly, and what implications these different layers of memory have for the study of public discourses and practices of memory and identity in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Though limited to a specific case, the paper tries to highlight some features from which the study of memory in a post-socialist and post-war context can benefit.

Contextualization

In the framework of extreme (ethno)nationalist ideologies fostered by the political elites of the parties involved in the war marking the end of Socialist Yugoslavia, cultural heritage acquired a place within the list of targets for destruction. While nationalist rhetoric juxtaposed ethnic affiliations within a logic of mutually exclusive definitions of self and other based on blood purity, political projects of ethnic homogenization on given territories were pursued with violent means between 1992 and 1995 in the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Efforts of redrawing the territorial organization and demographic composition of the area were carried out using systematic violence against the ethnic other through practices ranging from harassment to deportation, torture, rape, detention in camps and mass
killings, where the Serb faction assumed by and large the role of the perpetrator. Within this context, narratives of the past were employed to stiffen ethnic affiliations as well as justify current political and military goals. Cultural heritage was thus directly invested with meaning as symbol of the historical presence of the ethnic other on a contested soil, and targeted for deliberate destruction, in a process in which narrowed notions of identity and belonging were associated most visibly and immediately to tangible items of heritage, such as historical and religious buildings. The strategy of so-called “ethnic cleansing” entailing coercive eradication and/or elimination of people – and, with them, the intangible heritage of the area – was complemented by the devastation of what was identified as physical marker of the other’s identity, to the extent that investigations in the post-war period “found that the entire heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina is endangered”.1

Halting the conflict in 1995, the General Framework Agreement for Peace (hereinafter: Dayton Agreement) provided for the establishment of a Commission to Preserve National Monuments (hereinafter: the Commission). The creation of a specific body concerned with monuments in this agreement represents the encounter between an international tendency of growing interest and sense of shared responsibility towards cultural heritage and a local experience of systematic destruction of cultural memory.2 Moreover, it testifies for the investment of cultural heritage with a relevant role in contributing to political stability and economic development in the process of post-war reconstruction, emphasized by the

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2 The 1954 Convention For The Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict signed at The Hague is one important step in this respect. Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified it in 1993 (see www.unesco.org).
positioning of the Annex establishing the Commission (Annex 8, following Annex 7 on the return of Refugees and Displaced Persons).

**Vraca Memorial Park as National Monument**

Vraca Memorial Park was inaugurated in 1981 as a complex dedicated to the suffering and resistance of the citizens of Sarajevo during World War II. Originally an Austro-Hungarian fortification (completed in 1898), the structure was used between 1941 and 1945 by occupying forces as execution place. Plans for the erection of a memorial in the Socialist period were drafted since 1965, but lack of funds prevented its realization until 1980. When finally erected, the Memorial comprised many individual elements, whose ensemble points in the direction of a memory narrative that honoured victims and victors in one structured message: along with the names of 2,013 fallen fighters and 9,091 victims of fascist terror, the Park comprised a memorial to twenty-six national heroes, a sculpture to combatant women, an eternal flame and messages by Tito.³ Between 1992 and 1995, the location was used as a military position for snipers and heavy artillery of the forces besieging the city, who, upon their withdrawal, left the site in damaged conditions (subsequently aggravated by neglect and acts of vandalism – Illustrations 1 to 4).⁴ Nowadays, different “layers” of history can be traced in the space of Vraca Memorial Park: the Habsburg presence (1878-WWI), the experience of war and “revolution” (1941-45), the conflict that marked the end of Yugoslavia (1992-95).

In 2005, following the submission of a petition by the Council of Associations of Fighters of the National Liberation War (SUBNOR – the partisan

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³ For a detailed list of all the components and description of the site see the website of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments: www.aneks8komisija.com.ba.
⁴ Custo 2008.
veteran association created after WWII), Vraca Memorial Park was designated as national monument by the Commission. As established in the Dayton Agreement, the mandate of the Commission is to “receive and decide on petitions for the designation of property having cultural, historic, religious or ethnic importance as National Monuments” (Annex 8, Art. IV). A first glance at the items declared national monuments until now, leads to two initial considerations on the Commission’s work: first, decisions concerning religious buildings or historical/architectural properties that might be associated with specific ethnic groups have been designated in “balanced” proportions, i.e. properties that can be assumed to represent each of the three “constituent peoples” of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniac, Croat, Serb) were evenly designated. This suggests that the Commission’s efforts are dedicated to positively build upon the so-called “ethnic key” informing the Dayton Agreement, and that, without “privileging” any of the groups, its work is directed to reconstruct the heritage of the country in its entirety, plurality, and heterogeneity. Secondly, it can be noted that monuments purposely erected to mark historical events/persons (items of heritage other than historical or religious buildings, bridges, tombstones, archaeological sites) constitute a tiny minority of the decisions adopted by the Commission, partly because of more limited destruction in the last conflict. In this respect, the designation of Vraca Memorial Park as national monument constitutes an “exception”.  

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7 Other similar instances are the Partisan Memorial-Cemetery in Mostar and the Memorial complex of the Battle on the Neretva in Jablanica. See www.aneks8komisija.com.ba.
Around Vraca

The designation of Vraca Memorial Park introduces a central question. It concerns the implications of designating a memorial erected during Socialist Yugoslavia as “national monument” in 2005 independent Bosnia and Herzegovina. The criteria applied by the Commission involve considerations on time frame, historical and artistic/architectural value, and symbolic value\(^8\) of the monument (besides technical documentation). The question, thus, concerns how we should interpret and what we might deduce from the fact that a site commemorating the victims of fascism and celebrating the resistance and victorious revolution of the partisans of WWII has been declared to have a symbolic significance for the entire nation of an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged from the armed conflict that brought the very existence of Socialist Yugoslavia to an end.

The decision of the Commission, while acknowledging the importance of the monument as part of the Bosnian cultural heritage, simultaneously invests it with new meanings, by putting it under special protection by the appropriate institutions and urging them to proceed to its reconstruction. Ultimately, it gives the memorial a formal recognition through an act that is final and binding, and does so publicly. In this way, the Commission emerges as a new actor in the process of production and shaping of national memory.

In reflecting on collective memory, I draw from Halbwachs’s (1992) constructivist approach and understanding of remembering in relation to social

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frames, and Kansteiner’s identification of memory “makers” and “consumers” as agents involved in memory production (2002:180). As Assmann (2008) remarks,

collective memory [...] depends on transitions from history into memory that involve the framing of historical events in the shape of affectively charged narratives and mobilizing symbols. If historic dates [...] are selected to be collectively and transgenerationally remembered, “fiction” in the sense of making, shaping, constructing is always implied in their narrative emplotment or visual encoding (pg.67).

In studying memory, thus, the focus lies on the process of its creation and the relationships between the actors involved in this process. In this perspective, the Commission functions as a ‘mediator’, evaluating proposals that any juridical or natural person is allowed to submit, and issuing binding decisions that involve institutions at various administrative and political levels. The petition concerning Vraca Memorial Park was submitted in 2004 by another traditional ‘mediator’ of remembrance: SUBNOR (see above). The drafting of the petition was completed in SUBNOR’s premises, in collaboration with other associations, as the society “Tito”, the association of independent intellectuals “Krug 99”, the Serbian Civic Council, and the Croatian National Council.

In the process of creation and transmission of memory, a crucial role is played by practices and performances around specific sites (Connerton 1989). During the 1980s, Vraca Memorial Park used to be the destination of frequent visits not only in occasion of official celebrations of important dates, but also for organized trips for students, with “history lessons” in loco, and excursions. After the 1992-1995 war, security reasons precluded visits to the site, and nowadays its damaged conditions

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9 On the role of SUBNOR in mediating collective memory during Socialist Yugoslavia see Karge 2009, Custo 2008. The term ‘mediator’ is taken from Karge’s work.
10 Personal communication, Sarajevo, April 2010. The last two associations mentioned are local NGOs created in the mid-1990s, promoting a Bosnian pluralist identity in opposition to nationalist politics from their respective ethnic groups.
and its specific location turned it into a place people would rather avoid. Practices around the memorial have reduced to the formal laying of wreaths by authorities and citizens on official days of remembrance. After the designation as national monument by the Commission in 2005, a new petition has been signed to address the lack of concrete measures for its reconstruction, and one “working activity” took place to clean the site.

A second question on Vraca Memorial Park concerns the events that took place on its area between 1992 and 1995. In this respect, what is at stake is the possibility for the memorial to acquire new significance, by being invested with meanings that transcend the messages originally inscribed in the monument within the official politics of memory of the apparatus that erected it. Ascription of new meanings to the existing site might come from any of the actors involved, or might inform the measures (or lack of measures) adopted by the institutions towards the site. Investigating this topic is far beyond the aim of this paper. It is interesting to note, however, that the 2005 Decision of the Commission does mention this part of the history of the Memorial in its description of the site. Similarly, the internet-based group Spasimo i obnovimo Spomen-Park Vraca reminds of the damage suffered by the site during the last war, while suggesting that, because of its location, reconstruction might offer the opportunity of collaboration between citizens and institutions of the two Entities. Reference to this more recent use of the place

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11 During the siege, the site was mined (Custo 2008). Today, it lays on the boundary between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, the two Entities comprising, together with Brcko Distric, the state of Bosnia.

12 “Radna akcija na Vraca” (Working activity at Vraca), Dnevni Avaz, 25/05/2008. The action is reported in the forum of the website www.sarajevo-x.com. The facebook group Spasimo i obnovimo Spomen-Park Vraca (Let’s save and renew Vraca Memorial Park) addressed the petition to the Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in February 2010.

appears limited to unbiased statements as in the two cases recalled above. Both institutions and groups engaged with the memorial’s rehabilitation are committed to restoration to its original look, and the idea of adding some sort of visible “marker” referring to the 1992-95 events is seen as a measure that might encounter resistance.\textsuperscript{14} Recently, Mayor Alija Behmen gathered a meeting with the directors of two institutes for the preservation of heritage (the Cantonal and Federal institutes), the president of the Jewish Community, the Mayor of Novo Sarajevo municipality (comprising Vraca neighbourhood), and \textit{Pokop} funeral services, for arrangements to start the reconstruction works.\textsuperscript{15}

In sum, the case of Vraca Memorial Park shows a relatively high level of involvement on the part of various associations and groups of citizens, both in formal communications with the institutions and through some activities on the site itself. These groups comprise both individuals who experienced the 1941-45 events directly and younger generations, and their involvement is motivated by distinct meanings with which each group invests the site, on the basis of a shared perception of its significance for Bosnian present identity. The Commission recognized the symbolic value of the Memorial through its designation as national monument, while authorities pay formal tribute to the site on official recurrences.

\textsuperscript{14} Personal communication with a private citizen engaged for the rehabilitation of the Memorial, Sarajevo, April 2010.
\textsuperscript{15} May 11\textsuperscript{th} 2010. “Gradonačelnik sazvaio sastanak o sanaciji Spomen-parka Vraca”, website of the City of Sarajevo, www.sarajevo.ba
Conclusions

The implications of the relations between memory, power, and identity\(^{16}\) are increasingly addressed in studies on the recent conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the (re)emergence or persistence of local memories is explored in relation to the rise of (ethno)nationalist ideologies and their use and construction of narratives of the past.\(^{17}\) This reflection is developing especially in relation to the recent armed conflict and remembrances of previous episodes of (inter-ethnic) violence during WWII. As such, the analysis is mainly focused on the role of memory in the context of war and in relation to the rhetoric of reconciliation and post-war reconstruction, and often concludes that ‘within a decade the modern Balkan wars [have] generated their own powerful cycle of memories’ (Bet-El 2002:207).

This approach would need to integrate enhanced analyses of the articulation of memory during Socialist Yugoslavia and with regard to regime change.\(^{18}\) The case of Vraca Memorial Park hints at some elements of continuity with Bosnia’s socialist past (official visits on important dates, the role of SUBNOR, the active involvement of citizens, rhetorical reference to fascism and antifascism), drawing attention to entanglements between actors and processes of production/contestation/mediation of memory in post-war Bosnia and Socialist Yugoslavia.

The engagement around the Memorial points to a further consideration: that one site is identified by distinct subjects and invested with a significance that is understood as common, though variation in the meanings attached to it is present, as is the awareness of possible situations of disagreement and tension over these

\(^{16}\) Muller 2002.


\(^{18}\) See Nadkarni 2003, Bucur 2002.
meanings. This, in turn, hints at the fact that ‘we are always part of several mnemonic communities’ (Kansteiner 2002:189). All these elements are important variables in studies that understand memory ‘as an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture’ (Confino 1997:1391).
Illustration 1 – Fort, Nov. 2009 (photo: author)

Illustration 2 - Eternal flame with fountain, Nov. 2009 (photo: author)
Illustration 3 - Sculpture to women combatant, Nov. 2009 (photo: author)

Illustration 4 - Panoramic view, Nov. 2009 (photo: author)
References:


