

## **Memoriscapes, Tourism, and the Environment in Croatia: Slow Memory and Sites of Conflict and Slow Violence**

What is the relationship between manifestations of memory, tourism development, and environmental transformation in areas that experienced the traumas of armed conflict and violence? This is the question I sought to answer as I traveled through three different regions of Croatia where the damages and legacies of the Croatian War of Independence (*Domovinski Rat* – “The Homeland War” in Croatian, 1991-1995) have had different and uneven impacts regarding the country’s memoriscapes, tourismscapes, and landscapes.

This trip was supported by the COST Action – “Slow Memory: Transformative Practices in Times of Uneven and Accelerating Change” in April of 2023. Slow memory is both a conceptual and methodological approach that seeks to move beyond rapid practices of memorialization of events and things, and to place memory studies within the framework of the Anthropocene – the long durée period (arguably epoch) in which humans have become the primary agents of environmental change. According to Jenny Wüstenberg, it seeks to do this in three major ways: A) by studying slow things (e.g. slow violence) B) remembering things slowly (e.g. centering divergent memories) C) and working slowly (e.g. slow observations).

I used these tools to try and explore how and why some Croatian environments were relatively quickly transformed from warscapes into tourismscapes (including UNESCO World Heritage sites like Plitvice Lakes National Park), while others have remained neglected. My hypothesis was that cultural and collective memories of the war can influence and inform the ways in which areas materially transform, especially in terms of how environments are managed. I also wanted to connect memoriscapes with the concept of slow violence, and I used this experience to determine how slow memory can inspire alternative methods for managing environments in conjunction with considerations regarding the ethics of commemoration.

### **The Museum of the Homeland War – Karlovac-Turani**



The exterior exhibition of the Homeland War Museum in Karlovac.

To gain a better understanding of the dominant and hegemonic narrative, and the construction of collective memory in Croatia, I visited the Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac-Turanj. This museum was introduced to me by Professor Vjeran Pavlaković, an expert on the politics of memory at the University of Rijeka, as a potentially significant counterargument to slow memory. This particular museum is significant in that it demonstrates the main national (i.e. dominant) narrative of the war and victory during the Homeland War for the fledgling Croatian state led by Franjo Tuđman, whose HDZ party continues to hold a major grip on power in Croatian politics and society. The museum is also symbolically significant since the battle for the town of Karlovac and its surroundings represents a major victory for the Croatian forces against the breakaway Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) in the strategically important Kordun region. The museum is housed in a former barracks dubbed “Hotel California” by Croatian soldiers during the war, and is close to the site where some of the first skirmishes between Croatian police and rebel militias occurred.

Upon visiting the museum it becomes immediately clear that the Croatian victory in the Homeland war is presented in a way that contradicts slow memory: it is heavily event and site based, with counternarratives and divergent memories made invisible. Misinformation is not one of the characteristics of the museum, however, and the factual information provided corresponds to well-known political events. However, the narrative avoids some of the more complicated and perhaps contradicting factors, such as how Croatian and Serbian neighbors co-existed in the region before the war, and it became obvious to me that problems related to slow violence, environmental impacts, and counter-memories are left out through this type of presentation, which in many ways represents the top-down and official approach to cultural memory of the war in Croatia. Since this conflict was simultaneously a civil war and an international war, it was extremely complex, and these complexities are left out in favor of presenting a more comfortably one-sided narrative of victimization and heroism.

Despite the somewhat teleological story told in the museum, it is an impressive exhibition that seeks to portray the tense atmosphere of the war years, provides selective primary sources, and seeks to inform audiences and visitors of the catastrophic human toll of the war and the difficulties that have shaped modern post-socialist Croatia’s independence. While the museum does succeed in informing guests about the political and military history of the war in the region, there is almost no mention of environmental costs of the conflict (though damage to cultural heritage is very briefly mentioned), and in some ways, the museum itself contributes to the militarization of the environment, as the above image reveals.

Some of the reasons, in my opinion, that environmental consequences of the war have been left out, are that (1) they have not been studied in enough detail, (2) environmental consequences can be extremely slow moving and generational (i.e. slow violence) and ongoing, (3) they do not quite nicely fit into one-sided narratives of victory, since military actions from multiple sides of conflict can cause negative environmental impacts. Finally, (4) environmental topics require precisely the type of methodology that slow memory proposes, and a long durée perspective is required that moves beyond events, looks at broader and gradual processes, and pays attention to intangible outcomes of the wars.



Ličko Petrovo Selo is a small village near the Plitvice Lakes National Park that has not experienced much development stemming from Plitvice tourism, aside from the impressive new Lyra hotel (Slovenian-owned) and few emerging tourist accommodations, and most of its remaining inhabitants are elderly members of the Serbian Orthodox minority. I met with a local guide who runs the TARA community group based in the village, which is an association for local women that includes production, exhibition, and marketing of local goods and handicrafts that locals consider to be a part of the village's heritage.

I reached out to my guide, Sonja Leka, and asked if she could show me around the area and help me understand how the disappearing community preserves its heritage and memory. I was attracted to this specific community after reading a 2020 BBC report on how the Lyra hotel is taking major steps towards preserving the town's memory and heritage, and helping it recover from the traumas of wartime depopulation and enduring ethnic tensions (<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20221020-in-croatia-a-hotel-trying-to-heal-war-wounds>). I was also hoping my trip with Sonja would help shed some important insights into the ways in which memory politics can directly affect the natural and human environment.



Josef Djordjevski and Sonja Leka, local tour-guide and head of the TARA Association in Ličko Petrovo Selo.

To my surprise much of the efforts of the local community to preserve the village's cultural heritage had either suffered major setbacks or not materialized, with the ethno house co-run by Sonja experiencing structural decay. According to Sonja this decay included a large hole in the roof that made holding exhibitions impossible. While proponents of the ethno-tourism model maintain that it can help stimulate local economies while preserving local traditions and cultures (see Karmen Pažek et al. 2020), if this type of tourism is developed rapidly, it is hard for me to believe that it would not lead to familiar problems associated with mass tourism: commodification, over-crowding, over-dependency, loss of authenticity, inequality, and pollution.





Entrance to the Croatian side of the neglected Socialist Yugoslav-era Željjava airbase.

Most of the sites of memory in Ličko Petrovo Selo are from the Second World War and the Socialist Yugoslav period, both of which are extremely controversial at the national level in Croatia. Together Sonja and I traveled outside of the town where abandoned Yugoslav People's Army barracks remain neglected and decaying with no real attempts at renovation or new construction, as well as the underground Yugoslav airplane hangars of the former Željjava air base that cut into the mountain separating Croatia from Bosnia-Herzegovina. She described how occasional visitors drive through them and even hold races, throw trash, or take selfies. There are no plaques or any displayed sources of information for interested guests. In addition to these sites' relevance to the socialist period of Yugoslavia, they were also heavily involved in the Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s, with rebel RSK forces first using and then later destroying many of the facilities.



One of several abandoned buildings in the former military complex near Petrovo Selo.

The village itself has had a very violent and traumatic past. At the town's entrance a large monument listing the names of hundreds of people who were killed during the Second World War by the fascist Ustaša movement remains fixed on a now empty and abandoned building. According to Sonja, the people of Ličko Petrovo Selo, who are mainly Serbian Orthodox, and the people of neighboring village Vaganac, majority Croatian Catholic, will never be able to get along because of this history. As she made clear, while some of the villagers from Vaganac participated in the Ustaša killings of Petrovo Selo's Serbs during the Second World War, the

Serbian rebel forces in the 1990s did little to foster reconciliation by burning down Vaganac's Catholic church and trying to ethnically cleanse the village.



Monument with names of the town's mainly Serb victims of fascism during the Second World War on an abandoned structure.

Most of the population of Ličko Petrovo Selo left after the war in the 1990s and never returned, leaving much of the environment unused, abandoned, and unregulated, while a lack of funding for projects like the preservation of the Yugoslav-era historical sites and traditional Orthodox Serb heritage of the village threaten the area's economic and cultural survival. Although I cannot confirm whether it is true, Sonja believes that the Plitvice Lakes National Park management, which is responsible for the region's development, are hesitant to divert funds for heritage preservation in the village due to its historically Serb character. While there could indeed be some truth to this, the problem of depopulation and environmental neglect are common throughout the Lika region, including in regions and towns populated mainly by Catholic Croats. Altogether, in 2011 Croatia had more than 73,000 abandoned dwellings (Lončar and Pavić, 2017), which presents Croatia's leadership with a perennially challenging task that is only exacerbated by the persistent tensions in dissonant memories of the 1990s war.



An abandoned and stripped Douglas C-47 airplane at the airbase.

A major takeaway for me after visiting the village is that in areas where memory and heritage are contested, there seems to be a much more conspicuous lack of investment and funding, and therefore, greater environmental neglect where slow violence from the war continues to shape the landscape. However, there is also a common problem in terms of the lack of development and investment in rural areas in comparison to urban ones. The Lika region is known as Croatia's biggest county with the least amount of people, with several towns considered to be "First Category Areas of Special State Concern" by the Croatian government. But while abandonment,

depopulation, and environmental neglect are common throughout de-industrializing and de-agrarianizing societies, in places like Lika where slow violence from the war continues to interact with neglected heritage and suppressed memories, the link between memory of the war and environmental management is more highlighted, and the way in which memory is performed can have dramatic environmental and social consequences.

### The Osijek-Baranja Region



The famous war monument of a red *fićo* running over a JNA tank in Osijek.

I contrasted the Lika and Plitvice Lakes National Park region with other parts of Croatia by visiting the Baranja part of eastern Croatia, which was also heavily impacted by the war. The most famous symbol of memory in the regional capital Osijek is the model of a small red *fićo* (Zastava) car running over a Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) tank, which is a parody of the infamous video of a T-55 tank running over a red *fićo* attempting to block the road on the eve of the war in 1991, which serves as a symbol of the city's defiance. There are also multiple monuments to Croatian defenders in the city and the surrounding areas, with some monuments to Yugoslav Partisans as well, though these tend to be in areas of either mixed Serb-Croat populations or majority Serb populations (this is well-known and covered extensively by Vjerran Pavlaković and others).



A Yugoslav Partisan monument in Bijelo Brdo near Osijek, which has a majority Serb population.



I ventured out of the city of Osijek and its immediate surroundings into the Baranja region, where the Kopački Rit Nature Park lies. The nature park is one of the last and largest wetlands in Europe and is an integral part of the Mur-Drava-Danube river system, recently labeled as the “Amazon of Europe.” Due to its strategic position between the Croatian and Serbian borders, during the war in the 1990s Kopački Rit was heavily militarized with thousands of mines being placed in and around the park. As of 2015, the project *Natura 2000*, which was co-funded by the EU, has resulted in the removal of thousands of mines from the area, and in 2020, as much as 90% of the area had been reportedly demined.

Much like Plitvice Lakes National Park, Kopački Rit and its surrounding villages seek to develop rural, eco, and nature tourism, with a newly renovated information center housed at the Tikveš Austro-Hungarian manor in the heart of the park. Similar to the Plitvice area, the extent to which tourism from the nature park extends to surrounding locales is in need of further research. While the park’s main focus is now on education and nature tourism, there is no public commemoration of the heavy mining and militarization of the park during the war, or the ongoing and painstaking efforts to rid the area of mines. This process of collective forgetting is problematic, since it appears that developing eco-tourism has the potential of displacing knowledge that can be gained by the public about the different environmental impacts of warfare and militarization. Again, since dominant memory practices tend to focus on events, a slow memory approach could help memorialize the long process of militarization and de-militarization of the environment near Kopački Rit.



The “preserved” historic town of Tikveš inside the park. While the tourist info mentions that the population significantly declined during and after the Homeland War, there is no further detail about the impacts of the war, and the focus is instead on history, traditional economy, and nature.

While Kopački Rit is much less internationally renowned than Plitvice, there is a fledgling tourist industry that targets tourists who will come for nature tourism (i.e. ecotourism), bicycle tourism, wine tourism, culinary tourism, bird watching, among other activities. Since the area around the park was heavily impacted by the wars, most of which was under control of the rebel Serbian forces, I expected to see several similarities between villages in Baranja and the villages near Plitvice like Ličko Petrovo Selo. With this in mind, I explored the nearby village of Karanac, which is becoming increasingly well-known for its development of a unique brand of ethno-tourism. Karanac is a self-ascribed “ethno-village” that offers preserved traditional architecture, farm stays, traditional cuisine and wine tasting, and gift shops with local arts and crafts.

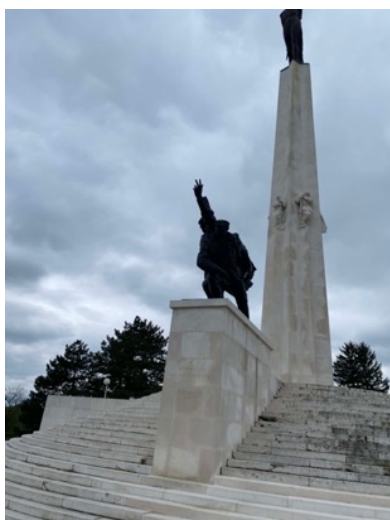




An "ethno house" in Karanac serving local cuisines and wine, while showcasing traditional agricultural labor practices.

With a mixed population of Serbs, Croats, and Hungarians, the town takes a novel approach towards the preservation of its heritage by focusing on the common traditions of each ethnic group, and there are both Catholic and Orthodox religious sites in the town. While the town's approach is novel and shows evidence of inter-ethnic reconciliation, there is still a severe lack of development and investment, and the town is part of the Kneževi Vinogradi Municipality which is listed as a First Category Area of Special State Concern. While there are decaying structures and persistent problems with depopulation, there are few spaces in the town dedicated to commemorating the war, though there is a plaque listing the names of victims of the war in front of the Catholic church, and several such commemorative plaques in surrounding villages.

Less than 30 kilometers away from Karanac, I explored the Second World War monument complex in Batina (*Spomenik*), that commemorates the Soviet-Yugoslav joint victory in the first major battle to liberate eastern Croatia from the Axis powers in 1945. At the very northeastern edge of Croatia, near the Serbian and Hungarian borders, the impressive monument stands high above the Danube River on the outskirts of the village, where there is a growing wine production and tourism economy that is geared towards rural tourism.



Part of the massive monument in Batina.

The demographic makeup of Batina (and the Draž municipality) in 1991 was majority Hungarian, followed by Croats, who were the second most populous, and then Serbs and others. Now, Croats are in the majority though there is still a significant Hungarian population. This is an interesting factor since the Batina monument celebrates Soviet and communist Yugoslav forces during the Second World War, both of which are controversial among the Croatian population. However, due to significant attention by both Russian and Serbian politicians, the monument remains in a relatively well-cultivated state, though there seems to be, unsurprisingly, few local visitors.

Despite the fact that other Second World War monuments commemorating the Yugoslav victory throughout Croatia have experienced vandalism, defacement, and removal, due to Serbian and Russian funds the monument is well-kept, and the surrounding area is pursuing wine tourism to varying degrees of success. However, the entire region is still considered by the government to be a First Category Area of Special State Concern, and several buildings, homes, and former factories and production facilities remain abandoned with war damages and pollution (especially in the form of debris).



Abandoned and damaged facilities in Baranja.

In general, throughout the Baranja region, municipalities are trying to develop rural tourism, ethno tourism, and other alternatives forms of tourism, while the long-lasting legacies of the war (slow violence) in these areas are not given significant public attention or commemoration, with the heavy mining, depopulation, and landscape destruction from the war continuing to present major roadblocks to development.

## Conclusion



Swing set beside an abandoned and damaged house in Erdut, Baranja county.

One common theme throughout the Lika and Baranja regions of Croatia, which contain most of the First Category Areas of Special State Concern, is that local communities are trying to develop various forms of tourism while multiple examples of slow violence continue to affect them. While tourism has potential in terms of preserving heritage, as in the case of Karanac, it also presents problems that include the further suppression of dissonant heritages and memories. According to scholars Patrick Naef and Josef Ploner, in Croatia, as in other societies that experienced the Wars of Yugoslav Succession in the 1990s, tourism has at times “been harnessed as a strategic tool within wider national politics of collective amnesia rather than an agent of memory and reconciliation” (Naef and Ploner 184).

These politics of forgetting, omission, and “reinvention of tradition” have at times been exaggerated by scholars and are often limited to discussions of the Adriatic coastal region. But despite the potential for exaggeration, during the Slow Memory STSM it became clear to me that in rural areas still suffering from the impacts of slow violence, dissonant heritage and memories continue to conflict with dominant and hegemonic discourses of collective memory. In these places tourism has the potential to lead to development and the preservation of certain heritages, but tourism also has the potential of suppressing and displacing memories of the war altogether, and lessons that could be learned about how war affects communities and their environments may be forced out of the public’s sight and away from the tourist’s gaze.

In conclusion, more work needs to be done. It is still unclear if there is a direct link between memory and the enduring legacies of war in terms of environmental transformations, but the trip showed me that there is at least much to be said about putting critical memory and heritage studies into conversation with studies of environmental management, tourism, and conflict. One thing that can be said for certain is that in areas of state concern with significant lingering war damages, there are clear cases of dissonant heritages and memories that are either suppressed, marginalized, or made invisible. With this in mind, the idea that memory of conflict and environmental legacies of conflict have become entangled and interconnected shows that slow memory has the potential to offer alternatives to slow violence, environmental neglect, tourism overdependence, and collective amnesia.

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