

Between Memory Politics and New Models of Heritage Management: Rebuilding Yugoslav Memorial Sites ‘From Below’¹

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Introduction

Second World War monuments and related types of built heritage from the socialist period in former Yugoslavia (1945–1990) – such as memorial centres, museums or memorial parks – have been attracting the special attention of international experts and the global public for more than a decade. Their sudden popularity can be observed as part of the broader phenomenon of (re)discovery and exoticisation of the former socialist artistic and popular culture. Such encounters with the ideological “other” and its unexpected artistic and cultural legacy were enabled by the unprecedentedly fast and immense scope of dissemination of images through the internet and social media. The authors who have analysed the phenomenon of such sudden and broad popularity of Yugoslav monuments agree that the iconic images of a couple of dozen concrete monuments, accompanied with the mystification of their “alien shapes”, became

viral after the photo-project by the Belgian photographer Jan Kempnaers was released in 2010, both in form of a printed publication² and, even more so, through the free circulation of his images in the booming market domain of online social media space.³ This trend, which I have referred to as the “*spomeniks* effect”,⁴ has initiated a lot of amateur research projects, presented through dozens of blogs, websites and publications,⁵ and – more recently – through tourist routes as well.⁶ This tendency is still on the rise, provoking nevertheless timely and insightful critical responses and scholarly analyses.⁷ Following such trends, but also relying on the growing amount of contemporary academic research on the topic of commemorative and artistic culture in Yugoslavia, monuments have also gained a more “legitimate” recognition from some of the most prestigious art institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York,⁸ or the interest of global heritage institutions such as ICOMOS⁹ or EU-based heritage funds (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Display of the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948–1980*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2018–January 2019, view of the section dedicated to monuments and memorial complexes (photo: Sanja Horvatinčić, 2018)

Bearing in mind the lack of institutional supervision and maintenance of these historic and memorial sites and buildings, caused by the drastic outcomes of the changed political circumstances in most parts of former Yugoslavia (including war destructions and various forms of political misuse of the recent past), while at the same time witnessing the growing international interest and commercial potential of these sites, we are facing challenges that appear to be particularly alarming when it comes to protecting the interests of local communities and immediate heritage stakeholders.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the monuments' current heritage status and to detect the main challenges concerning their perception and management in future. The emphasis is put on small-scale, local initiatives that emerge and develop independently of the *authorised heritage discourses*, and on heritage practices that grow 'from below'.

I will first outline the main characteristics of this large group of public monuments and memorials, thematically related to the antifascist struggle and the socialist revolution of the Second World War in Yugoslavia, including the conditions and various levels of their production that, among other factors, led to their high density and pronounced typological diversity. In the focus of this analysis is their "post-socialist" condition – their unresolved, contingent and dissonant heritage status, torn between, on the one hand, official *disinheritance* manifested through historical falsifications and political appropriations, and on the other hand the grass-root, activist initiatives or locally supported small-scale renewal projects that challenge or subvert the dominant politics of both memory and heritage management, and – in some cases – even constitute or fertilise new, counter-hegemonic heritage approaches and practices.

Monument production and heritage protection in Yugoslavia

Monuments started to be produced as early as during the Second World War, either as built structures such as tombs, other forms of publicly mediated commemorative and propaganda messages, such as graffiti,¹⁰ or as used places and structures that would later on be listed as heritage and highly valued as "authentic monuments". Soon after the war had ended, all preconditions were set up for the start of the most prolific period of monument production in this part of Europe.¹¹ The economy of the war-devastated country, based on workers' self-management, was recuperating, and memory culture flourished due to the generous investment in the commemorative practices from both state institutions and local communities, as well as the individual and organised involvement of the new generation of artists and architects who were eager to get their hands on in the newly open, highly competitive, and – even for Western European standards – relatively liberal field of public memorial art production. These were among many consequences of the expulsion of socialist Yugoslavia from the Comintern in 1948, and the consequent changes within cultural politics, i.e. distancing from the Soviet model and opening up

to international influences and new global cultural and philosophical currents.

Monument production in Yugoslavia was a widespread social and cultural practice, involving a dynamic multilateral exchange among various social actors and stakeholders – political committees and veteran organisations, artists and architects, urban planners, art critics, and local communities. The highest level of memorial production, which was mainly organised through public federal competitions, enabled the introduction of novel, at times even experimental, concepts and approaches. It is important to emphasise, however, that the majority of monuments were produced locally through direct commissions, often corresponding to local traditions as well as to the practical, infrastructural needs of such communities.

The official legal protection of monuments dedicated to recent historical events was in itself a novel practice in post-war Yugoslavia, often resulting in innovative conservation and preservation methods. Heritage protection laws on this specific category of monuments differed among Yugoslav republics; however, there was a considerable amount of ideological bias in the listing procedures, as is in general the case with most heritage protection policies. Monuments and sites were classified under the new, specialised category of "Monuments to the Revolution" or "Monuments to the Peoples' Liberation Struggle and Workers' Movement". The fruitful professional exchange among Yugoslav heritage experts generated a large amount of fieldwork, statistical surveys, professional recommendations and new standards. Although their condition and legal status within heritage protection systems in former Yugoslav republics largely differ, under the changed political circumstances of the post-socialist period their meaning is once again aligned with the hegemonic cultural and memory politics, often adapted or falsified to meet short-term political interests, or subordinated to the emerging profit-oriented models of heritage management.

Furthermore, lacking high aesthetic qualities, the majority of monuments and memorial sites became overshadowed by the popular, often decontextualised images that have come to constitute a kind of *ad hoc* canon of Yugoslav monuments. (Fig. 2). The insistence on their exquisite aesthetic features as the only or primary criterion of determining their contemporary heritage status undermines the monuments' immense cultural, commemorative and political significance.

Shared or (re)appropriated heritage?

If we choose to avoid an approach by which memorial heritage would be evaluated and prioritised according to such criteria, the concept of 'shared heritage' or serial nominations could be applied as a reasonable solution. However, the new geo-political constellations and ideological uses of the past on the territory of the former socialist countries have imposed new political frameworks for such nomination and interpretation of heritage. One such example is the use of the term "totalitarian" in defining and reframing tangible and intangible heritage of former socialist countries in Europe. By retracing the use of the term since the 1920s, its

ly attracting visitors and stakeholders from all parts of the former state. Today's cultural and commemorative practices that take place under – or despite – the changed political circumstances, still form a shared cultural and linguistic space, thus making a strong argument for heritage management models that would bind together and create cultural and memorial routes based on the territory of former Yugoslavia, or, alternatively, on the shared international experience of the resistance and collective struggles during the Second World War across the Mediterranean, European or even global territory. Such models, however, oppose or even subvert the hegemonic political agendas, be it neo-liberal/anti-communist on the EU level, or nationalist on the level of local politics in the former Yugoslav region.

On the other hand, visible tendencies of the tourism-oriented management of Yugoslav monuments and memorial sites – especially those aimed at an international audience – are often based either on the “ruinophilic” appeal of some sites, or on the aforementioned trend of the exoticisation of the “former East”. Although the concept of “memorial tourism” was developed within the self-managed socialist system in Yugoslavia as early as the late 1960s, it was at the time based on comprehensive demographic/economic assessments and detailed physical planning of protected memorial zones. The idea was to supplement novel heritage protection regimes over memorial and natural landscapes and artefacts with recreational and educational purposes to benefit local self-managed communities. The economic profit for the local communities was an important outcome, but not the guiding principle for such a model of heritage management.

Under the changed political circumstances and economic principles, the absence of any kind of professional involvement and dialogue with local communities, the commodification of recent heritage by branding them as ‘difficult’ or ‘dark’, could lead to the scenario in which (hi-)stories of fascism and anti-fascism can freely compete on the “open market”.



Fig. 3: View of the monument dedicated to the victims of fascism in the village of Jošan, Croatia, sculptor: D. Džamonja, 1979–1988. The monument was mined in the early 1990s and has been neglected ever since (photo: Matija Kralj, 2016)

Fig. 4: Monument to the fallen soldiers of the 1912–1918 wars and the Peoples Liberation War 1941–1945, Sukovo, Serbia, architect J. Petrović. The original five-pointed star was replaced by an Orthodox cross (photo: Žarko Aleksić, 2019)

The many shades of physical destruction

The treatment of Second World War monuments in the wake of the bloody and devastating dismantlement of socialist Yugoslavia greatly differed among the former Yugoslav states. There were as many strategies towards the inheritance of the revolutionary legacy of the former state as there were agendas and new ideological positions within the diversified political fields in the former Yugoslav territory. However, most of them had one thing in common: distancing from the legacy of the socialist system and the affirmation of new national narratives and symbols. The level of destruction depended on various factors, primarily on the level of the political extremism of the new nationalist parties in power and the intensity of the 1990s armed conflicts in ethnically mixed communities. It greatly varied: from almost complete and systematic erasure of monuments and memorials in some parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo (Fig. 3), to abandonment and oblivion in some parts of Serbia, to the full preservation or partial modification for the purpose of aligning the monuments with new national paradigms, as has been the case in Slovenia or Montenegro (Fig. 4).

The first comprehensive survey done by the Union of Antifascist Associations in Croatia in 2000 showed that out of some 5500 monuments listed in the late 1980s, about 3500 (including plaques, busts and other types of memorial objects) were destroyed or damaged in the first ten years after the fall of socialist Yugoslavia (1990–2000).¹⁷ Another extensive survey of Croatian monuments and memorials, conducted from 2011 to 2017, showed that these numbers were even higher. It resulted in a map of more than 1700 monuments, with different colours representing the degrees of their damage (Fig. 5). The dark red dots mark those that were completely destroyed, which make up some 30% of the analysed monuments. Another 30% are dark blue dots,



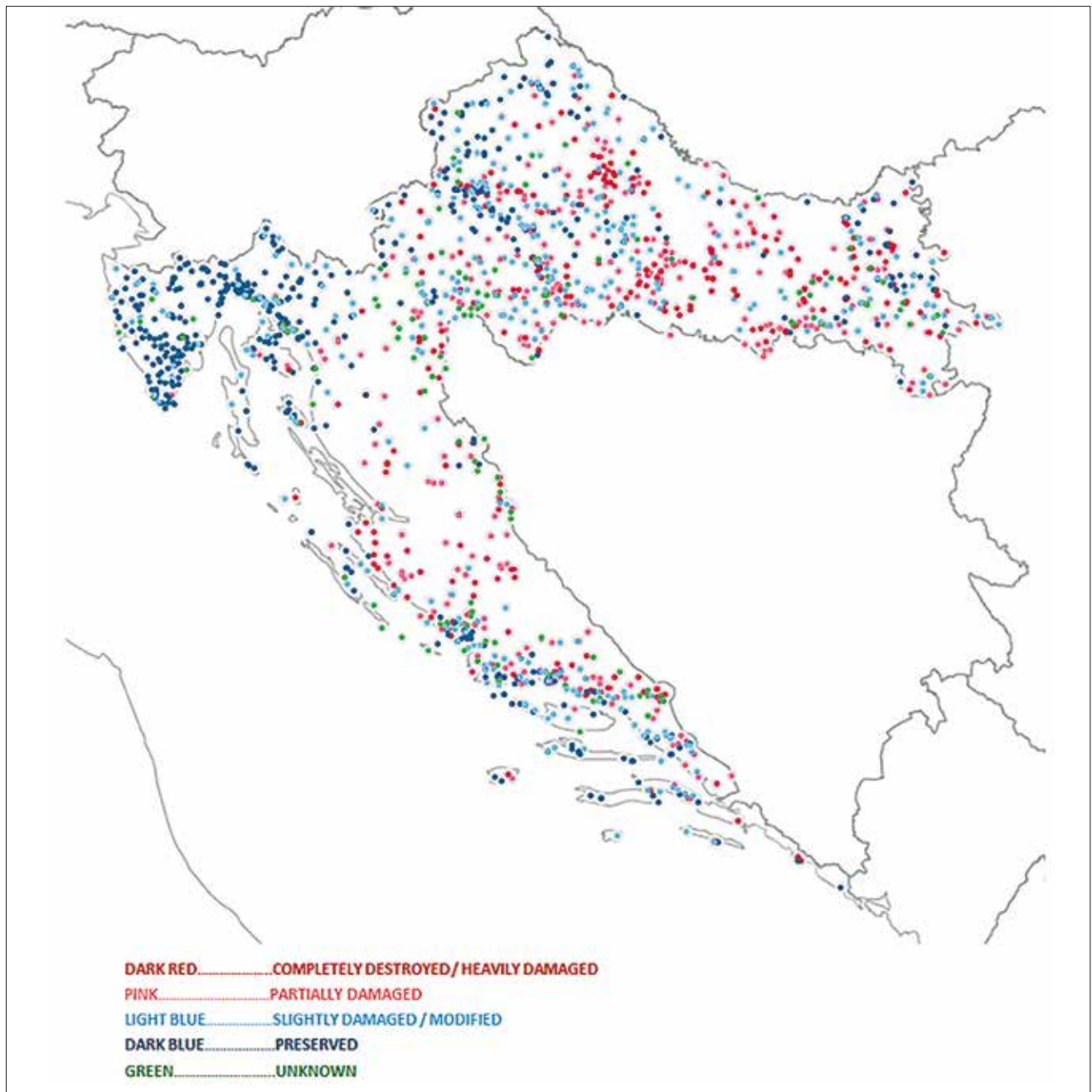


Fig. 5: Map showing the damage degree of the monuments dedicated to the Peoples' Liberation Struggle and Revolution in Croatia in the period 1990–2017 (taken from: Horvatinčić, *Memorials from the Socialist Era*, 2017, p. 154)

marking monuments that have been preserved. Partially (pink) and slightly damaged or modified (light blue) make up the rest of the 40%.¹⁸ As the map demonstrates, the destruction of monuments greatly varied in different Croatian regions, and it is easily noticeable that the intensity of war conflicts in the 1990s directly and – after the end of war – also indirectly conditioned the degree of the monuments' destruction. Those were often the same, ethnically mixed communities that had severely suffered during the Second World War, the period to which the monuments were dedicated. After the wars of the 1990s, and still today, Croatia has seen numerous examples of new monuments built on top of the old ones, with their epitaphs, names and symbols

replaced, removed or overwritten. These actions have almost never been legally processed or sanctioned.

In her study on heritage management practice in former Yugoslavia, Marija Jauković suggests that the state of devastation of monuments dedicated to the Peoples' Liberation Struggle in Yugoslavia can be interpreted in several ways. "Firstly, it can be regarded as a clear statement of new national states aiming to detach themselves from an 'uncomfortable past'. Secondly, it can be interpreted as the inability of responsible institutions to act upon the burning issues of heritage management (concerning all of its segments), due to limitations imposed by both policy and practice. And finally, it can be regarded as a genuine indifference of the new

‘owners’ towards this ‘expired’ heritage, which should in that case be demoted. However, the new ‘owners’ of this shared heritage are hardly showing indifference while they are assuming an active role in the informal processes of heritage management, as demonstrated in earlier examples.”¹⁹ She therefore claims that “the main issue is not held in the domain of the informal heritage management practices, but rather in the inabilities of the formal ones.”²⁰

Approaching the memorial Yugoslav heritage ‘from below’

How should such structural issues concerning memorial heritage be resolved and tackled under the described political circumstances? In order to disable further negative outcomes of political manipulation with their historical meaning, and to secure the resonance of their positive messages in contemporary social reality – such as the struggle for social justice, or international and interethnic solidarity – the management of the monuments should primarily rely on, and be derived from, the local communities. Examples have already shown that heritage initiatives worked best when based on horizontal organisation models and voluntary networking of various social stakeholders, ideally with the support of interdisciplinary groups of experts. Their task should be to empower and employ a multitude of stakeholders in the process, and not to impose or merely implement predefined heritage programmes and agendas. A socially responsible engagement of heritage experts should be based on reciprocity and participation, and aimed towards the development of new research and mediation methodologies and practices. Finally, with the concept of community heritage in focus, they should advocate and appeal to the high-level decision-makers and heritage protection institutions to change or modify legal boundaries, policies and heritage regulation protocols.

Recently, a growing number of grassroots initiatives and movements – still largely ignored in the media – emerging in different parts of former Yugoslavia can be noticed. Despite the fact that in most cases they have neither been supported nor recognised by the state heritage institutions, such initiatives are followed by an emerging interest in critical heritage studies within the academia. Some such examples are Mišo Kapetanović’s research on the memory politics and popular commemorative practice of the working-class surrounding the monuments dedicated to the partisan hospital in Korčanica Protected Memorial Area in Bosnia and Herzegovina,²¹ or the international interdisciplinary heritage project “Heritage from Below/Drežnica: Memories and Traces 1941–1945”, dealing with the legacy of the partisan guerrilla warfare on a micro-historical level, with the emphasis on connecting archaeological, art-historical and anthropological analyses of different types of material traces in the once protected, but now largely depopulated and impoverished mountain area of Croatia. An important goal of this project is to find new models and practical solutions for the (re)evaluation, reconstruction, preservation and local management of memorial areas, complexes and monuments dedicated to the Second World War conflicts in the wider Yugoslav region.²²

The international fame of Yugoslav memorial complexes and their authors has certainly brought some positive outcomes for local communities. The dire state of many of Bogdan Bogdanović’s memorial complexes – often located in the areas hit by the wars in the 1990s – has drawn the attention of foreign heritage and conservation experts. Apart from his MA on the said topic,²³ British archaeologist Andrew Lawler has been working for years on a long-term comprehensive survey of monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, published sequentially as “Municipality Reports” on academic social media.²⁴ At least two more memorial complexes by the same architect, Bogdan Bogdanović, have recently become the object of study of interdisciplinary teams, mostly consisting of local residents or emigrants, young heritage experts and artists, who are – besides the basic aim of reconstructing or revitalising these sites – also interested in their potential as contemporary social and political tools for bridging ethnic divisions and conflicts. The research done at the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in the city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina resulted in a publication tracing oral histories and personal stories of citizens. This project contributed to the cohesion of several local grassroots organisations to define and attain the common goal of renovating the memorial complex (completed in 2018).²⁵ This project was followed by a “Curated Walk” to Bogdanović’s Memorial Complex Garavice near Bihać: it included guided tours, lectures and open political discussion as a step that the organisers believe should precede the physical renovation of the memorial complex, and a performative method of heritage preservation in itself (Fig. 6).

Some recent heritage projects even transgress national borders, thus opening up new questions of what borders mean when it comes to cultural heritage management ‘from below’. With the goal of revitalising a Yugoslav partisan memorial ossuary in the small coastal town of Barletta in southern Italy, a group of architects from Italy and Serbia have been researching this forgotten Yugoslav monument on Italian territory, designed by the sculptor Dušan Džamonja between 1968 and 1970. Interestingly, the memorial ossuary still legally belongs to the non-existent Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Despite the fact that neither of the former Yugoslav states claims this piece of land as their national heritage and territory, the group has made architectural reconstruction plans for the elaborate and endangered concrete structure, along with discovering its new social potentials and its resonance in memories of the local Italian population.²⁶

Finally, there has been a growing number of contemporary visual artists dealing with various issues concerning Yugoslav monuments, approaching them not only as aesthetic objects, but as important parts of collective and personal memories, and as heritage endangered under the changed social and political circumstance.²⁷ The ‘heritage from below’ approach is, however, most commonly and most importantly manifested through locally initiated community endeavours, organised either by individuals, non-profit organisations or self-organised groups. Sometimes they manifest as radical, guerrilla-like conflicts with ideological opponents in the streets (by using graffiti, for example); sometimes they operate by the available legal means (public funding, interna-



Fig. 6: A group of visitors attending the “Curated Walk” programme at the Garavice Memorial Complex near Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo: Amina Pečenković, 2018)

tional funds, etc.), but are in most cases disassociated from the heritage institutions. Such approaches respond to the contested state of memorial heritage defined on the higher levels of political decision-making, indicating the crisis of heritage management and the necessity of structural changes within the systems. The methods thus used are equally telling and warning, often in conflict with the prescribed conservation standards. This, in turn, indicates the necessity of addressing urgent epistemological and practical questions regarding the politics of heritage.

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- ¹ This work has been supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2016-06-2112 “Manifestations of Modern Sculpture in Croatia: Sculpture at the Crossroads between Socio-political Pragmatism, Economic Possibilities and Aesthetical Contemplation”.
- ² KEMPENAERS, *Spomenik*, 2010.
- ³ KULIĆ, *Orientalizing Socialism*, 2018. See also SEKULIĆ, *Nepodnošljiva težina*, 2013.
- ⁴ The Serbo-Croatian word for a monument or a memorial – *spomenik* – has entered English language, albeit in a semantically narrowed version, describing a particular group of objects that have been perceived as a specific aesthetic and cultural phenomenon. HORVATINČIĆ, *The Peculiar Case*, 2012.
- ⁵ Among them, the work done by Donald Niebyl is especially worth mentioning. See SPOMENIK DATABASE, 2019.; NIEBYL, *Spomenik Monument*, 2018.
- ⁶ See, for example, [N. N.], *This new tour*, 2018.
- ⁷ HATHERLEY, *Concrete clickbait*, 2016.
- ⁸ I am referring to the exhibition held from July 2018 to January 2019 and the catalogue: KULIĆ and STIERLI, *Toward a Concrete*, 2018.
- ⁹ USKOKOVIĆ, “Uncomfortable” Significance, 85–90.
- ¹⁰ Eric UŠIĆ, “The Walls Remember – A Visual Ethnography of (Post-)World War II Graffiti in Istria”, presentation delivered at the international conference *Cities and Regions in Flux After Border Change: Reconfiguring the Frontier, Reshaping Memory and Visualizing Change in Twentieth Century Europe*, July 10–12 2019, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka.
- ¹¹ The systematic survey done in Croatia has shown that most monuments were built during the 1950s, with the peak reached in 1961, on the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the organised partisan resistance. HORVATINČIĆ, *Memorials from the Socialist Era*, 2017, p. 42.
- ¹² NEUMAYER, *Criminalisation of Communism*, 2018.
- ¹³ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Intangible Heritage*, 2004, pp. 52–65.
- ¹⁴ The official mission of the Regional Cooperation Council is “regional cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe in order to spark development in the region to the benefit of its people”. TRIPLE P TOURISM PROJECT, 2019.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ HRŽENJAK, *Rušenje antifašističkih*, 2001.
- ¹⁸ I have been unable to verify the condition of all monuments, but unfortunately predictions are that the green spots are mostly either destroyed or damaged.
- ¹⁹ JAUKOVIĆ, *To Share or to Keep*, 2014, p. 101.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Mišo KAPETANOVIĆ, “Korčanica – Memorial Culture and the Absent State on a Bosnian Mountain”, presentation at the Fourth International Conference “Socialism on the Bench: Continuities and Innovations”, September 26–28th 2019, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia.
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- ²³ LAWLER, *Memorial Works*, 2013.
- ²⁴ <https://bangor.academia.edu/AndrewLawler> (accessed August 3, 2019).
- ²⁵ BARIŠIĆ et al., *Mostar’s Hurqalya*, 2017. See also the link to the project: <https://nezaboravljenigrad.com/?lang=en> (accessed August 3, 2019).
- ²⁶ See: <https://www.barlettanews.it/ossario-jugoslavo-barletta/>, Barletta News, Ossario commemorativo dei caduti Slavi di Barletta: il passato jugoslavo tra architettura e memoria, 30th October 2018 (accessed August 4, 2019).
- ²⁷ See, for example, a comprehensive artistic research project by Macedonian artist Elena Chermenska: <https://spomeniknaslobodata.mk> (accessed August 4, 2019).