

Who Said “Unwanted”? Unpacking the Case of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar

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Yugoslav memorial architecture: heritage of a country that no longer exists

Although the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ceased to exist as a political entity, its architectural heritage has not stopped generating as well as resisting multiple interpretations of the past. The Partisan Memorial Cemetery (*Partizansko spomen-groblje*) in Mostar discussed here represents a well-known site in Bosnia and Herzegovina that plays a prominent role in the network of antifascist and partisan memorials scattered across the territory of the former state.

Seeking to shed lights on the experiences of groups and individuals from different generations who are otherwise hidden from mainstream narratives about their own heritage, this article draws on long-term collaborative ethnographic research work and material collected through a series of (walking) interviews, participant observations and site explorations.¹ The study problematises and offers insights not only into the architectural potential but also into the political ramifications of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery today by investigating the tensions between the image of the Memorial created by political and institutional discourses and the understanding shaped by people’s direct engagement with the site.

The city of Mostar and its Memorial

Mostar’s Memorial was completed in 1965 to honour local partisans (mostly young people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds) who lost their lives during the Second World War (Fig. 1). The initiative for the construction came directly from the citizens of Mostar, war veterans and survivors, and gained the support of local politicians. Architect Bogdan Bogdanović (1922–2010) worked on the concept that took into account the urban aura of Mostar to design a memorial complex that “gazes at and watches over the city”.² Working on multiple scales – sculptural, architectural, landscape and urban – Bogdanović, together with skilled stonemasons from the island of Korčula, shaped an optimistic topography open to new uses and possibilities. Cobblestone paths and winding alleys lead visitors through the entrance gate up the hill to the grassy terraces covered with stone markers (also called stone flowers) with engraved names of fallen partisans. The focal element of the uppermost terrace is a circular stone relief recalling cosmological references and a fountain from which the cascading water used to flow down the hillside.



Fig. 1 The Partisan Memorial Cemetery shortly after the construction in 1965

Built without political, ideological or religious symbols and embedded in the surrounding landscape, the Memorial became much more than a space of public commemoration. Generations of Mostar citizens used it as a city park, public promenade (*korzo*) and a meeting place (Fig. 4). The Memorial eventually emerged as a prominent urban landmark. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the war of 1992–1995 transformed Mostar into a city whose institutions were internally fragmented between nationalist Bosniak and Croat stakeholders, so that the Memorial suffered from damage, neglect, and vandalism.

Public discourse about the Partisan Memorial Cemetery

An official act of recognising the importance of the site came in 2006 when the Partisan Memorial Cemetery was declared the national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although formally placed on the list of the historically and artistically most valuable properties of the state, the listing itself could not guarantee mechanisms of maintenance and management of the site. Partial restorations could neither change the perception of ordinary people that the whole complex was an unsafe no-go zone. The memorial setting,



Fig. 2 Broken stone markers with the names of partisans and neo-Nazi graffiti sprayed on the stone relief on the uppermost terrace of the Memorial in 2018

however, became part of young residents’ lives as they used it for informal gatherings.

It is important to highlight that citizens who openly cherished the site were dismissed as “(Yugo)communists”, welcomed with Nazi and Ustasha symbols³ sprayed on the walls of the Memorial (Fig. 2), while masked hooligans occasionally attacked the visitors and participants of commemoration ceremonies. From time to time, stone markers with the names of partisans were broken to pieces or even relocated. In 2015, activists found their fragments at the garbage landfill in the suburbs of Mostar. The role of the local ethno-national political elites in controlling the city budget and (not) providing regular maintenance of the site, as well as a possible complicity of the police in (not) prosecuting troublemakers deserve further investigation. Different civil society organisations and associations of anti-fascists have repeatedly warned that the active neglect of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery was a conscious political strategy for disqualifying the site. Equally alarming are the repercussions of the European Union’s acceptance of the discourse of “two totalitarianisms” resting on the equation of communism with fascism that legitimized the suppression of social dialogue about the heritage of everyday life during Yugoslav socialism, and on the Mostar Memorial itself. More precisely, the narrative of “two totalitarianisms” in synergy with local populisms and conservatism contributed to the ideological misuse of the Memorial, raising concerns among civil society actors about a silent acceptance of neo-

fascism as a tool for settling accounts with the Yugoslav socialist past.

The cumulative effect of the debates and events described above is an active erasure of the memory of the partisan resistance movement in the Second World War and transnational solidarity that characterised it, not only in Mostar but also in other regions of former Yugoslavia. The very existence of the Yugoslav memorial architecture has been threatened in many cases by the post-socialist search for political legitimacy and the rising right-wing sentiments, whose mutual interconnectedness is worthy of both scrutiny and suspect.

The Partisan Memorial Cemetery as an object of care

While public discourse about the Memorial was largely dismissive, one important aspect remained frequently overlooked: the Partisan Memorial Cemetery was an object of care embedded in urban experiences of a significant number of Mostarians and valued across communities. The most common reaction of citizens was to carry out voluntary work and clean-up campaigns, which not only contributed



Fig. 3 Installation by Marina Đapić inspired by the text of architect Bogdan Bogdanović (Translation: “I am scared of cities without memory, just like I am scared of people without subconscious...”) an exhibited in 2013



Fig. 4 Assemblage of family photographs taken between 1965 and 1980

partially to improving the condition of the site, but also helped to channel disagreement about the gradual decay of the Partisan Memorial that was deliberately left unclean, poorly lit and vandalised.

The political misuse of the Memorial as previously discussed generated multiple forms of sociality and solidarity among citizens, artists and activists who accepted the status quo of the site as an invitation to engagement and experimentation. They expressed the willingness to preserve, reactivate and promote knowledge and ideas about the Memorial, demonstrating that the site interacts with new communities of users while producing new civic and artistic responses. Over the past 20 years, individuals and groups have entered into dialogue with the Memorial on numerous occasions, choreographing their bodies, engaging stones in sound performances, or letting their brushes speak about urban and political matters in today's Mostar. These interventions have sought to make citizens' concerns about the Memorial in the public arena visible (Fig. 3). The poetic, visual, and performative responses that generated alternative claims about the values of the Partisan Memorial have not been officially recognised or integrated in any form of community-based heritage assessment.

Excluded from the decision-making about the present and the future of the Memorial, Mostarians have reacted by opening their family archives to show that the past they lived is worth remembering and that the Memorial deserves institutional protection (Fig. 4). Some of these analogue photographs, originally intended to capture occasional visits to the Partisan Memorial and quotidian details, are often digitised today, annotated by comments of their owners, and publicly shared on social media platforms.⁴ As such, they serve as crucial resources for understanding the everyday life

of the Memorial in the years after it was built. What became clear in the interaction with the owners of the photographs was that the associations with the life with and around the Partisan Memorial are today as much their heritage as the materiality of the site itself. Their reflections were not simply a nostalgic longing for the past, but a concrete and constructive thought process about the manner in which urban fabric changes.

Conclusion

In contrast to the dominant protocols in which the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar is seen, spoken and written about as “unwanted” heritage, this article proposes a shift in perspective and a new set of questions. For whom is the Partisan Memorial in Mostar “unwanted”? Who has the power to control the narrative about the Memorial? What kind of strategies and techniques are used to understand and put into context this example of Yugoslav memorial architecture?

By combining (memory) activism from below and scholarship from above, this study exposes the complexity of encounters between people and the site expecting to counter waves of misleading historical revisionism. It demonstrates that the Partisan Memorial today is much more than the political elites allow it to be – it is a place of remembrance, learning and creativity that additionally lives on through performative interactions and the creation of activist archives. For this reason, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals, groups and organisations who engage with the Memorial in a variety of formats are active agents in creating knowledge and values about the site. Preservation



Fig. 5 The Partisan Memorial Cemetery after a partial restoration of the memorial complex in 2018

of the material integrity of the memorial complex has to be accompanied by a change in discourse that will allow a plurality of engagements with the site to be freely expressed and evaluated.

Credits

- Fig. 1: Courtesy of Agencija Stari grad Mostar
Fig. 2: Aida Murtić, 2018
Fig. 3: Marko Krojač, 2013
Fig. 4: Courtesy of the citizens of Mostar
Fig. 5: Antonio Radić, 2018

¹ I want to thank Marko Barišić, Alisa Burzić and all the contributors to the collaborative research project “Mostar’s Hurqualya: The (Un)Forgotten City” for creating an inspiring terrain of learning and action. For our previous work, see <https://nezaboravljenigrad.com/?lang=en>.

² Bogdan Bogdanović, in: Ico MUTEVELIĆ (ed.), *Partizanski Spomenik u Mostaru*, Mostar: IKRO Prva književna komuna, 1980, p. 37.

³ Fascist movement that ruled the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War.

⁴ ⁵ The online community CIDOM (*Centar za informaciju i dokumentaciju Mostar*) offers unique insights on how citizens of Mostar remember and experience their urban environment. For more details, see <http://www.cidom.org/>. I would like to express my gratitude to the numerous members active on this platform for their support and trust in this research.