**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the first mass imprints on the body in the entire region of the former Yugoslavia, which eternally marked members of its armed forces. Through bodies permanently imprinted with socialist history and narrations of tattooed soldiers from the Yugoslav People’s Army (YPA), I install tattoos from YPA in-between the subversion of power and the incorporation of the dominant ideology, in the antithesis between uniformity and subjectivity. Above all, tattoos from YPA function as a mnemotechnical practice of recollection of the cultural memory, which awakens narrations and the regimes of memory as well as the regimes of memorization of the YPA, socialism and the period of (post) transition. Whereas the collected ethnographical material will sustain the claims made above, the situations in which the ethnography was impossible will be discussed further. Rejection, reflex silence or refusals of collaboration are all peculiar modes through which the paper emphasises the importance of the “ethnography of absent” (Telban). In this vein, they represent a fertile springboard to discuss notions of productive oblivion (Kuljić), forgetting (Ricoeur) and the “eloquent reticence”. The recollection of negative sentiments (as a way of activating the past) did not only materialize in tattooees’ non-responses. Tattoos from YPA also triggered practices of extreme permanent tattoo concealment (e.g. cicatrisation, cauterization) that do not fit into the classical anthropological milieu as practices of embellishment, rites of passage, strengthening the pain-tolerance threshold, etc. Instead, I see these practices as a preliminary phase of oblivion and as ways of “deideologization”. Furthermore, the paper supplements Connerton’s “habitual memory” preserved in the body and conserving the past in the memory, with its material constitutional side on the body – the tattoo.

**Keywords:** Yugoslav People’s Army, tattoo, memory, oblivion, ideology
I. INTRODUCTION: EXPERIENCING THE YPA ON THE SKIN

Studies of the visual culture of Yugoslavia and its (post)socialist mosaic of images are not anything novel in the academic field. Normally they focus on the popular culture, nostalgic “materialized discourses” in the form of “the cultures of nostalgia” (Velikonja, 2008: 35; 40), political iconographies and mythologies, mass media, and other visual representations of the former socialist federal republic. However, a piece of the everyday life integral to Yugoslavia is lurking within these accounts: the practice of tattooing within the Yugoslav People’s Army (hereafter YPA).

The phenomenon of tattooing in the YPA, performed during the military service, will be the central focus of this paper, regardless if the tattoo was subsequently removed, covered or deformed. Although the “functional” dimension is significant, the analysis will attempt to disclose tattoos’ semiotic extensions, historically multi-layered, as well as their inherent contradictions and, of course, tattooees’ narrations and interpretations.

Tattoos from the YPA can be installed on the intersection of history, power, and subject. By borrowing the post-structuralist vocabulary, I specifically allude to Foucault’s theoretical insights. We are about to deal with the body imprinted with history and persons, whose bodies’ are covered with a tattoo made in the YPA. Therefore, the emphasis will be on the body as “the inscribed surface of events [...] the locus of a dissociated self [...] a volume in perpetual disintegration” and “[g]enealogy, as an analysis of descent, [...] situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault, 1984: 83).

In the case of tattoos from YPA, the inscription of events on the body or, more precisely, on its surface can be understood almost literally: the military service within the YPA knits the time frame, or stated with Foucault, it determinates the event.

On the other hand, the very act of inscription on the body is interlaced with the event; act of inscription is the event’s constitutional part: the tattoo represents either the inscription of the event on skin either the event of an intimate fixation of memory. From here derives the understanding of the tattoo as a multi-layered collage of history, power, and subject: it is an event stick together with skin; an event firmly inscribed on the skin for eternity that comes to mind and persists in memory. Moreover, my intention is to analyse also the relations toward the past through the regimes of memory – not an official, but personal and subjective memory, not to denominate it as private. With this, we draw nearer to the political connotations of “emotional regimes” (that follow Foucault’s regimes of power) (Reddy after Muršič, 2004: 53).

The synchronic will complement the diachronic analysis since tattoos from YPA in all their contradictions, determinability, and characteristics—and the bodies as the medium of tattoos—coexists in a certain social construction of reality (Berger in Luckman), where the body plays simultaneously both as a subject and material object (Csordas in Schildkrout, 2004: 320). Consequently, I will analyse the positions that tattoos from YPA as an “active practice” (Kuwahara 2005: 3) occupied in the time of their infliction up to their positioning in present day, including the “metastasis” scattered between this two points in time.

The outlined springboard inevitably leads me to the manifoldness of the phenomena. Put differently,
tattoos from YPA can be installed between the incorporation of the dominant ideology and the subversion of power, in the antithesis of uniformity and subjectivity, on the edge of the ephemeralness of an single event and the conserved historiography, betwixt the regimes of memory, memorization and the memory politics, in the in the fold of the collective and individual identification. Therefore, I will explore this cultural and historical phenomenon in the paradigmatic embodiment, physical absorption, and material implantation of the (post)socialism on and in the body.

Two aspects inherent to the personal interpretations and individual narrations traverse this analysis. The first is a temporal-historical, referring to the time, in which the tattoo was made. The second is a contextual-geographical aspect. Without special effort, it could be stated that tattoos with the provenience in the YPA are dispersed all over the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The territorial allocation is not negligible since the collapse of Yugoslavia caused immense misery and, consequently, the signifier “YPA” is far from being neutral. Quite to the contrary, the signifier multiplies on the level of its ambivalence in space and time.

Thus, the question remains how time changed the same tattoo within the territory of the former Yugoslavia. I do not have in mind changing as a physiological process (e.g. wrinkling, discoloration) but rather the changing of tattooees’ mental mappings and narratives as well as the outside reactions, which were triggered, caused, and mediated by tattoos – from biopolitics to public sentiments.

Before ploughing into ethnography, mostly carried out in Slovenia, it is necessary to state the following: tattoos form YPA were neither a profane act written into the skin inspired by collective impulses, nor an individualistic aesthetical and commercial doing like the two main compartmentalisations of tattoos are suggesting (cf. Shildkrout, 2004; Caplan, 2000). It is crucial to understand the social context of their emergence together with the temporality and force (i.e. the mandatory military service in Yugoslavia). Thus, we shall situate tattoos exactly in-between, wherefrom both spheres are considered equally. Within the universe of tattoos from YPA, I will research Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” – the minimal set of common essential characteristics (after Velikonja, 2008: 25) of tattoos from YPA.

II. THE TATTOOED BALKAN: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TATTOOS IN THE BALKANS

The historical presence of tattoos and the continuity of tattooing throughout the last centuries on the Balkans share a quantity of complementarities with tattoos from YPA – most evidently the geographical element. Based on the extent of tattooing of catholic women (men were not an exception) in certain areas of mainly Bosnia and Croatia (cf. Filipović, 1938; Durham, 1928; Petrić, 1973; Vremec, 1992; Krutak, 2000; Hrovatin, 2010; Slganović, 2012) one could point toward a specific social tolerance of a historically and culturally embedded tattoo practice in the recent past, somewhat affecting the tattooing in the YPA. Let me clarify the presumption that indicates potential reasons why in the YPA some men were more keen to tattoo themselves than others. The liability to mark oneself with a tattoo was related to the social and spatial background, which might nourished practices of tattooing and consequently paved a greater acceptance for tattoos.

The second reason for the hypothesis above is hidden in the tattooing of army forces throughout the last
centuries. In the end of the 19th century, Glück writes that for solders the cross does not play anymore the leading role but “much more often than the cross, they [solders] tattoo a heart and crown, anchor and the initials of the tattooed person, the birth date, [...] and even the double-headed eagle [...]” (Glück, 1889).

Glück’s account is pivotal in revealing an ethnographic rarity of an early personified tattoo within the army as well as in documenting a case of the early reflection of the dominant ideology on the body through the tattooed motives (i.e. a crown, a bicephalous eagle, an orb and sceptre taken from Hapsburg Imperial insignia). Truhelka, following Glück, adds: “(...) in the Turkish army it was a custom to mark solders with tattoos”, especially in the conflicts with Montenegro (Truhelka, 1896: 242). As opposed to the religious tattooing among Catholics, which prevented the conversion into Islam, these tattoos were meant to divert soldiers from potential desertion.

III. TALKATIVE TATTOOS AND FOUND BODIES: TATTOOS BETWEEN THE INCORPORATION OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND THE SUBVERSION OF POWER

The historical treatise, necessarily porous and incoherent, will be succeeded by outlining the elementary characteristics of tattoos from YPA. Important is to note that tattoos do not function exclusively as a material evidence of a concluded military service, but also and simultaneously as remembering.

A. The Alphabet of Tattoos from YPA

Ever since entering the service each and every soldier was, so to speak, belt with all necessaries for a successful tattooing: a sewing needle, a thread, and a black-coloured ink. This trinity of instruments formed part of the mandatory equipment for all solders in the YPA.

The techniques how the ink was inserted under the skin differ from interlocutor to interlocutor. Generally, the thread was wrapped around the needle, wherein some millimetres at the needle-bottom remained unwrapped. A lighter normally took care for the sterility of the tattooing tool or, more frequently, no one even bothered with such preoccupations. After the needle was dipped in the ink, the do-it-yourself process of free-hand skin prickling, known nowadays also under the name stick’n’poke, could begin. By contrast with the tattoo gun, unknown at the time, the process of the handmade skin perforation consumed more time. Depending on the size of the motive and how skilful was the occasional tattooist, the session did not take longer than an hour, just exceptionally lasted two or more.

The physiological consequence after the tattooing terminated was usually a swollen skin tissue; less likely tattooing caused an infection. The upper limbs were nearly always reserved for tattoos. The most popular location was the forearm. This choice would be misinterpreted with the simple fact that this part of the body tolerates the pain slightly better.

We must not, therefore, get caught in the net of practical interpretations. Already a glance at the majority of tattoos reveals two aspects: always, or almost always, tattoos could be found on one of the most visible and “public” parts of the body (the forearm or upper arm). Secondly, at the time tattoos were already per se—let alone if placed on upper extremities—commonly considered as unusual and extravagant. Above all, by being intentionally directed outwards, their consequent exposure drew attention and offered itself to be read by the “public” eye.
The tattoo, shortly after its infliction, through a simultaneous demonstration called for attention. However, the tattoo again underwent a semiotic rotation in post-socialism. The symbolic communicational method of the performativity of the tattoo was bifurcated, if not splintered, by the process of transition and dissolution of Yugoslavia. The outcomes of this fragmentation will be discussed in more detail later but for the moment is sufficient to make use of Foucault's aphorism: “The glance is silent, like a finger pointing, denouncing” (Foucault, 1963/2003: 122).

If I leave aside the temporal dimensions when the pigment was injected into the skin (during boot camp [obuka] or after the deployment to specialized units [prekomanda]), it becomes clear the tattooing occurred before soldiers’ eyes, yet it avoided to be seen by the officer’s vigilant sight. Although it was not declared prohibited, the tattooing practice was kept hidden. Overall, the tattooing was a custom in soldiers’ spare time, whether dictated or coincidental. What differentiates tattooing in the YPA from a mere way of killing time is the hypothetical illegality and—given the actuality of the sight—the toleration of tattooing.

The question we are faced here with is how to understand tattooing in the YPA encapsulated in the oxymoron “tolerated subversion” and “overlooked obviousness”? What can be drawn from the contradiction between the unquestionable dictate of order and discipline, and the subversion of the axiom of uniformity and army drill? Supposedly, I could write about the soldiers’ ardent wish to eternally etch the YPA into the skin; about a straightforward reproduction of the army propaganda in line with appurtenant power relations; or about the lionization of belonging to the YPA and socialism consequently; about a permanent mark of a temporal identification, or about the expression of comradeship bonds and sanguineous solidarity, etc.

I, however, have no such intention. Although it might hold true that reasons for tattooing vary, some common features can still be elucidated. For one, the research should take into account the institution of honour on the Mediterranean, since the majority of the tattooed interlocutors served the military duty between 1970 and 1980, when Yugoslavia witnessed the so-called “golden age”, to which respect and honour are still shown.

Let’s take a look on few examples of tattoos from YPA.

For the infantry a shield with swords was typical; the tank division tattooed a schematized tank (model T-55 and older T-34); in the army forces the eagle (or MiG-21) with spread wings was popular accompanied by the abbreviation “RViPVO” (“Ratno vazduhoplovstvo i Protivvazdušna odbrana”); to the members of the navy the unmistakable anchor and the abbreviation “JRM” (“Jugoslavenska ratna mornarica”) adorned the arms; the border guards tattooed the characteristic boundary stone, to which oftentimes a number was added according to the identifiable number of each watchtower (“karaula”); the artillery was recognizable by the tattooed cannons.

Such illustrating codified tattoo language was not lonesome on the skin. The symbolic cryptography and abbreviations were complemented with one of the following elements or the arbitrary combination thereof: a toponym (the place where the military service was held), a logogram of the YPA (originally “JNA” signifying “Jugoslavenska narodna armija”), or the date of entry into the army (in Arabic digits and/or in combination with Roman numerals).
Anthroponyms, monograms, and nicknames were designated for elsewhere, neither one of them intruded the standard repertoire above-listed. The entire tattoo composition accurately narrates fundamental coordinates: the army division, the place and date of entry into the army. Yet even if soldiers in the YPA were acquainted with such tattoo alphabet, including the readable localization and temporalization, the skill of decrypting such “dermographics” (Schildkrout, 2004 : 328) never inspired a spontaneous conversation between two random tattooees.

Of course, it was not only the dominant ideology which precisely reflected itself on the body. Often tattoos found themselves in eclectic company of political figures (stars, wreath, left hand clenched in a fist, burning relays), symbols for good luck (four-leaf clover, horseshoe, No. 13), fauna elements (snakes wrapping around a sword, cobra, eagle), love-emphatic motives (hearts, then hearts pierced with an arrow/sword, bleeding hearts, female names, names of army comrades), and mythological creatures (mermaids). I would like to conclude this classification of designs, inescapably ideal-typical, with a “pearl”. Tattoos of Josip Broz Tito, “tittooages” so to speak (Močnik in Velikonja, 2008 : 22), certainly deserve a special place in the sphere of political portraying and representations.

Although the reflection of motives and ideology on the body may sound like a handy metaphor, sometimes the term reflection calls for a quite literal understanding.

Serving the military for 12 months near Mužil (Croatia), an ex-mariner explained that few magazines were the only visual material at his disposal on the deck, out of which a comrade copied the image of Cleopatra and an Indian and tattooed them later. Surely, the deficit of images during the military service strongly depended on the deployment of soldiers. However, some copied images, later to be tattooed, were (sub) consciously deeply provocative. Consider, for instance, a self-tattooed “German” eagle depicted originally on the banknote of a hundred Deutschmark issued in 1977, or the similar case of an interlocutor who adorned his forearm with an eagle after seeing the motive on the watch Darwil.

The mediation for the service based on the gift in a pure Maussian sense. The act of tattooing, without exception, was performed in absence of money. The occasional tattooist received in return a tiny material mean. If in Russian prisons cigarettes represented the size of the tattoo, the cigarette measure (Condee, 2002 : 47), the tobacco rolls were in the YPA prime means of direct exchange. The cigarettes “Filter 57” were on the top of the exchange hierarchy, surpassing “Morava” and “Niška” because of one innovative detail; “Filter 57”, as already the name indicates, boasted with a cigarette filter.

IV. SILENT BODIES AND FOUND TATTOOS: CULTURAL MEMORY AND TATTOOS IN THE (POST)SOCIALIST CONTEXT

In this chapter, I will briefly outline productive cues for elaborating the topic of cultural memory. During the fieldwork it often occurred that questions directed to coincidental persons bearing a tattoo from YPA were perceived as bothersome but, more importantly, the reaction to the memory recall materialized in either tattooees’ complete silence either in their refusal of any collaboration whatsoever; less frequently my uninvited interference into their daily lives triggered a vehement resentment.
All visible traces and sharp reactions should be considered with equal significance as the willingness to be interviewed and/or photographed. We need to ask ourselves what the symptomatic screaming silence, the telling reticence, and the mouthy avoidances “tell” us. The screaming silence is a silence, that should be “listened to,” described as a quiet and problematic conversationalist, whose voice is deliberately silenced. Telban called this the “ethnography of absent” – the absence of something we expect on the fieldwork, something that should but does not happen (Telban, 2001: 19; cf. Bille et al., 2010).

Before venturing into concrete interpretations, I will summarize and articulate the most common forms of these reactions, which I met along what I call the fieldwork serendipity – fortunate encounters with tattooees during accidental fieldwork. After seeing a tattooee who unintentionally exposed his tattoo from YPA,1 I spontaneously addressed him and the minimal conversation ended up in this rejection or in cursing. I understand such verbal response and avoidance, this absence of presence, as a mixture of (the recollection of) sentiments (e.g. remorse, shame, reminiscence) with an outer deciphering of the tattoo located on an uncovered part of the body, which discloses a unique period in the bearer’s life trajectory.

Perhaps the most eloquent out of all unplanned non-responses are the visible outcomes of the modification and deformations of tattoos from the YPA that caused a new material form. Here belong all those subsequent practices of manipulation on the body, produced after the initial tattoo appearance on the skin, for the sake of its permanent full or partial concealment.2 The tattoo modifications and deformations include practices of: scarification and excision (e.g. cicatrisation with a razor blade or chemical solution), covering up (replacement with a different tattoo on top), supplementation and distortion (e.g. improvement from “JNA” to “JANJA” or “ONA”), cauterization (burning a part of the skin), and surgical removal (treatment by laser technique or some other sophisticated method). We can dissect these invasive corporal practices into two interrelated groups: some were self-inflicted, while others interpolated an external force.

A liminal space between scarification in the widest sense and the “cosmetic” surgery grows from this point. The aestheticism within this liminality is merely a side “product” of the primary purpose of removing and concealing the tattoo from YPA. Herein lies a peculiar paradox: erasing removes the tattoo-formation from the surface of the body, even though the tattoo-memory might nevertheless persist in remembering.

The postulate of either scarring either the surgical embellishment is completely identical – to transform the marked epithelium by bringing it into the domain of the invisible. The first practice, scarring, is having roots in primordial rituals, while the second practice is the aesthetical procedure and a modernization of the first. Through the “scarification” of tattoos from YPA, a whole spectrum of practices can be traced extending from mutilations on the skin (skin excision, cauterization) up to the subsequent self-inflicted “embellishments” (the supplementing and covering self-tattooing). If the last bundle of practices is attributed to the pre-transitional period (before the disintegration of Yugoslavia), the post-transitional period brought forth technologically perfected procedures (surgical and laser removal, professional covering-up by tattoo artist etc.).
In other words, “scarification” of tattoos from YPA cannot be taken as a technique of body beautification and ornamentation, an adornment with permanent jewellery, an aesthetical skin fashioning, a rite of passage, a fortification of the pain tolerance etc. (cf. Flügel, 1950; Gröning 1997). It is anything but that. The “scarification” was reflexively concealing shame and the inverted honour; it materialized regret and repulsion towards the past and it was the outcome of the process of deideologization. Therefore, Connerton’s (in Kralj, 2008: 43) concept of bodily habitual memory—a collective memory sedimented in bodies preserving the past in memories—can be complemented with its constitutional and material counterpart: the tattoo as an embodied site of cultural memory. And the latter affirmatively answers also the question posed by Geremek (1996: 248): “Can feelings have a history?”

The tattoo erasure was ironically a shortcut to the erasure on the body, not entirely erasing the past. In consequence, we truly can observe an embodied memory to be modified. The corporally erased tattoo was only a prologue to the inner process of productive oblivion (Kuljić, 2012: 214-5). The “erasure” as an active mechanism prevented an additional public display of a body saturated with a chapter of socialism, a chapter, which each male adult in Yugoslavia willy-nilly had to experience. On the other hand, forgetting and oblivion were in domain of mental processions (the personal in contrast to the public) storing and discarding images from the past.

In sum, the non-response as form of the abstinence of presence was, consequently, a constitutional part of forgetting, whilst the tattoo erasure was the materialistic side to accomplish the final aim the quickest possible – that of forgetting. What appears to be a “self-willed” erasure was, in turn, biopolitics in practice; the erasure at most accelerated the memory harakiri endeavouring to put an end to the stigmatic visual impulse. The surgical operation or the second round of tattooing that created a diverse layer on the skin, ironically, obscured the tattoo only from the public eye and from the outside gaze, yet the crucial question remains how such “image transformed into memory” (Halbwachs, 2001: 26) was processed in tattooees’ memory after the act of self-lustration.

IV. CONCLUSION: TATTOOED SOUVENIRS FROM YPA

The paper discussed the phenomena of the tattoos “made in Yugoslavia”, emphasising especially tattooees’ cultural memory in postsocialism. The research contributed to existent studies of the general tattoo cultures, prolonging discussions of tattoo practices into the milieu of the embodied cultural memory and oblivion, by presenting tattooees’ (re)interpretations, (re)constructions and material reconfigurations. A main rupture in historiography of tattoo culture in the Balkans can be also asserted. Tattoos from YPA were, except among few marginalized social groups and in areas where religious tattooing was practiced, the first popular permanent body paintings and a low-tech body art, whereas in certain places they penetrate for the very first time as an altered skin idiosyncrasy and characteristic.

However, my intention was to point toward a neglected piece of the quotidian mosaic in former Yugoslavia and its socialist legacy, or, stated with Foucault,
to "make known what we do not see" and "to make visible what precisely is visible, that is, to make appear what is so close, what is so immediate, what is so intimately tied to ourselves that because of that we do not perceive it" (Foucault in Djaballah, 2008: 137). The tattoos from YPA have for its bearers often performed the role of memoirs of the YPA and, therefore, played the role of a mnemotechnic practice of memory recollection of a particular personal experiencing in the collective Yugoslav army.

Whenever memory was subject of forgetting and oblivion (cf. Augé, 2008; Ricoeur, 2004), the tattoo from YPA written on the skin remained an incorporated lifelong "legacy as perception" (Todorova, 2009: 199), a perception after sleeves were rolled up, a perception when the clothes were thrown off, a perception of bare skin imprinted with an ambivalently calibrated army souvenir. Jack London was presumably right when he declared: "Show me a man with a tattoo and I'll show you a man with an interesting past."

**ENDNOTES**

[1] It is not hard to imagine that the fieldwork under such conditions was far more successful in summer when the sleeves were rolled up and more skin is visible.

[2] The distinction between permanent and temporal concealment needs to be made. The temporal concealment is attained with the help of, for example, self-adhesive bandages, plasters matching skin hue, and the similar, which were placed directly on the tattoo.

[3] Although I install tattoo covering and erasing in the field of deideologization, it should be considered not only Yugoslavia and socialism evaporated, but also the dominant patterns of masculinity.

**REFERENCES**
