

# Vukovar 1991 Battle and Cultural Memory

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**Abstract:** In this paper it is argued that Vukovar 1991 Battle traumatic memory wearing away process is a social issue and cannot be simply amputated by modernist narratives from accumulated traces of the past. Instead, those traumatic memories are constantly reconstructed, repressed, or transformed in some way or another under the pressure of manipulative power politics and competing ideologies in contemporary Croatian society. Therefore, the question this paper asks is whether war crimes and atrocities committed in Vukovar 1991 have its meaningful place in the Croatian cultural memory and whether social research techniques into contemporary cultural memory in Croatia can afford to avoid testimonial narrations of the Vukovar 1991 Battle and war experiences since they are an integral part of the collective memory?

**Keywords:** Vukovar 1991 Battle, trauma, cultural memory, collective memory, testimonial narrations, social research, symbolic representations of emotions

## I. INTRODUCTION

The extensive public and scholarly discourse related to the former communist Yugoslavia's bloody dissolution has indicated so far that social theory of moder-

nity has failed to comprehend what lies underneath its discursive constructions and interconnection between the personal and social (Cvikić, 2012: 14). Unfortunately, the public and scholarly discourse is in line with the media reports which often distorts the facts, relativises the responsibility for the war, and tries to equalise the guilt (Nazor, 2013: 35). In their efforts to rationalise Croatian war realities various scholarly disciplines have reduced the subject to debate on nationalism and victims of war neglecting to deal with collective memory and remembrance (Ramet, 2005; Cushman and Meštrović, 1996; Finkelkraut, 1992). Their efforts have become a *new cultural project* that has a difficult task to comprehend and provide workable scientific framework in order to reason images, languages and practices of the "Balkan tribes" which appeared during and in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars of dissolution.

## II. FRAME OF REFERENCE

In this paper it is argued that Vukovar 1991 Battle traumatic wearing away process is a social issue and cannot be simply amputated by modernist narratives

from accumulated traces of the past. Therefore, the question this paper asks is whether Vukovar 1991 Battle and genocide have its meaningful place in the Croatian cultural memory and whether social research techniques into contemporary cultural memory in Croatia can afford to avoid testimonial narrations of the Vukovar 1991 war experiences since they are an integral part of the collective memory?

Under the scrutiny of critical theory, the frame of reference used to enable critical analysis of the social inquiry into Croatian cultural memory related to the 1991 Vukovar Battle includes four levels:

- level of social inquiry;
- level of historical meaning and collective memory;
- level of moral values of human suffering;
- level of scholarly explanation and/or understanding (Cvikić, 2012: 12).

Analysed literature pertains to the domestic and international publications (1991 – 2010) related to the Yugoslavia's dissolution and war in Croatia available to the authors from the local library along with the data that was collected from demographic and social researches they conducted.<sup>1</sup>

Theoretical frame of the papers' inquiry into the cultural memory in Croatia related to the 1991 Vukovar Battle is based on the Meštrović's analysis (1993) of the contemporary barbarism in the Western civilisation and how is it managed by modernist scholarly discourse; and conceptual framework of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and cultural memory (Assmann, 2002). According to Meštrović, the social theory of modernity debate at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> cen-

tury is marked by abstract and conceptually structured theories which are impregnated by the fragmentation of meaning and discursive constructions of the social (Meštrović, 1993; 1998). Namely, the ethics of social inquiry into the cultural memory of the recent past in Croatia therefore, has failed to include studies of contemporary morality and human actions in the framework of people's historical, political, state and social relations. In this context, the cultural memory, perceived as a reality, is not represented in the contemporary Croatian scholarly discourse and narratives.

Since the Halbwachs' groundbreaking work (1993) on collective memory, this phenomenon has developed beyond the boundaries of aggregated individual recollections. Today it is reinforced by studies that converge on the idea that collective memory is a result of power relations in a society (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). As indicated by Connerton (1989; 2009) the memory of a social group is also shaped through state administration and is under the influence of power politics. In that respect, society's memory can be moulded so that their citizens are "deprived of their memory" which is then overpowered by the state promoted *official memory* as collective (Connerton, 1989: 14). Inevitably selective, the official collective memory of aggression and war in Croatia has conveniently excluded the memories of Vukovar 1991 Battle only to create politics of forgetting (Connerton, 2009). So it could be argued that the ongoing process of forgetting and remembering and their interplay on the personal and national level in Croatia can not simply be put aside and used when conveniently needed by the politics in power (Ricoeur, 2004). The Vukovar case in that respect enters the new historical narrative

with suppressed memories and is detached from the official narrative that favours one interpretation of the war events over the other.

### III. THE VUKOVAR 1991 BATTLE

Facts about the Vukovar 1991 Battle and destruction after its fall speak of the violent past and devastating effects of the imposed war. The city of Vukovar was surrounded by the Yugoslav Peoples' Army and Serbian paramilitary forces which were supported by the local Serbian communities for three months (August 24<sup>th</sup> – November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1991) fighting the battle that was doomed to fail from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> During its three months siege the city and its citizens were faced with tremendous human suffering, killings and almost cataclysmic material destructions (Živić, 2008).<sup>3</sup> The way in which the city was looted and destructed, its inhabitants expelled, imprisoned, tortured, raped and killed after its fall prove the inevitable fact – a *historical truth* – that this armed aggression was planned and systematically implemented by the Yugoslav Peoples' Army and paramilitary forces, and was supported by the Serbian political elite and local Serbian population in Croatia (Nazor, 2013; Jurčević, 1993; Karač, 2004; Živić, 2008). Thus, the *collective trauma* imposed on the Croatian society by the brutality of war in Vukovar will become a constant and pressing issue – a problem that politicians, scholars and social elites alike were unable to process. Twenty years after the siege, Croatian society and Vukovar citizens are still struggling with their memories of war. Dynamics of the *trans-generational effects* on the post-war Croatian society therefore pose a serious question to the untreated trauma that is repeatedly denied and negated by all

Croatian governments since its independence. It is obvious that the social issues caused by neglected multifaceted traumatic memories are not confronted in the manner that they could be restored and situated safely in the real context of the historical truth and post-war collective memory – contemporary *cultural memory*.

### IV. SOCIAL INQUIRY AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Namely, modes of collective remembrance after the *Homeland War*<sup>4</sup> in Croatia include activities shared by the Croatian people, war victims and war veterans in the public domain. They appear in forms of remembrance, thus it is very difficult to define how the recent past is managed in the Croatian society in the framework of culture, memory and reconciliation after mass trauma. However, it is increasingly evident that maintenance of the society's "mental hygiene" is closely related to the collective memory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century war trauma (Meštrović, 1993). So the scholarly debate in Croatia over the last twenty years is unwilling to admit this and is not overly concerned with 1991 violence and war memories that deeply impregnate the contemporary society. The social discourse concerning *historical truth* on the individual and society level has reached a disastrous point since it is defined through discriminatory man-made policies by the Croatian political entrepreneurs (Cvikić, 2010). Political desire to avoid the confrontation with the war crimes, the horror and the victims' suffering comes from politicians' reluctance to know and to resolve the pressing social issues stemming from the dysfunctional and selective legal/prosecution system. However, with Vukovar 1991 genocide in particular, the

current social problems (Vukovars' Cyrillic sign postings in 2013) indicate to what extent scholarly discourse avoids its inclusion into the historical description of the recent past as an integral category that defines the horror and traumatic nature of the war events.<sup>5</sup>

Namely, the *post-traumatic energies* are actualised in divergent ways by various social actors creating a public space where internal conflicts shape the relationships and bonds of solidarity on all societal levels (Babić, 2008). Therefore, social inquiry into the recent troubled past requires from the Croatian social sciences to create a *conceptual framework* that involves the *mapping of memory events* and to redefine the meaning of the sites as self-referential. So far, the tracing of the memory movement in and across Croatia is rendered through discursive engagements with the subject of history and memory in the context of war mainly as *commemorative projects* (for example Remembrance Day in Vukovar on November 18<sup>th</sup>). Commemorative projects as forms of remembrance are directly related to the war losses and embedded in the construction of memorial sites which are sponsored by the government (Žanić, 2008). As such, they are public representations of war memories even though the negotiation of the distance between history and memory is still an ongoing process (Žanić, 2008). So far, all the previous Croatian governments as autonomous legislators of their actions have ignored the historical and sociological efforts to map the memory events and define the meaning of the sites, thus off-loading their responsibilities through selective targeting of the information and resources.<sup>6</sup> Their concern with cultural memory renders historical truth as images devoid of context, and specific, real and ethical values (Meštrović, 1993).

## V. HISTORICAL MEANING AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Collective memory of the recent traumatic past in Croatia therefore, is shattered by the way in which modernity functions in order to forget (through selective means) problems of the past which are not resolved (Meštrović, 1998; Connerton, 2009). The Homeland War and Vukovar 1991 Battle are issues that transgress the still ongoing negotiations between history and memory. They are transferred into the present as memories – representations which coexist with present ones (Meštrović, 1993). Despite the constant political efforts to install the *culture of forgetting*<sup>7</sup> in Croatia, the collective memory of war and compiled personal and collective traumas represent today *mechanical issues* - bottle necks to progress and social order. Memories of violence, injustice and war are especially problematic for modernity as it tries to perpetuate an infinite cycle of forgetting (Connerton, 2009). Production of modernist narrative as neoliberal instant solution in Croatia represent a substitute - scientifically engineered oversimplification of the collective memory - socially constructed and reconstructed in order to suite daily politics of the political entrepreneurs (Rogić, 1995; Cvikić, 2010; Banjeđlav, 2012). Instead, what they create is a *cultural amnesia* of specific structural forgetting type. According to Croatian anthropologist Sanja Špoljar Vržina (2007; 2009; 2012) the social mechanisms that connect the contemporary experiences of the after-war generations with the earlier traumatized war generations are brutally disrupted because they are all disconnected from their recent past and experiences of war through various elements of *structural forgetting type* particular to Croatia:



In the framework of the *permanent present* those elements pose a serious threat to the government sponsored reconstruction of Croatian history and historical consciousness of the recent past (Connerton, 2009). Vukovar 1991 Battle therefore, is a *fiction* – socially constructed reality - moulded to shape the historical fact with conceptually fragmented meaning. Vukovars' *historical meaning* is detached from scholarly research that can prevent elitist culturally prescribed goals, and develop sensitivity to moral values. Instead, it is transformed into the *information* – a commodity consumed by many and misused by politicians through government sponsored media in order to sustain the popular notion of Croatian national independence and nation state (Banjevlav, 2012; Kadrov, 2006). Historical meaning of the Vukovar 1991 Battle is limited and it does not go further than stating the obvious historical fact that the city was besieged, concord, and war crimes committed (Skenderović, Jareb and Artuković, 2008).<sup>8</sup> The level of perceived historical relevance therefore indicates to what extent Vukovar

1991 Battle is insignificant in relationship to the collective memory of the nation.

#### VI. MORAL VALUES OF HUMAN SUFFERING

Furthermore, the moral values of human suffering and the brutality of imposed war<sup>9</sup> are reduced to the level of mere observational remarks that disables one to develop sensitivity for the subject such as Vukovar 1991 genocide, and form factual historical meaning as a grounding block of Croatian cultural memory. This however begs the question as to why it is so? Why is it so difficult to establish universally stable and valid moral groundings of the collective memory of war, aggression and violence in the contemporary Croatian society?

If rendered through Ramet's idealist perception, the subject of Croatian collective memory of war undoubtedly requires social inquiry into the significance and complexity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide committed in Vukovar. Her line of scholarly inquiry pertains to the development of stable universal beliefs and moral standards from the idealist point of view.<sup>10</sup> Return to idealism predisposes a new line of research where "moral beliefs matter, that shifts in moral consensus can have political consequences, and that one can speak sensibly about universal moral norms and universal rights, with corollary too that there are some duties incumbent upon the international community under certain conditions" (Ramet, 2005: viii).

Comprehensive understanding of the cultural memory in the contemporary Croatia hereby depends on those culturally shaped bits and pieces of the recorded social history - *testimonial narrations* - which are regrettably still structurally undefined and devoid of scholarly validation (Cvikić, 2012). This however, is

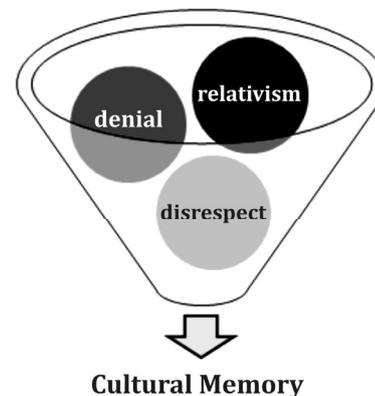
most prominent in the case of Vukovar 1991 Battle as it proves that 'true' representation of the war time reality in Croatia is fragmented. The battle is therefore, robbed off its historical meaning and significance it bares for the Croatian nation, while simultaneously it is denied the moral value of the human suffering endured by the war survivors.

#### VII. SCHOLARLY EXPLANATION AND/OR UNDERSTANDING

This prevailing trend however, continues in sharp opposition to the public perception of the Vukovar 1991 tragedy that is imprinted into the minds and hearts of every person in Croatia. However, as part of the collective war trauma it poses a serious question as to how it affects the Croatian nation on the level of their rational existence. Published personal narratives of war in Croatia provide an insight into the answer to this question from which it could be inferred that Croats avoid confronting their war traumas on deeper emotional level, and deal with it in a constructive way creating a memory that does not obfuscate wartime events (Cvikić, 2012). Therefore, the understanding of the war time events is obfuscated, while social history production is initiated, and *culture of ignorance* created. Namely, the absence of the Vukovar 1991 Battle in the Croatian cultural memory indicates to what extent this collective trauma is deeply repressed in the minds and hearts of people. So their war experiences are not strongly shared and reinforced in narrations about the war in Croatia (Cvikić, 2012).

This social framework of interpretations provides conceptually fragmented war reality trapped in between scholarly interpretations and experienced per-

ceptions on the individual level (Horelt and Renner, 2008). Inability to establish a workable relationship between two poles of the common historical truth has created an environment in which war memories – personal experiences, emotions and thoughts are reduced and adjusted to the comfortable and acceptable interpretations by "Others" – international and domestic alike.<sup>11</sup>Therefore, the "new social framework of remembrance" constitutes following trilogy:<sup>12</sup>



Croatian collective memory is shaped by international and national popular and scholarly discourse full of prejudice and biased interpretations of the war events (Cvikić, 2012; Banjeglav, 2012). The Vukovar 1991 testimonial narrations in this context are underrepresented in the sense that the subject of its tragedy and suffering is not extended and elaborated on the level of its meaning, moral and historical significance for the Croatian nation. Intellectual discomfort however, is an outcome of such socio-political reality of contemporary Croatian society, and collective trauma rooted to the Vukovar atrocities forces one to neglect,

omit or remain quiet about it. Therefore, public and scholarly discourse is not able to initiate a meaningful discussion about pressing issues related to the fact that contemporary Croatia is unable to place Vukovar 1991 testimonial narrations in a larger context from which is possible to create a constructive dialog about “culturally shared and appropriate meaning of the Serbian aggression, violence and crimes against humanity” (Cvikić, 2012: 24).

It could be inferred that Vukovar 1991 Battle does not hold a significant position in the Croatian collective memory. However, as a part of the cultural memory the battle indicates to what extent Croatian society is struggling to come to terms with traditional and emotional elements of the collective trauma inflicted upon them by the brutal war. Namely, the scholarly and public discourse provides enough space for manipulated social interpretations and explanations of the war-related realities, thus creating cultural constructions of revised historical and social facts detached from the comprehensive understanding (Špoljar Vržina, 2012). According to Špoljar Vržina (2012) and Cvikić (2012), the reason for this could be found in the fact that Vukovar 1991 testimonial narrations as a historical truth disrupts the contemporary canons of the scientific social interpretations and positivist reasoning, thus forcing Croatian social research to follow the path of the positivist categories of space, time and causality professed by their international colleagues.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The 1991 Vukovar Battle and cultural memory therefore converge only to maintain the relativist historical knowledge as images of the traumatic past disabling Croatian society to develop a “true” social

framework of memory. Subjective memory, testimonial narrations and personal history are neglected and not perceived as valid and reliable source of knowledge. Such text forms and narratives have not gained prominence in the contemporary social inquiry of the war in Croatia. Since the text forms of experience and memory can never be neutral from the moral, historical and ethical relevance point of view, it could be argued, according to Ricoeur that memory, history, forgetting and remembering all belong to the people and without their memories the history could not exist (Ricoeur, 2004). The 1991 Vukovar Battle and all the memories related to it by Croatian citizens and Vukovar survivors deserve to become a part of the official historical knowledge – an integral part of the cultural memory. Vukovar testimonial witness not only shapes the group memory and its common knowledge, but it also demands from the Croatian society to remember the Battle and atrocities as a social duty with moral obligation to acknowledge human sacrifice, giving the meaning to “their loss through justice and truth” (Cvikić, 2012: 31).

Devalued moral consciousness of the Croatian nation confines the Vukovar marginalized histories into the inaccessible space that lays beneath various selective interpretations of the war. It is still unclear who is recording history in Croatia today and for whom is it done. Its defenders, victims and survivors are in no position to freely voice out their remembered past and truth through their testimonial narrations. Therefore, assisted scholarly interpretations threaten to replace it with their own versions of historical truth and by doing so they silence the witness with secondary traumatization (Špoljar Vržina, 2009, 2010, 2012). In order to achieve culturally prescribed goals, the political and post-communist society elites in Croatia have imposed

public discourse that selectively target war events and socially construct collective memory disconnected from its historical roots, thereby obstructing the scholarly inquiry into the complex structure of committed violence and crimes in Vukovar 1991 Battle.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] Sandra Cvikić's research (conducted in the period 2011-2012): Vukovar 1991 Battle in the Context of Public and Scholarly Discourse about Yugoslavia's Dissolution and Homeland War in Croatia; Dražen Živić's demographic research (conducted in the period 2010-2012) for the project Vukovarsko-srijemska županija – Prostor, ljudi, identitet and through the series of conferences Vukovar 1991; and Mateo Žanić' research (conducted in June 2012): Symbolic Construction of Urban Space. Case of Vukovar.
- [2] According to Sučić and Živić (2007) the military power ration was as following: Croatian "Army"/Vukovar defenders (4 000 people, 2 tanks, 25 mortars, 20 artillery weapons, 20 counter air defence weapons) vs. Yugoslav Peoples' Army and Paramilitary Forces (40 000 – 60 000 trained soldiers, 600 armoured vehicles, complete artillery and air force on disposal).
- [3] The figures used in order to show the extent of the violent destruction imposed on the Vukovar citizens and its infrastructure, comes from the official data reported by the Hague Tribunal during Slobodan Milošević's trial in 2006 (Sučić and Živić, 2007; Živić, 2008; Grujić and Bilić, 2009). The Vukovar 1991 war demography entails following: 1 739 persons were killed out of which 638 defenders and police force members, 97 civil defence members and 458 civilians (and the status of the remaining persons is unknown); 353 persons were considered missing, out of which 178 defenders, 56 civil defence members, 115 civilians (and for 4 persons the status is undetermined); 2 796 persons were held captive (in various concentration camps in Serbia and occupied Croatian territories by Serbian forces); in the wider Vukovar area 1 232 victims' bodies were exhumed in the mass graves (Vukovar Cemetary – Memorial Burial of the Homeland War Victims, Ovčara farm, Borovo, Negoslavci, Berak, Sotin). Figures related to the forced war migrations (ethnic cleansing of non-Serbian population) – exiled population – are as following: 2009 data indicates that from the Vukovar city

area 22 061 citizens are exiled (almost half of the pre-war population), and it is important to note that Croatian official statistics does not have the access and numbers related to exile status of its (unregistered) citizens in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Germany, Austria and other European and cross-Atlantic states. Total material damage (infrastructure and housing) amount to 2.5 billion of kunas.

- [4] "The Homeland War is the generally accepted name for a recent period in Croatian history in the 1990s, when the modern Republic of Croatia was established, and then defended in the imposed war. (...) The term Homeland War refers to the following: final preparations of the Serbian aggressor for war and the realization of the main goal of Greater Serbian foreign policy of "all Serbs within one state" (in the greater part of the territory of the former Yugoslavia); unconstitutional and terrorist actions, and the arming and the armed insurgency of part of the Serbs in Croatia after mid-1990 (in military terms, a creeping or latent aggression); start of structuring of Croatian defensive forces after August 1990; start of the war and open aggression of Serbia and Montenegro – that is, of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian -Montenegrin units – on Croatia in the summer of 1991 (soon after the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia enacted on 25 June 1991 the Constitutional Decision on the Sovereignty and Independence of the Republic of Croatia); defense of the territory of the Republic of Croatia starting in 1991, and the liberation of the greater part of its provisionally occupied territory in the period between late 1991 and the end of 1995. Therefore, according to the laws of the Republic of Croatia the term Homeland War also comprises the period immediately preceding the war in Croatia, i.e., open Serbian aggression on the Republic of Croatia, and the period immediately after the end of war operation in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina." (Nazor, 2011: 10-11).
- [5] In Sandra Cvikić's research, she surveyed more "then 900 domestic and international works on Yugoslavia's dissolution and war in Croatia, published in the period 1991 – 2010 (Cvikić, 2012: 39). Namely, 71% of the reviewed works does not mention the Vukovar 1991 genocide at all! This in return indicates the fact that contemporary scholarly and popular literature is "continuously under technical censorship which perpetuates a sophisticated production of selective and biased memory and history reconstruction" in Croatia (Cvikić, 2012: 39).

- [6] The NGO Documenta-Centre for Dealing with the Past was established in 2006 with the aim to initiate a process that will confront Croatian citizens to deal with its violent past – war related events for the period 1941 – 2000. However, the dangers in the fact that this non-government initiative (that has spread so far its activities to the whole region of the former Yugoslavia states) has stepped into the realm of public debates shifting the discussion about the relevant war-related issues from scientific and juridical domain into the public domain of disputes over various interpretations of the historical truths.
- [7] As indicated by Connerton, they are “specific to the culture of modernity” (2009: 2).
- [8] Ovčara atrocities and a mass grave is on the farm next to the city of Vukovar where on November 20, 1991, 266 wounded civilians and defenders and medical staff (20) were taken away from the General Hospital, executed and buried by the YPA and paramilitary forces. 200 bodies in the age between 16 and 72 were exhumed in September – October 1996 (Nazor, 2011: 105).
- [9] For more information on Serbian aggression on Croatia and Homeland War see on-line publications by the Croatian Homeland War Memorial and Documentation Centre in Zagreb: <http://centardomovinskograta.hr/>.
- [10] According to Ramet universalism is “the belief that one can speak sensibly of a universally valid moral standard by which one may criticize the laws or practices of a given government for being wrong (immoral) and that one can establish some universally valid moral precepts by the exercise of unaided reason” (2005: vii).
- [11] Authors such as: Darko Karačić, Tamara Banjeglav and Nataša Govedarica (2012); Bette Denich (1994); Rose Lindsey (2004); Mladen Ostojić (2009); Britt Baillie (2013); Lauren A. Rivera (2008).
- [12] According to Ramet relativism is “any orientation which relativises morality or which treats the rights of one (group of) people as less important than than the rights of some other (group of) people” (Ramet, 2005: xvii).
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