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Croatian Homeland War Memorial Museums – Exhibiting Urbicides and Concentration Camps

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Abstract

Recently opened memorial museums and exhibitions in Croatia museumize the “Homeland War” of 1991 to 1995. This article examines the four major institutions, the Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac as well as three sites in Vukovar: The Memorial Center for the Homeland War, the Memorial Hospital and the Ovčara Memorial Home. This first systematic site analysis compares 1) the overall narratives; 2) how enemy images from World War II are reactivated to demonize “the other”; 3) how women are represented in these war exhibitions; and 4) the topics that are left out. I argue that while there is still no national museum that includes war developments in all of the country, the two big institutions, the Museum in Karlovac and the Center in Vukovar, focus on the “defenders,” as the Croatian fighters are called – while in Karlovac strikingly marginalizing and at the Center completely omitting civilians. War here means (male) soldiers and weapons, while the other two institutions portray individual victims without discussing their biographies. In all sites, Serbs are depicted with reference to World War II: as Chetniks, running “concentration camps” who committed either “urbicide and culturocide” or a “holocaust” against Croats.

Keywords: Croatia; Homeland War; Memorial Museums; Vukovar; Karlovac

Thirty years ago, most of the deadly fighting ceased in Croatia. The “Homeland War,” as the Croats call it, officially ended two years later with the five-day “Operation Storm” in August 1995 when the Croatian Army gained control over the Serb territory of the self-proclaimed Serb Republic of Krajina. In order to commemorate the war, first memorials and now also memorial museums opened. Here, I analyze all the major institutions with permanent exhibitions in Croatia: the 2019 Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac and three sites in Vukovar: the 2013 Memorial Center for the Homeland War, the Memorial Hospital from 2006 and the Ovčara Memorial Home and mass grave site from 2006.¹ While their names differ – museum, center, memorial – as it is often the case also internationally with similar institutions, they all have permanent exhibitions devoted to the 1990s war, which combine historical information with memorial elements.

I firstly argue that these different sites are *in situ* memorial institutions not only because they are located at the sites of the events the exhibitions deal with, but also in the sense that they are limited to local events. There is no national museum permanently exhibiting an overview of the events throughout Croatia. While it might not seem surprising that, as I will show, crimes committed by Croats are not exhibited in Croatian memorial museums, this local focus also means that the expulsion and crimes Serbs committed against non-Serbs in the Krajina at the beginning of the war in 1991–1992 are barely mentioned.²

Secondly, I will show that the two big museums, the Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac and the Memorial Center for the Homeland War in Vukovar, have a striking focus on military aspects – visualized primarily by (male) fighters and their weapons – while civilian aspects are

almost completely missing. “War” is here understood as the heroic fighting “we,” the Croatian “defenders”³, wage to save the homeland. In contrast, the Memorial Hospital and the Ovčara Memorial Home in Vukovar focus on the individual victims killed during the 1991 Serb siege of Vukovar and, in particular, those who were taken from the hospital once Vukovar fell and were murdered at the Ovčara industrial farm. The victims’ biographies are mostly not discussed in these latter sites; only their names and dates of birth are given – in contrast to the Center, where we learn more about some of their (the defenders’) backgrounds. Bringing together the narratives of all three Vukovar sites allows us to close some gaps each of the institutions leaves.

I thirdly argue that all exhibitions evoke empathy with the Croats yet paint a black-and-white picture in which a constructed “we,” the Croats, did nothing wrong. Croatian crimes are omitted as if mentioning them would diminish the much larger crimes Serbs committed in this war. While it is typical for post-conflict societies that “they” are painted as a homogenous evil enemy (Sundhaussen 2004), I show that in the post-Yugoslav context, this is done by borrowing terms from World War II for depicting the 1990s war. The Croatian museums refrain from claiming openly that Serbs committed a genocide against Croats, given that neither scholarship nor the courts would support such a claim. Yet, Serbs are depicted either as “Chetniks,” as the Serb royalists who committed mass murder in occupied Yugoslavia during the 1941–1945 civil war were called, or as the new Nazis, when it is claimed that they ran “concentration camps”⁴ and committed an “urbicide and culturocide” or even a “holocaust” against Croats. National authorities and memory institutions apply the “Holocaust template” (Radonić 2020) to prove that “we” have suffered “just like the Jews” and to demonize the enemy. “Universalization of the Holocaust” (Eckel and Moisel 2008) in this case means that the Holocaust has become a “container” (Levy and Sznajder 2007) for other victim stories and a model of how to narrate one’s own suffering. Use of old enemy images and self-identification with a World War II faction thrived during the 1990s war – the enemy was depicted as the new Nazis.

The first section sketches the transformation of World War II memory politics in Yugoslavia and independent Croatia, thus contextualizing the discourse regarding the 1990s war and the museums’ references to the Ustasha – as the Croatian fascists collaborating with the Nazis and Italian Fascists in World War II were called – and Chetniks – Serb Monarchists whom the Allied Forces first considered the main resistance party in World War II but who then collaborated with Italian Fascists. I will show that these enemy images were reactivated in the 1990s war. The Serbs who held the Krajina in Croatia from 1991 to 1995 took the Croatian historical revisionism and downplaying of the Ustasha crimes as an excuse for their 1990s war crimes – claiming they were preventing a new Ustasha genocide against the Serbs. There are no Serb museums of the 1990s war; instead, World War II museums such as Donja Gradina serve as a background for justifying current Serb nationalism. This context is crucial for understanding Croatian museumization efforts.

The second part provides the first comprehensive comparative analysis of the museums in Karlovac and Vukovar. While the commemoration of the Homeland War has been fairly well researched (Šuligoj and Rudan 2022), a detailed analysis of memorial museums has been lacking. Publications that mention museums in the larger context of memory politics and commemorative rituals devote only one or two paragraphs to them (Banjeglav 2019, 203–204; Balžuc 2018, 20–21; Clark 2012; Križić Roban 2010, 234–235; Kurka 2022; Mrvica Madarac 2020; and Schellenberg 2017). Even a Croatian master’s thesis on the use of digital media in the Karlovac Museum only briefly introduces the institution and buys into the heroic narrative when it describes the museum’s location as “having received the greatest honor in peace – as a symbol of invincibility and the creation of a sovereign Croatian state and an eternal memorial to commendable heroes” (Mihalić 2022, 26, my translation). Schellenberg (2016, 46–52) discusses both the exhibition at the Memorial Hospital and the Ovčara Memorial, but not in relation to the foci of this article.

I compare the four institutions and their exhibitions in terms of 1) the overall narratives, 2) the references to World War II and Nazi crimes, 3) the representation of women and gender, and 4) the voids and “elephants in the room” (Zerubavel 2006), which are (noisily) missing in the exhibitions. I argue that demonizing⁵ enemy-images from World War II, “traditional” gender relations, and gaps

in the 1990s war narrative have become constitutive for Croatian nationalism. On the one hand, the new museums show the hardship caused by the Serbs' attack against Karlovac and Vukovar and thus succeed in museumizing Croatian suffering and courage in fighting back. On the other, the unreconstructed nationalist narrative leaves out all gray zones that would complicate the story. When it comes to the gender dimension of musealizing war (Spring 2019; Winter 2013, 34; Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006), the Karlovac museum, though led and designed by women, stands out in marginalizing female defenders – seemingly a threat to predominantly Catholic, conservative post-1990 Croatian nationalism.

Methodological and Theoretical Approach

The analysis is based on my repeated museum visits, documentation of the outdoor and indoor spaces through photographing all elements, guided tours, guidebooks, the museums' websites, and e-mail exchanges with museum officials and exhibition designers between January and August 2021.⁶ These sources were subjected to a systematic analysis and then comparison of the four museums on several levels. A site analysis discusses the *in situ* specifics (involvement of human remains, if any) of each institution, situates the museum in the broader city and regional location and war history, and analyzes how the museum and its permanent exhibition refer to spatial dimensions. A qualitative discourse analysis of all exhibition and guidebook texts examines the main narrative by asking which causes, responsibilities, needs for action, and values, as well as self- and other positioning, are addressed in the texts and how this is done (Keller 2011, 59; Jäger 2004). Visual analysis of the images (Paul 2013; Brink and Wegerer 2012) asks if the protagonists are displayed collectively or individually, in heroic group portraits or headshots commemorating the individual "fallen" defender or murdered victim, and how gender relations are represented on the visual level. Object analysis looks at how the objects are put to work to convey the museum narrative, if "auratic" objects are highlighted, for what purpose and how, if the "object biography" (Dannehl 2017) provides information about how objects testify of the violence connected to a person or an event, "survive" war and violence and end up in the museum – and again, how gender features on this level. Beyond a mere description of what can be found in which museum on which of these levels, this article focuses on what is displayed where in the hierarchy of visibility arguing that undesired aspects are often hidden deeply like in endless chronologies. In contrast, auratic objects and war icons are put to work center-stage to convey the dominant national narrative about the Homeland War. I understand museums as hybrid media (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006, 37) that are more than the mere sum of texts, photographs, and objects. Only a combined analysis of the different media used in museums and the whole their interplay produces allows meaningful insights.

Museums are key producers of knowledge about history. It was argued earlier in regard to national museums that they need "to be analysed as manifestations of cultural and political desires, rather than straightforward representations of historical or national 'facts'" (Aronsson and Elgenius 2014, 2). This is true also for many publicly funded, often regional or city museums and even for privately initiated museums that choose to represent the dominant narrative. Public museums and other institutions narrating the dominant "history" showcase which version of the past is canonized for identity purposes.⁷ In the 19th century, "museums, already established as sites for the bringing together of significant 'culture objects', were readily appropriated as 'national' expressions of identity, and of the linked idea of 'having a history' – the collective equivalent of personal memory" (MacDonald 2003, 3). Consequently, museums are far from neutral spaces of knowledge transfer that simply depict what actually happened. "They never describe war; they only tell us about its footprints on the map of our lives" (Winter 2013, 23). Museums are, rather, manifestations of cultural patterns and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion that govern the relations between social, ethnic, and religious in- and outgroups – and are, therefore, contested spaces (see Sommer-Sieghart 2010; Muchitsch 2013). When the dominant memory politics excludes contents from its museums

or impedes the existence of museums on certain topics altogether, grass-root musealization initiatives can, especially when using digital resources, fight this silencing (Walden 2022, 27–30; Milic 2022).

The subcategory of memorial museums combines information about the past with commemorative elements (Williams 2007, 8). The fact that so many recent memorial museums find themselves instantly politicized reflects the uneasy conceptual coexistence of reverent remembrance and critical interpretation. Or as Jay Winter (2013, 22) put it, “what is war doing in a museum? Shouldn’t war be marked in a memorial? Where does the profane stop (MUSEO) and the sacred begin (MEMORIAL)?” The “Never again” they propose, “instilling in their visitors and societies democratic values” and other “utopian goals are often challenged by their political genealogies” (Sodaro 2018, 4). Museums are flagships of national identity, in the case of public memorial museums often initiated or led by “mnemonic warriors” who “draw a sharp line between themselves (the proprietors of the ‘true’ vision of the past) and other actors who cultivate ‘wrong’ versions of history” (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 17). At the same time, new museology and the deconstruction of concepts of identity and nation-state have led to transformations in many museums that chose to implement these debates. “Articulating postnational, transcultural or ‘hybrid’ identity” (MacDonald 2003, 9) has become one of the challenges – as well as challenging traditional gender representations (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006; Winter 2013, 34). Yet, Croatian and post-Yugoslav memory politics and key memorial museums are too involved in the post-Yugoslav “war on memory” and in the still very painful memory of the 1990s war to reflect these later trends.

Memory Politics in Postwar Yugoslavia and Independent Croatia

During World War II, Nazis, Italian Fascists, and Horthy’s Hungary had occupied Yugoslavia and created the “Independent State of Croatia” as a Nazi satellite – led by the Ustasha in most of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1945, interwar Yugoslavia was reestablished, yet this time as a socialist state, given that the partisans, led by Tito’s communists, had liberated most of its territory from the Nazis without foreign support and that Tito used this fact to legitimize power (Höpken 1999, 223). But the country also had to legitimize its existence as a multiethnic state, following a civil war between the Ustasha, partisans, and Chetniks, which had raged during World War II. Postwar Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) was a one-party socialist state and a federation. It had six constituent republics: the more or less ethnically homogenous Slovenia, Croatia (inhabited primarily by Croats, but also with regions with Serb majorities), Bosnia and Herzegovina (inhabited primarily by Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats), Macedonia (where, beside the Macedonian majority, also Albanians and Turks lived), Montenegro (two thirds Montenegrins with minorities from most other republics), and finally Serbia including the two autonomous Yugoslav provinces Kosovo (inhabited by Kosovo-Albanians and Serbs) and Vojvodina (inhabited also by neighboring nations, especially Hungarians). After 1945, no specific nation/ethnic group (for example, the Croats) was condemned; all guilt and responsibility were externalized to the defeated noncommunist powers such as the Ustasha and Chetniks (Radonić 2010, 109). One challenge was the question of how to deal with the mass murder committed by the Ustasha, a Nazi collaborationist regime that had operated death camps. The biggest of these, Jasenovac, was a death camp complex, where around 100,000 Serbs, Roma, Jews, as well as political prisoners, were killed (Calic 2018, 170).

The Communist Party forbade debates about the civil war, which did not fit the slogan of “brotherhood and unity” of all Yugoslav nations (Jambrešić-Kirin 2006, 166). Partisan crimes were a taboo, and the Holocaust was treated as a minor matter, since the victims of “Fascist” atrocities were rarely subdivided into resistance as opposed to genocide victims; they all were simply called “victims of Fascism.” During the 1960s, controversies between Serbian and Croatian historians unsettled this narrative about the “supranational” Yugoslav partisans by raising the question of the Serbian and Croatian “share,” on the one hand, in the heroic victory and, on the other, in collaboration (Hudelst 2004, 259). “The fragmented memory conveyed by the official historical

narrative gave rise to multiple frustrations that were not discussed in public discourse: On the Serb side, frustration – long unexpressed and inexpressible – over the insufficient recognition of the Serb victim role in the war; on the Croatian side, the no less suppressed frustration with a latent accusation of collective guilt” (Höpken 1999, 225, my translation) – the idea of a general Croat inclination toward “genocidality.” Consequently, the different ways of remembering the war became an element of political mobilization in the late 1980s.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia was accompanied by a break with both the antifascist frame and the communist dogma about World War II. Post-1989 memory politics brought about numerous changes on the level of dominant public discourse, the symbolic sphere of renaming streets or the currency, memorial spaces, and other, different media important for renegotiating national memory and identity (Kuljić 2010). In Croatia, the “Independent State of Croatia” (1941–1945) was depicted as a milestone in Croatia’s struggle for national identity. Croatia’s president Franjo Tuđman, a former partisan and World War II historian, ran a deficient democracy and became the country’s revisionist-in-chief (Tuđman 2004). He attempted to reconcile Ustasha and partisans who had, in his words, both fought during World War II for the same goal, the Croatian cause – albeit in different ways (Čulić 1999, 105–108). Although antifascism was anchored formally in the new constitution, most street names that commemorated the victories of the partisan struggle and the victims of World War II were renamed. The “Square of the Victims of Fascism,” the location of the Ustasha and Gestapo prison in Zagreb, was renamed the “Square of the Croatian Great Men”; thousands of memorials commemorating “victims of Fascism” or the antifascist struggle were removed or destroyed (Hrženjak 2002).

After Tuđman’s death in 1999, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) won the elections. During the following process of full democratization, the manner in which the past was dealt with in Croatia also changed and President Stipe Mesić reappraised the antifascist narrative. The government broke with Tuđman’s revisionism regarding the Ustasha, yet remained careful in its language because it was under huge pressure from the military, veterans’ organizations, and the former Tuđman party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) (Radonić 2010, 317). These groups treated the new government as traitors because of the cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Kasapović 2001, 23). In 2003, the HDZ won the elections again, yet this time prime minister Ivo Sanader maintained a Europe-friendly democratic course. The HDZ government hired as director of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum a US-educated art historian who stressed that the new permanent exhibition, which opened in 2006 while Croatia was attempting to join the European Union (EU), was developed in partnership with international experts and met “European standards” (Radonić 2021, 108). The exhibition focuses on individual victims, their names, testimonies, belongings, and drawings and has thus served successfully as a “dray-horse towards Europe,” as the critical journalist Boris Pavelić (*Novi list*, May 15, 2005) put it. Sanader was later imprisoned for corruption. Except during another coalition government led by the SDP from 2011 to 2015, during which Croatia joined the EU in 2013, Croatia has remained in the hands of the HDZ until today.

Museumization of the Homeland War

Whereas Jasenovac was compared to the “Croatian Holocaust” (as partisan crimes from 1945 were called) during the Tuđman era, HDZ prime minister Ivo Sanader had a different approach to history. In Jasenovac, he emphasized contemporary Croatia’s “commitment to antifascist values” but added that the “Homeland War” (1991–1995) was also fought against a type of fascism (Radonić 2010, 331). In 2005, he argued similarly in the Israeli Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem, claiming that the Croats had been victims of the same kind of evil as Nazism and Fascism during the war in the 1990s and that no one knew better than the Croats what it meant to be a victim of aggression and crime. One newspaper reported this under the headline “Croatia will get a Museum of the Homeland War” (*Vjesnik*, June 29, 2005). In post-Yugoslav territories, the idea spread that

one's own nation, whether the Bosniaks, the Croats, or the Serbs, were the new Jews of the 1990s war and the enemy the new Nazis or Fascists (MacDonald 2002). The adaptation of World War II narratives was a common "tactic" in Central Eastern Europe, especially during EU integration when it came to claims of a "double genocide" (Katz 2016) committed by the Nazis and the Soviets. Yet, the post-Yugoslav wars in Croatia and Bosnia added a new layer to this approach of competing victimhood when depicting the victims of the 1990s wars as the "new Jews." This case of "memory appropriation" (Subotić 2019, 9) seems to confirm the universalization of the Holocaust as the negative icon of our era (Diner 2007; Levy and Sznajder 2007). Furthermore, memorial museums have "because of their seemingly vast potential to confer legitimacy, enact social change, and promote liberal democratic values, (...) become a truly global form: they appear to be the embodiment of what Astrid Erll terms 'travelling memory,' exemplifying the movement of 'carriers, media, contents, forms and practices of memory' between and across national and cultural borders" (Sodaro 2018, 5). To what degree do Croatian memorial museums devoted to the 1990s war reflect international trends of exhibiting war? "War museums began to change in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. They began to privilege non-combatant victims of war alongside civilian and military mobilization in the war efforts of combatant countries. Crucial to this development was the emergence of the subject of the Holocaust as a central element in the history of the Second World War," as Jay Winter (2013, 29) put it. Does this apply when exhibiting the 1990s war?

The Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac

The town of Karlovac is 50 kilometers south-east of the Croatian capital Zagreb and has about 50,000 inhabitants. The Museum of the Homeland War is dedicated to the Karlovac front of the 1991–1995 war. At the time the museum opened in 2019, an open-air weapons and military vehicles exhibition had been in place since 2002 (Halovanić 2006, 211; see Figure 1). The museum is housed in a former Habsburg military barracks from the 19th century, part of the defense line against the Ottomans. (Schellenberg 2016, 25). In the post-1945 socialist era, the Yugoslav army (JNA) had a large base in Karlovac. Croatia blockaded all JNA army bases at the beginning of the war in 1991 because the JNA was considered Serb-dominated and a supporter of the "Serb aggression." Serb units then tried to break through this blockade to get to the barracks. Fighting reached Karlovac on October 4, 1991, when the JNA and local Serbs attacked Karlovac. Because Croatia is geographically narrow here, the country could have been cut in two. The JNA and the Serbs reached the suburb of Karlovac-Turanj (where the museum is located today; see Figure 2) and the bridge required for entry to the city. In 1991–1992, this line was held by the Croats, initially badly armed, against the local rebel Serbs from the so-called Republic of Krajina, the self-proclaimed Serb territory in Croatia, and the Yugoslav army. Today's museum building was the only building that had remained standing among ruins from the Serb shelling in this area. It served for relaxation of Croatian soldiers behind the front lines (who ironically called it "Hotel California"). For preservation purposes, the ruin that houses the museum today is "enveloped" by a glass building (Božić 2012, 27). In contrast to Vukovar, the Croats held Karlovac, although the city was severely damaged in the war and the population suffered badly, especially from the shelling from the Krajina.

The institutional initiators of the museum are the City of Karlovac and the Karlovac City Museum; the museum is a branch of the City Museum (Stjepanović 2012, 8). But the initiative is also connected to the retired brigadier Dubravko Halovanić. After the fighting ceased in 1993, he started to build up a collection to which many soldiers contributed by bringing objects for "their war museum" (Halovanić 2006, 203). In 1995, he was part of the *Oluja*, the Croatian "Operation Storm," and brought back a small collection of "weapons of enemy soldiers" (Halovanić 2006, 203). As a member of the Karlovac City council, he later proposed the founding of a museum (Halovanić 2006, 203). In 2001, the military saw no further use for the ruins, and the mayor asked the Croatian government to donate the site to the City, which it did – and thus the open-air exhibit opened in 2002 (Halovanić 2006, 203).



Figure 1. Outdoor exhibition in front of the ruin which later became the museum. Courtesy of Suradnik13, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 2. The Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac after the opening, © Author.

In 2011, the Museum Council of the Croatian Ministry of Culture accepted the concept for the revitalization of the site beyond the open-air exhibit, for museum purposes, in a way that foregrounds the historical structures, calling the building “a witness to the events. The elements of the original architecture, devastated by war, and the new, contemporary ones, standing next to each other, symbolize two eras, the era of the destruction and the era of the creation, with the destruction of one space becoming a building element for the new one” (Božić 2012, 27). The exhibition’s author was Ružica Stjepanović, Karlovac City Museum’s senior custodian of the Department of Contemporary history for the period after 1990, deployed for this new museum’s purposes, while the conceptual design was by Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović, who had designed several exhibitions in Croatia, such as the Nikola Tesla Museum and the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka. The City Museum hired two Karlovac-based female architects to design the building (Božić 2012, 4). All the people in charge were thus women. The museum is funded by the City of Karlovac, Karlovac County, and the ministries of culture, Croatian defenders, tourism, and regional development. During the 2011–2015 government led by the leftist SDP, not much progress was made in opening this museum, designed to convey a black-and-white nationalist narrative, but it was realized during the following HDZ government. Then Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (HDZ) attended the 2019 opening. The visitors include school groups from Karlovac, the wider region, and Vukovar, with which the museum has an exchange program, individual domestic and foreign visitors, and organized groups like domestic defenders’ organizations and foreign tourists.

The permanent exhibition is in one big room on the first floor. Objects are the dominant elements, combined with posters and newspaper articles on the walls. Photographs in one smaller section feature as a wallpaper background for text and video screens, while in most parts the exhibition does not rely on them for visual communication. In the central part, the museum, as a hybrid medium, translates its *in situ* location into an installation that uses objects both as individual items with an “object biography” and as atmospheric elements: “the Serbs” (and the UN) are located on the right/ east bank of the Karlovac rivers that are marked on the floor, the Croats on the left/ west bank (see Figure 3). The Serb Krajina part is recognizable from a distance thanks to a town road sign in Cyrillic script. The JNA and Serb showcases east of the river show weapons aiming west toward the Croats, and vice versa. Thus, the central installation emphasizes the role of Karlovac and its rivers as a line of defense against the enemy from the east, the *ante muralis* function against the Serb Krajina, which began immediately east and south of Karlovac.

The narrative of the exhibition in Croatian and English⁸ can be roughly summarized as follows: this historical line of defense has worked again.⁹ When we, Croats, tried to gain independence, the great-Serbian aggressor, as the museum puts it, attacked us. Some of the Serbs initially claimed they were trying to save multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, but it soon turned out they all – not only the local Serbs and Serbia but also the Yugoslav Army (JNA) – just wanted a “Greater Serbia,” as the “How did the war start” text panel explains. So the Serbs brutally attacked us, bombed our town into ruins, but we stood up to fight, practically with just our bare hands, and defended Karlovac “by the strength of unity, courage and love,” as the very first introductory text puts it. Because of outstanding heroism and because we were right and they were evil, we won in the end, the exhibition claims.

The focus is clearly on the “Croatian defenders.” Civilian aspects come late in the exhibition (behind the central showcases). They are mentioned in the extensive chronology of the war in Karlovac, which the visitors can scroll through on a screen. While the use of digital media is now seen as essential for museums, the sheer volume of information available there also means that topics that are only covered there are low on the hierarchy of visibility, as visitors must actively choose to read them. It is in this digital chronology that completely new aspects are introduced – for example, that the health center was turned into a reserve war hospital or that the beginning of the school year on September 2, 1991, was postponed because of the war and on October 22 was switched to radio schooling.



Figure 3. The main exhibition room in Karlovac, © Author.

I thus argue that firstly, the Croatian (and Bosnian) museums differ from other post-1989 redesigned or newly opened museal institutions in Central Eastern Europe because in the post-Yugoslav context the focus is not on the Communist crimes but on the 1990s wars. Secondly, Karlovac is a typical example for Croatian museums that, to a striking degree, dismiss the European trend to focus on victims to convey the national narrative – they highlight heroic fighters instead. Péter Apor discussed the post-1989 trend as follows: “The most spectacular new national museums in the region, those that seek to commemorate the crimes of communism and to pay homage to the victims, seem to reinforce those myths of national martyrdom and historical essentialism that were often forged together in the last decades of the socialist dictatorships” (Apor 2014, 53). While national martyrdom and historical essentialism can be found in Karlovac, the victims are strikingly absent; and while the Communist crimes are not in focus, the Serb crimes after 1989 are.

This marginalization of civilian suffering comes to an end in the subsection “Urbicide and Culturocide.” Interestingly enough, the citizens are here only briefly portrayed as victims on the textual level and are not represented on the level of photographs or objects. It is the town and the churches that this text board presents as the main victim:

The enemy’s goal was not just to destroy the physical integrity of people [about which we have heard nothing so far in the exhibition], but to completely eradicate any trace of Croatian culture in the given territory. Heritage did not fall victim merely due to war conflicts, but was destroyed intentionally and systematically, which is testified to by numerous examples of devastated cultural monuments.¹⁰

The terms “urbicide” and “culturocide” from the title are not picked up in the text again. They stand out in this museum about heroism, love, and victory, when a genocide against the town and Croatian culture is claimed here. While the museum does not seem to follow certain international musealization trends, such as focusing on individual biographies, it does make use of one in particular: that is, implicitly depicting the suffering of one’s own collective as a genocide (but not, in this case, as a holocaust). I argue that the Srebrenica genocide serves as model here. What I have so far described as the “Holocaust template” should more precisely be termed the “Holocaust/genocide template” (Radonić 2020): in the process of “universalization of the Holocaust,” the term

“genocide” has become the strongest available and thus most desirable term to depict one’s nation’s suffering. In Karlovac, the immediate reference point is a genocide in a neighboring country, Bosnia, not the Holocaust itself.

In this museum, Holocaust museums do not serve as role models. While many newer museums worldwide focus on individual protagonists, their testimonies, biographical objects, and private photographs in order to evoke empathy, there is no such strong focus here. The memorial room on the ground floor does show glass bricks with names and portraits of “fallen defenders” on a wall, yet civilian victims are not included. Also, the Croatian anthem is written on the wall and a Croatian flag and a rosary are placed in showcases without captions in this room. The white glass bricks are lit in a way that outlines the borders of Croatia. The room’s dedication (in Croatian and English) reads: “With respect and love for you who, carried by patriotic ideals of freedom, had created our homeland and testified with your love how to fight for home and freedom.” The fallen individuals are not depicted as victims here, but as heroes who sacrificed their lives and as part of the collective.

In the main exhibition room, the war story is told along the lines of “us” vs. “them” and mostly not with the help of individual stories of the kind that are combined in many contemporary museums with private photographs or biographical objects. There are two major exceptions: The story of a JNA general whose helicopter was forced down by Croats is told from the perspective of one of the Croatian soldiers involved in the “joyful” capturing of the “arrogant” general, whose insignia and the radio device that were found in the helicopter are exhibited in a pull-out drawer.

The second individual story told with the help of objects can be found in the center of the exhibition space and is about Igor Tonkli, a teenager who volunteered as defender and was killed. We see a self-designed “Fuck the army” T-shirt showing a turtle copulating with a JNA helmet and jeans painted in the colors of the Croatian flag (see [Figure 4](#)). Tonkli wore these self-designed clothes to his prom at a JNA center in Karlovac in protest. He later volunteered for the 110th Karlovac brigade and was killed in Turanj in front of “Hotel California,” which houses the museum today, at the age of 18. His biographical objects are among those with the strongest “aura” at the exhibition and prove how powerful this medium is for conveying the national narrative. They are accompanied by the uniform Tonkli wore when he was killed by a piece of shrapnel. This exhibition does not feature a range of individual stories, instead highlighting this one as a paradigmatic narrative of innocent young volunteers who heroically gave their lives for the motherland.

Women are represented in this museum in an old-fashioned way, to put it mildly. Behind the central showcases there is a concrete structure representing a bomb shelter. Women are mostly relegated to this symbolic shelter, which depicts topics such as humanitarian help, civic protests and prayers at a mother’s rally demanding the JNA release their sons from army service. Again, it is only at the lowest level of visibility, the digital, endless chronology of war events, that women are mentioned explicitly as participants in the November 27, 1992, entry, which says that there were 239 women in the Croatian army in the Karlovac Defense Zone. Outside the shelter, on the object level, we see the helmet of Ljerka Begović, who was part of the medical service in the 110th brigade of the Croatian army, but we do not learn anything else about her and the only indication she is a woman is her name (which not all visitors will recognize as female). A backpack (with a red cross) is also shown in one of the central showcases, with the only information given on the digital captions screen that it belonged to Sabina Mihalić, a volunteer of the Homeland War.

Three of the medals exhibited in slim showcases on the wall, among many for men, are attributed to women; they were awarded to Ana Anita Kasunić and Sabina Mihalić Protulipac, but we do not learn for what. This is even more striking because there is so much to be told about these women: Ana Anita Kasunić is the head of the veterans’ association of an infantry company of the Croatian army, the “Rebels.” She was a defender, and today is prominently engaged in the commemoration of the Homeland War. The other woman, Mihalić Protulipac, then an 18-year-old volunteer who fought on the first frontline for 1,700 days, published a book about her experiences as a defender titled “Diary of a warrior’s soul” (*Dnevnik duše ratnika*) in 2016, which the museum has chosen not to mention. And yet, the medical backpack in the exhibition suggests that her primary role was

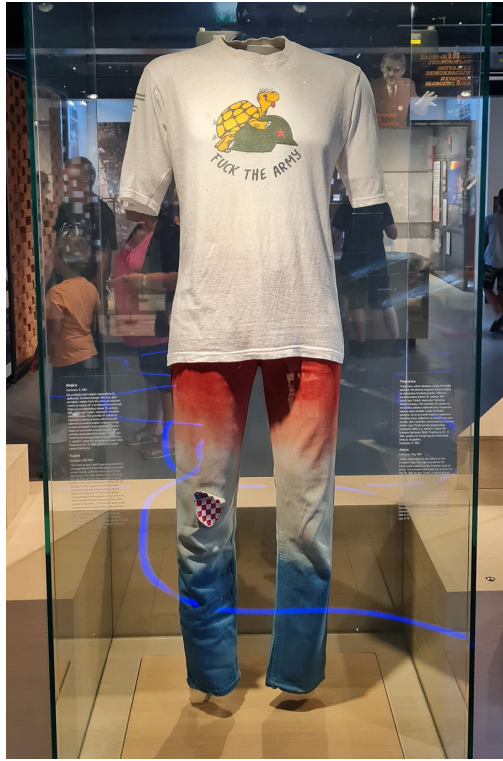


Figure 4. Igor Tonkli's self-made clothes at the Karlovac museum, © Author.

medical, but she fought alongside men and saved her cousin's life by carrying him to a car, despite having been wounded herself. Only when I revisited the museum in 2022 did I discover that Mihalić's autobiographical book is sold in the museum shop. Adding the audio-guide in 2020 did not bring any improvement. The only women it mentions are the exhibition-makers. Even where photos of women are shown in the symbolic shelter, the audio-guide does not mention them. Obviously, the museum, curated and led by women, chose to portray women only as non-fighters, as if female fighters could threaten the conservative nationalist self-image.

Several aspects are missing in this black-and-white museum narrative. The first gap is the reasons why Serbs might have feared becoming citizens of an independent Croatia: Tuđman's historical revisionism is non-existent here. While the museum often refers to some Serb proponents as Chetniks and thus connects the 1990s with World War II, it does not mention the Ustasha at all – but still they sometimes pop up seemingly unintended. For example, an (untranslated, only Croatian) leaflet of the Croatian League of Communists mobilizing against the Croatian independence referendum in May 1990 addresses several segments of society with different messages: Croat citizens, Serb citizens, workers, peasants, and intellectuals. The museum seems to have intended it as proof that the Communist party was against the Croatian democratic referendum. But the extensive text touches upon several issues that the museum takes pains to avoid. When addressing the "Croat people," it also clearly addresses the parallels between the Ustasha state and the new Croatian state, but pointedly does not perpetuate the Serb-nationalist idea of the genocidity of Croats. Its message for the "Serb people in Croatia" is a different one: "You are not alone. Your justified fear and bitter anger can be understood by every truth-loving Croat." This is the only time that Serb fear is mentioned in the museum – and even called justified. Of course, the leaflet is

Communist propaganda, but it brings in a multi-perspectivity that the museum obviously fears as harmful for Croatia.

The second important void in the museum narrative is Croat violence against Serbs throughout the war. Recent permanent exhibitions in other countries have taken pains to deconstruct nationalist narratives and critically confront perpetratorship and collaboration by their own collectives¹¹ without diminishing representation of “our own” suffering, but the Croatian museums do not choose this path when exhibiting the 1990s war. Certainly, Croats did not commit crimes to the same extent as Serbs in Croatia – but this could be made clear even when openly discussing crimes committed by Croatian soldiers and civilians. However, even the local Karlovac “incident” is missing at the exhibition, the killing of 13 Serbs on the nearby Korana bridge in 1991 by Croat defenders. The chronology mentions, in its entry for September 1, 1992, that on this day the trial of Mihajlo Hrstov began, but without further information, so visitors do not learn that he was convicted for killing the JNA soldiers – or that the killings took place at all.

Along the same lines, Croat violence against Serbs during Operation Storm in August 1995, when the Croatian army established control over the territory the Serb Krajina, is also missing: around 150,000–200,000 Serbs fled or were expelled, and several hundred, mostly elderly, Serbs who stayed behind were murdered. The last exhibition section, on “Victory” and Operation Storm, blames the Serbs themselves for fleeing and does not mention the murders. A panel shows president Tuđman’s appeal to Croatian citizens of Serb nationality on the first day of the operation “to stay inside their homes, emphasizing that they would be given all civil rights under the Croatian Constitution.” The full version of Tuđman’s announcements, displayed only in Croatian, even mentions that the Serb citizens need not fear for their lives. The museum completely omits the fact that the Serbs who fled were proven right, given how many of the elderly who stayed were murdered. This topic is omnipresent in the Serb collective and individual memory (many people in Serbia have relatives or friends who fled Croatia in 1995). In Croatia, it is publicly discussed by critical scholars, memory activists, and NGOs, yet it remains an “elephant in the room” in the nationalist narrative; and so far the only commemorations of the murdered are local or private memorials erected in Serb communities in Croatia (Banjeglav 2012).

Other missing topics include Serbs who opposed the nationalist self-proclaimed authorities of the Serb Krajina, both from inside and outside the Krajina territory; inner-Croatian criticism of Croatian nationalist politics; Croats who opposed the breaking-up of Yugoslavia; the antiwar campaign; the challenge of (not) integrating the Serb population into the nationalist Croatian narrative; the role Croatia played in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which started in 1992, including Tuđman’s and HDZ’s aggressive aspirations to adjoin Herzegovina to the Croatian “motherland.” The chronology only says that, on April 22, 1992, 82 soldiers left the Karlovac defense zone for the Herzeg-Bosna front after being demobilized from the Croatian army. “Herzeg-Bosna” was the name for the envisioned Croat entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A second war, this time between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks/Bosnian Muslims was the consequence of this attempt. The wording of “defending” Herzegovina remains unquestioned.

To sum up, this very recent exhibition from 2019 tells a one-sided nationalist story that omits crimes committed by the Croats – as one might expect it in a post-conflict context. Yet, even within the Croatian collective, the “we” is focused on the defenders, while civilians are marginalized and women reduced to praying or protesting mothers and givers of humanitarian aid. While this tendency can be observed in many war museums (Taber and Grover 2021), the fact that current museological discussions about how to represent war and gender in museums seem to have had no impact on this exhibition whatsoever is striking. “The Serbs” are depicted as an evil homogenous collective, and no attention whatsoever is paid to even hinting at trying to include the Serb minority still living in Karlovac. International trends like the focus on individual victims do not play a role in this museum from the 21st century.

The Memorial Sites and Museums in Vukovar

Vukovar is a small town, with fewer than 28,000 inhabitants, on the Danube near Croatia's eastern border with Serbia. It is (in)famous for the 1991 siege – basically the only reason it attracts tourists and Croats living in Croatia and abroad. There are numerous memorial sites in Vukovar, the Croatian “hero city” (Žanić 2008; Mrvica Mađarac 2020). Because they differ significantly, I chose to introduce several of them to paint a fuller picture rather than to analyze them in detail as in the Karlovac case. I focus on all the three key institutions, the Memorial Center for the Homeland War, the Memorial Hospital, and the Ovčara “Memorial Home” and Mass Grave Memorial.

Vukovar was under Serb siege from August 25 to November 19, 1991. On November 20, Serb and JNA forces entered the hospital, where medical personnel, patients, and civilians were sheltering in the basement nuclear bunker, and took away 261 people. Then, 200 of them were murdered at the site of the Ovčara agricultural industry farm, several others at smaller sites. Vukovar stayed under Serb control until 1995, when the UN-negotiated “peaceful reintegration” began. This lasted until 1998. At first, the Ovčara mass grave could not be located, but it was found in 1992 with the help of a survivor released from captivity. The mass grave could not be excavated during Serb control, so UN soldiers guarded the test exhumation site from 1992 until the full excavation in 1996 when Serb authorities withdrew step by step. At that time, 192 Ovčara victims were identified by name.¹² The siege, the war, and the mass murder are still omnipresent in Vukovar society, more than in any other part of Croatia.¹³

The biggest museum, the Memorial Center for the Homeland War, is located at the site of the former Croatian military barracks of the 204th Vukovar brigade (Blažuc 2018, 19). In 2013, when the Center was inaugurated on the initiative of and funded by the Ministry of Croatian Defenders, the leftist government was under heavy attack from Vukovar. After a census showed that bilingual road signs in Latin and Cyrillic had to be put up around Vukovar, the local Croats objected strongly, and so the pulling through of the opening of this “patriotic” museum can be understood as a pacifying measure (Žanić, Kufirin, and Živić 2017, 260). The governing council includes the Minister of Croatian Defenders and his appointee, representatives from the Ministries of defense, science, education and sports, culture, tourism, regional development and EU funds, the Center's director Ante Nazor, a regional and a city representative, as well as three non-local representatives of Homeland War associations. This includes the aforementioned Halovanić, who initiated the Karlovac Museum. The guides at the Center are uniformed or plainclothes soldiers.

The term “Center” is misleading, since there is no visitors' center, ticket office, or bookshop – only a security check at the entrance to the vast barracks compound. The permanent exhibition, which is only in Croatian, comprises an open-air military vehicles and arms park, barracks, and a plane including a virtual reality experience titled “Vukovar is burning.” The main exhibition in one of the barracks is called “The battle of Vukovar” (see Figure 5). It is less of a hybrid medium than the other exhibitions, as it mostly functions as a book on the wall, with text panels and photographs at eye level, with only a few object showcases and larger objects on the floor that break this pattern. It focuses on newspaper articles and maps, texts and photos of the various defenders' units, exhibits of weapons, medals, supplies dropped from planes, and some photographs of destroyed buildings and tanks. Photos mostly show male Croatian defenders, but – in contrast to Karlovac – two women are shown: a HOS volunteer and a military policewoman, both in uniform, with captions giving their names and information about how they survived the war. This focus on individual defenders thus seems beneficial for the inclusion of female fighters in uniform. That there are only two of them among photos of numerous male fighters in militant-macho poses actually represents the war situation quite fittingly.

The narrative stresses the heroic battle and pride in the defenders – or as the first, introductory text board puts it, “By defending Vukovar, the defenders defended the whole of Croatia, our beautiful and only homeland.”¹⁴ The defeat and fall of Vukovar are reinterpreted as a victory that defended the rest of Croatia. Civilians are mentioned in two sentences of the introductory text that



Figure 5. At the Memorial Center for the Homeland War in Vukovar, © Author.

honor the efforts of medical personnel and workers in factories, schools, community offices, churches, humanitarian help, and the inhabitants “who formed an unbreakable unit with the defenders.” Most of the other texts are either part of a chronology of the fighting or introduce different military units.

Prominently exhibited among the defenders of Vukovar are the members of the Croatian Defense Forces (HOS), the paramilitary unit of the far-right Croatian Party of Right (HSP). Its emblem bears the slogan “Ready for the home(land)” (*Za dom spremni*), which used to be the Ustasha salute in World War II. President Tuđman forbade the paramilitary organization in December 1991, yet here it is celebrated as heroic – again, as in Karlovac, without any mention of the war crimes committed by its “Black legion” (*Crna legija*). The exhibition does not explain what HOS was – the acronym HOS is not even spelled out in the exhibition. This gives the state institution the character of a memorial made exclusively *by defenders for* the heroic defenders: Most of the numerous photos are group images of named HOS members in uniform – including details of which of them died where or is still alive and the name of the photographer. These captions make clear that some of the Ovčara victims taken from the hospital were HOS fighters – something neither the hospital exhibition nor the Ovčara memorial home mention, as I will show later.

The narrative of the heroic struggle and the visual impression of fighters, weapons, uniforms, and medals is contrasted only once, toward the end of the exhibition. A single showcase with belongings of those defenders who were taken to Serb camps shows the only non-military objects – playing cards, drawings, and letters. Only here are the defenders framed as victimized inmates. Also, at the very end, there is a list of over 50 people taken from the hospital who have not yet been found and an extensive list of names of inmates taken to Serb camps. A guided tour I witnessed in 2021 was joined by a former camp inmate who brought along his family, so that his grandson, in particular, could hear the story. The man’s name was included on this list of prisoners, as his daughter pointed out. The fact that this group consisted only of this family and me made the guide, who was as always at this institution a soldier, adjust his tour to his expectations of their demands, giving a lot of space and authority to the former camp inmate and not sticking to a script. Because of this circumstance,

the guide also spoke openly about how wrong he found it that the Croatian courts had convicted a Croatian war criminal who was his “hero.”¹⁵ This central institution of memorialization of the 1990s war thus uses the *in situ* location and the symbolic role of Vukovar as the “hero city” that was gradually reintegrated from the Krajina into Croatia in 1996–1997 to convey a heroic narrative that normalizes right-wing Croatian paramilitaries and even convicted war criminals in front of children. This last part is not included in the guided tours for the eight-grade classes that come from all over Croatia and stay in the Center’s hostel, but the unreserved nationalism is.

In the permanent exhibition, the first reference to World War II terminology can be found next to a prominent object exhibited in a showcase: a pair of yellow boots produced at the Borovo factory in Vukovar, which distributed its remaining inventory among the defenders during the siege. This pair belonged to military policeman Marinko Ivanković who made it out from the city alive in them, as the caption informs. The text accompanying the boots says that once Vukovar fell, these boots were used for identifying the defenders and meant a death sentence to many because wearing them “denounced you as Ustasha” (*prokazan kao ustaša*). The exhibition does not elaborate on this hint that Serbs regarded the Vukovar defenders, many of them from the HOS far-right paramilitary unit, as Ustasha. Furthermore, in transcripts from Croatian Radio Vukovar broadcasting about the siege, Serbs are usually referred to as “Chetniks” or “drunken Chetniks.” Here too, therefore, using terms from World War II seems self-evident – without any explanation by the museum about who is meant by them. While in other post-socialist countries the suffering from Nazis and from Soviets mostly refers to the World War II and the immediate aftermath, here the World War II enemy and the one from the 1990s concur. The common term for the camps to which defenders were taken once Vukovar fell is “concentration camps,” where prisoners “spent 1 to 9 months, were maltreated and psychologically killed” (*psihološki ubijani*), as the text board about the technical army company reads. Since killings were rather the exception than the rule in these camps, this phrase seems to fulfil the function of justifying the term “concentration camp.”

The second barracks houses an exhibition of arms in one cellar room, while the other room is called “Serb Concentration Camps ‘Stajićevo’ and ‘Begejci,’” thus again implying that the Serbs were running camps comparable to those of the Nazis. It is an installation symbolizing camp prisoners (made of metal) hunkering down towards the wall with only some straw and a blanket to keep them warm (see Figure 6). After the fall of Vukovar, Croatian prisoners were taken to a variety of sites in Serbia, including farms in the villages of Stajićevo and Begejci, around 150 kilometers east of Vukovar. “Around ten inmates died of beating and bad conditions, but also killing of prisoners was noted,” the text board says. According to the museum, 3,000 prisoners passed through Stajićevo and 500 through Begejci. The camps existed between the fall of Vukovar on November 19 and the end of December 1991, when they were closed due to pressure from the International Red Cross, and most prisoners were returned to Croatia in prisoners’ exchanges, while some were brought to other camps in Serbia. In contrast to the main exhibition described earlier, which alleges “psychological killing,” this section does not even attempt to argue why the term “concentration camp” is used – it seems self-evident. In the era of the “universalization of the Holocaust,” it seems not to be enough to simply display Serb crimes; the Serbs must be framed as the new Nazis.

This exhibition, funded by a ministry and located in an institution with a name – Memorial Center of the Homeland War – that promises overview, informs exclusively about the defenders, so it is basically everything else that is missing here: not only crimes committed by Croats, but also all civilian aspects of the war. Here again, war is reduced to fighting, military units, weapons, and fighters to a striking degree, even if the Center might argue that other Vukovar sites are responsible for civilian aspects. Stephan Jaeger starts his book on war museums observing that in contrast to

the traditional war museums of the twentieth century... exhibitions in the twenty-first century, however, take a markedly different approach.... A brief look at three recent examples of toy tanks and vehicles in war museums... indicates a clear shift away from the imitation of



Figure 6. Exhibition of “Serb concentration camps,” © Author.

military equipment and toward the display of stories concerning the cultural impacts of war. War toys have become much more closely related to the fate of civilians. (Jaeger 2020, 1)

A prominent example for such a shift is the Museum of Military History in Dresden, which today includes the impact of war on the human body, deconstructs national history-telling as well as its own museum history (Pieken 2013). The Museum of Military History in Vienna has long opposed this transformative, self-critical trend, yet in 2023 the museum – which has been showing uncontextualized weaponry and uniforms – has closed the interwar and World War II exhibition for a redesign after years of public protest. The Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, to give a Central Eastern European example of a war exhibition, discusses the impact of war on civilian everyday life, even on sexual relations.¹⁶ In contrast, the biggest, state-funded Memorial Center in Vukovar, just like the city-funded museum in Karlovac, opposes these international trends.

In contrast, the smaller Memorial Hospital, located in the cellar of the still operating Vukovar hospital, which served as shelter during the 1991 siege, is a very different memorial institution. Like the Ovčara Memorial, it opened in 2006 (Križić Roban 2010, 234), on the 15th anniversary of the massacre, when the HDZ government was canonizing the memory of the Homeland War with the help of these first flagship *in situ* memorials. It falls under the authority of the Ministry of Health, is financed by the hospital, and the guidebooks are written by doctors. It was authored by the late architect Željko Kovačić, known for the Neanderthal museum in Krapina, and the painter, scenographer and designer Ivica Propadalo, initially from Bosnia, now an established artist from Zagreb (Hina 2021). The central figure in this case is a woman, Dr. Vesna Bosanac, who was the head of the hospital at the time the war started and was famous for her interventions urging the

international community to stop the shelling of the hospital during the siege. She was also involved in the return of the Croatian medical personnel during the “peaceful reintegration” of Vukovar in 1997–1998. She is today the voice of the memorial. Her photo is exhibited prominently in the hall, and she narrates the story in the documentary shown in the exhibition. In contrast to the militarized exhibitions in Karlovac and Vukovar discussed so far, this is a civilian-medical setting with a woman at the foreground.

The exhibition, again only in Croatian, is defined by its location. First, in the hallway of the hospital’s cellar, where gurneys are still pushed through, the only exhibition space are the wall tiles on which the names of the victims are written and where photographs from the siege period can be found on eye-level. The holes in the ceiling through which two bombs fell onto the hallway are highlighted both by the lighting and by the guide. Then one enters the confined space of the former atomic bomb shelter, which is a recreation of the 1991 conditions without exhibition texts or photographs, so the hospital claims that the shelter was left in its “authentic” condition (Banjeglav 2019, 203) – except for the last room, the candle room in which the names of the dead are read out in a recording. But in order to symbolize medical staff and patients, faceless plaster-cast people were added throughout the bomb shelter (see Figure 7) including plaster-cast newborns in the incubators. During the very scripted tour, the guide highlights the fates of the children and babies as a story that explains everything.

The little text there is in the exhibition can be found on the sterile-looking tiles of the hallway in front of the shelter: a chronology of the events in the hospital during the siege. The introductory text says that out of the approximately 2,500 wounded treated at the hospital during the “great-Serbian aggression against Croatia,” 60 to 70 % were civilians. It also stresses that around 20 wounded soldiers of the aggressor JNA and even members of infamous Serb paramilitary units were treated there.

Furthermore, one tile is devoted to each member of the hospital staff who died during the siege, as well as the 18 staff members who were killed at Ovčara: their names, years of birth, and professions are indicated. There are also tiles for each of the other victims identified from the Ovčara mass grave, yet they only contain the name and year of birth of the killed person. Of the 190 identified victims commemorated at that stage, two here are women. Ružica Markobašić, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy, was presumably killed because her husband Davor was



Figure 7. The Memorial Hospital in Vukovar, © Author.

infamous in Serb media as a Croatian special policeman, an early fighter who allegedly cut fingers off Serb children. In 2021, her statue was erected in front of the hospital (GS 2021). Why the second woman whose name is given on one of the tiles, Janja Podhorski, was taken to Ovčara seems unknown.

If we connect the names with the photo captions from the Memorial Center, we can add that in addition to the murdered hospital staff and the famous journalist Siniša Glavašević from Croatian Radio Vukovar, the killed also include HOS volunteer Tihomir Tomašić-Tihica and Mile Mlinarić, a member of Blago Zadro's elite "Turbo" unit. Undoubtedly, the mass execution of (wounded) fighters is a war crime. Still, the focus on merely the names of the killed makes it possible to avoid discussing the biographies of those first beaten and then shot at Ovčara. This issue is a highly politicized one because Serb representatives in Croatia, such as Vojislav Stanimirović from the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka* – SDSS), claim that Croatian defenders were hiding at the hospital dressed as patients. Former hospital director Bosanac denies this, saying that only members of hospital security were present and no disguised defenders (Hina 2010).

Another focus of both the Memorial Center and the Memorial Hospital is stressing the guilt of JNA Major Veselin Šljivančanin, the only perpetrator mentioned by name in the hospital's chronology and also highlighted three times during the guided tour. "He enters the hospital on 20 November and removes Dr. Bosanac from her position. JNA and paramilitary units lead away 400 men, wounded, staff, and their family members out of which 264 are killed, mostly at Ovčara," as the chronology puts it. The Memorial Center also explains that he was put on trial at the ICTY: "Veselin Šljivančanin, convicted in The Hague for the organization, torture, and taking away of 400 wounded from the Vukovar hospital, the killing of 264 people in Ovčara, and for circumventing the evacuation of 4,000 civilians after the fall of Vukovar," as the text board on the violation of the international law of war at the Memorial Center claims. But this is not true. That is what he was indicted for, but the ICTY convicted him for being a JNA officer who did not prevent the beating of prisoners by local Serb forces. He was found guilty of "aiding and abetting the torture of the prisoners" (ICTY 2010). Those found responsible for the killings were "Territorial Defense and paramilitary soldiers of OG [Operational Group] South," whereas the JNA had withdrawn before the killings, as the tribunal established – a ruling that caused outrage in Croatia. This remains a frustrating obstacle in the Vukovar war narrative, to a degree that has even made the Memorial Center twist the ruling.

Another important part of the hospital's narrative regards the "displaced medical healthcare" after Vukovar fell in 1991 – which lasted until the "peaceful reintegration" in 1997. The tricky part for the narration, which claims that all the staff left, is the fact that some doctors, probably all of them ethnic Serbs from Croatia, stayed there the whole time. Dr. Mladen Ivanković, for example, treated patients at this hospital before, during, and after the war, and once the hospital was again run by the Croatian Ministry of Health (Filipović 2019). That some chose to stay, no matter who was running the hospital, complicates the story of "displaced Croatian medical staff" – a narrative that excludes non-Croat staff – and thus this information can only be implicitly found in the guidebook.

When it comes to World War II terminology, the Memorial Hospital, like the Museum and the Center, refers to the perpetrators as JNA and "Chetniks," yet not so prominently as the other two. While the exhibition text uses the neutral term "Serb paramilitary units," the documentary shown in the exhibition features Dr. Juraj Njavro, a surgeon and commanding officer of the war sanitary service of Vukovar during the siege, speaking of JNA Major Šljivančanin who "came with his para-Chetnik units and brought away the wounded in six busses; they were then liquidated at Ovčara." The Hospital's publication contains the only mention of a "holocaust" suffered by the Croats: The editor of the Vukovar Memorial Hospital guidebook writes about "war death, massive destruction, the physical ruin of a city, the holocaust of its citizens" (Biro 2007, 179), while the former director of the hospital Vesna Bosanac states that after the occupation "JNA and Serb paramilitary pursued genocidal great-Serbian policies" (Bosanac 2007, 111). Again, the term "concentration camp" is also

used as self-evident in a key testimony in this guidebook, in which a doctor writes about his imprisonment in the Serb “concentration camp Stajićevo” (Emedi 2007, 216). Given that the exhibition is mostly an immersive environment in which visitors are supposed to feel as if they are themselves sheltering in the cellar, and that there is only a little text, it is not surprising that there are only few references to World War II enemy images. But an analysis of the text-heavy guidebook clearly shows that the same pattern of identifying Serbs either as “Chetniks” or as running “concentration camps” and as perpetrators of a “holocaust” or “genocide” against the Croats is applied by this institution. Both Holocaust and genocide serve as a template here.

The Ovčara Memorial Home is located in a former farm warehouse (in Croatian: *hangar*) that was part of a Vukovar-based agricultural combine. Over 260 people had been taken there from the hospital. They were beaten and 200 of them were killed – by Serbs from the Territorial Defense and paramilitary soldiers of the Operational Group South, as the ICTY established. Their bodies were deposited in a mass burial pit a few hundred meters away.¹⁷ Just like the Memorial Hospital, the Memorial Home opened in 2006 – on the 15th anniversary of the massacre (Blažuc 2018, 11). It was initiated by the Croatian Association of Former Inmates of Serb Concentration Camps – even the name is relevant for the research questions of this article. Its local president, Zdravko Komčić, himself in 1991 a prisoner transferred from Ovčara to a camp in Serbia, became the Memorial’s long-serving director (Naef 2013). The establishment was co-funded by the city of Zagreb, with two million Kuna, and the site was inaugurated by the mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, and the then Minister of Family, Defenders, and Intergenerational Solidarity, Jadranka Kosor from the HDZ party. When the institution announced plans to introduce entrance fees to finance the operating expenses, the City of Vukovar and the Vukovar-Srijem province took over the financing and admission remained free. As a consequence, Ovčara has been run by the Memorial Center for the Homeland War since 2019. All eighth-grade pupils in Croatia visit it.

The only publication available about Ovčara at the shop in the Memorial House in 2021 was a graphic novel published by the Association, drawn by the cartoonist Nenad Barinić, a policeman from Vukovar. The text (Croatian only) was written by Danijel Rehak, a sports teacher who became a defender of Vukovar and was brought to the “Serb concentration camps Dalj, Stajićevo, Sremska Mitrovica, and Belgrade” (Rehak and Barinić 2007, back cover). In 1995, he became the president of the newly founded Association and later its Center for the Research of War Crimes. What little text there is in the publication is a fictitious letter which a fictitious prisoner writes to his parents until he is murdered at Ovčara.

The dramatic cover displays the title “Ovčara – scream in the night” in blood-dripping red letters. The language is demonizing: “the members of the aggressor’s paramilitary, like vampires thirsty for blood, pounced on the wounded, civilians, and defenders, viciously plundering, humiliating, butchering, and killing them in many painful ways” (Rehak and Barinić 2007, 1). Serbs are drawn as bloodthirsty, wild Chetniks, with gaps between their teeth and bloody knives and called “savages” (11). The “stinking soldier” then tells one of the prisoners, “get out, you Ustasha cattle” (9), but it is not explained why Croatian prisoners were called Ustasha. Three of the perpetrators on the drawings have a hat or helmet with a red star on it, indicating that JNA soldiers were also among the shooters, which goes against the ICTY verdict from September the same year, 2007. Even if the graphic novel format calls for a “lively” depiction, the demonization of the enemy still reaches a surprising level for a pedagogical tool supposed to encourage engagement by young people.

In contrast to the publication, the Memorial House itself focuses on the names, portraits, and personal belongings of the over 192 identified victims in a reverent and quiet way. Any text other than the names, and little visual material other than the portraits, can be found only on the computer touch screen in the glass entrance hall added for the memorial. The names are displayed at the computer terminal in the entrance hall of the *hangar* together with the year of birth. The only elements that light the dark *hangar* room are lit portraits of the individual victims and their names projected in red letters spiraling down into a vortex in the middle of the *hangar* (see Figure 8). This focus on the names and private portraits references international trends of musealization of mass



Figure 8. Victims' names spiraling into a vortex at Ovčara, © Author.

murder. Moreover, the individual victims' belongings are exhibited under a typical glass floor – mixing objects found during the exhumations with others donated by relatives. While the publication and the name of the Association carrying the term “concentration camp” in it would make one expect a drastic depiction, the Memorial Home makes a different kind of reference to international icons: by implementing an empathy-evoking focus on the individual victim. Also, while the Memorial Center, today in charge of the site, calls Ovčara a “concentration camp” on the English version of its website, the almost identical text on the computer screen at the site uses the word “prison camp.” In contrast, the Croatian version in all cases uses the term “camp,” so the English “concentration camp” communicates how bad the Serbs were to a potentially less informed foreign audience.

The Memorial Home – like the Hospital – does not discuss the biographies/backgrounds of the Ovčara victims. On the outer wall of the *hangar*/memorial there is a memorial plaque next to the statue of Jesus erected by the Association in 2002, which makes a very general claim: “Croatian defenders, women, children and elderly were tortured and killed on this site in Ovčara in 1991.” The Center’s English website, the computer screen and a brief Ovčara leaflet give similar descriptions of the victims:

More than 260 Croatian defenders and civilians were brought to the *hangar* on November 20 from the Vukovar hospital. (...) Today, at the site of the former hangar, there is the Memorial Home Ovčara, forever preserving the memory of the wounded and civilians taken from the Vukovar hospital, imprisoned and tortured in the former hangar, and then executed and buried.

The phrase “wounded and civilians” seems awkward and hints at a politicization of this question between the Croat and the Serb dominant discourse. In contrast to the site itself, Minister Kosor gave numbers during her 2006 opening speech, saying that the victims were “wounded from the Vukovar hospital – 155 defenders, 15 members of Civil Security, civilians, and medical personnel as well as the two journalists Siniša Glavašević and Branimir Polovina” (Vlada 2006). Again, killing unarmed prisoners is a war crime, yet the Memorial House does not discuss who the murdered were, as if saying that if some of them were HOS paramilitaries, that would diminish the mass

murder. As a consequence, the identities of murdered women are also not discussed, nor the question of sexual violence against them. In one regard, the Ovčara memorial has a lot in common with the Jasenovac Memorial Museum (Radonić 2021, 108), which commemorates the victims of the former Ustasha concentration camp 1941–1945 and which also opened in 2006. When the “universalization of the Holocaust” was at its peak in the early 2000s (Levy and Sznajder 2007; Eckel and Moisel 2008), both institutions chose to follow the international trend to focus primarily on the individual victims by exhibiting their names, photographs, or personal belongings in a way that clearly references the design of Holocaust museums, but thus also avoids discussing painful questions of one’s own implication.

Conclusion

Now, 30 years after the war, there are institutions devoted to the memory of the Serb and JNA attack against Croatia and the “success story” of defending Croatia, a narrative even present in Vukovar, which *in falling* defended the homeland, as the Memorial Center puts it. There are no ambivalences and gray zones in the Croatian memorial museums devoted to the Homeland War. It seems almost unthinkable in this context to even mention crimes Croats committed during the war. There is only “us,” the loving, heroic defenders, and “them,” the great-Serbian aggressors and Chetniks. The story about “us” makes a few attempts at informing visitors about the overall developments in Croatia during the war but quickly shifts to “our” local heroes.

While it is not surprising that Croatian crimes are not mentioned since similar trends can be found in other post-conflict contexts (Bounia and Stylianou-Lambert 2013), the marginalization of the suffering even of Croatian civilians, for example in the Krajina, is. A comparison with military and war museums abroad shows that older exhibitions, like the one at the Museum of Military History (HGM) in Vienna from the late 1990s about the interwar period and World War II narrate war history from a similarly nationalist perspective that lacks a self-critical confrontation with Austrians in the Nazi annihilation machinery or the crimes of the Wehrmacht and exhibits weaponry without critical contextualization. Yet, years of public protest (Messner and Pirker 2021) have led to the closing of this exhibition part in 2023. In contrast to the old part, the redone new exhibition at the HGM about World War I devotes a significant part to the effects of war on soldiers, but also civilians, the senselessness of death, and Austrian responsibility. The redesigned Museum of Military History in Dresden explicitly deconstructs nationalist narratives and critically confronts the own institution’s history and former exhibitions (Pieken 2013). The Museum of the Second World War in the Polish city of Gdansk focuses on much more than the Polish experience, including topics ranging from international aspects of the world war including the Pacific front to the forbidden sexual relations of female peasants with forced laborers.

Museums in conflict or immediate post-conflict societies that are devoted to war usually paint a different picture than the key Croatian museums with their lack of civilian experiences. In Sarajevo, the Museum of Crimes against Humanity and Genocide encompasses all aspects of the war in Bosnia, with a strong focus on fates of children and women, including sexual violence not only against women, but briefly also against men. Museums in the northern and southern part of Cyprus exhibit “personal belongings of the victims” and photographs that “create the sense of the victimization of a community” (Bounia and Stylianou-Lambert 2013, 157). And while it is too early to say how the musealization of the Russian war against Ukraine will look like, the museum projects devoted to the “Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity” and the subsequent war in Donbas show a focus not only on helmets, shields, clubs, Molotov cocktails, elements of barricades or bulletproof vests, but also on rather civilian aspects like fire extinguishers, stoves, dishes, stretchers, and art (see Olzacka 2021, 1034–1035). In Croatia, the biggest museums devoted to the Homeland War do not follow this international trend to exhibit war through the lenses of both fighters and non-fighters, of both heroism and critical reflection on the horrifying effects of war.

In Croatia, there is furthermore no national history museum and thus no canonized national narrative regarding World War II; its history is told at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum (in this case relying heavily on personal belongings of the victims and their testimonies) and smaller museums in Lipa and Šibenik, but not in Zagreb. There is also no central museum devoted to the 1990s war. While Vukovar's role in the 1990s war explains why memorial museums are located in the "hero city," the Karlovac location might be explicable through the proximity of the front line to a city, Halovanić's initiative, and the attempt to increase appeal for tourists on their way to the coast. Both locations stress their role as the defense line, on the border to Serbia, in the one case, and the Serb Krajina within Croatia, in the other. The Memorial Museum in Karlovac and the Memorial Center in Vukovar are focused on military aspects and the defenders to a surprising degree. The museums do not simply reflect the dominant nationalist narrative about the Homeland War, but through their role as pillars of education visited by all Croatian eight-graders in the case of Vukovar and most from the region in the case of Karlovac, they play an active role in shaping the dominant discourse. Children are specifically targeted through offers like the VR experience in the plane in Vukovar – and offered a story without any grey zones.

"We" are portrayed especially traditionally in Karlovac when it comes to the depiction of women, while two female fighters can be seen in the militarized-macho atmosphere of the Vukovar Center. When we switch from the defenders to the medical sphere at the Memorial Hospital, a female director and nurses dominate the picture, thus the museums reproduce traditional gender roles even when putting women center-stage.

The Karlovac Museum and the Vukovar Center do not openly claim that the Serbs committed genocide, in contrast to the Memorial Hospital guidebook, where Croatian "holocaust" and "genocide" are explicitly claimed. But in the exhibitions themselves, there are also numerous implicit references to the "Holocaust/genocide template," as I have shown regarding the use of terms like "urbicide and culturicide" and "concentration camps." All museums indicate that it seemed "normal" during the war for Serbs to refer to Croats as Ustasha and for Croats to refer to Serbs as Chetniks, yet none of the museums discussed this circumstance – it is taken for granted that everyone knows it and what to think about it. To discuss the Ustasha revival that occurred in independent Croatia after 1990 and the Chetnik revival among Serbs would make it possible to shed light on why Croats felt threatened by Chetniks and Serbs by the Ustasha, who had committed genocide against them in World War II. Yet, that Serbs in the 1990s depicted Croats as Ustasha seems to be considered so absurd that the museums' narrative does not even dismiss it – while at the same time all sites use the term "Chetniks" for Serbs, thus applying the same over-generalizing, demonizing mechanism. The re-occurrence of images of the enemy from World War II both in the 1990s war and in its memorialization and museumization is omnipresent, yet at the same time never openly discussed, in the museums. In this respect, too, the memorial museums serve as flagships of Croatian memory politics, directly linked to what HDZ Prime Minister Ivo Sanader established in Yad Vashem in 2005: That the Homeland War was "our" fight against Nazis.

Without doubt Serbs were the main perpetrators in the post-Yugoslav wars, yet all sides committed crimes, albeit by no means to the same extent. In the successor states of former Yugoslavia, the argument that the others also refuse to admit what they did could prevail for a very long time. Nevertheless, depicting the others as the new Nazis takes this one step further and has severe consequences for the "komšiluk," the living together of people of different ethnicity in the same towns. The Croatian case shows that the memory of the Holocaust and genocide serve as a template for memorializing the more recent war and that the memorial museum as a global form has also travelled there. Yet, it also shows that, despite critical museological debates in theory, in practice basically any kind of vague or distorting reference to these transnational trends and traditional gender representations are thinkable – as long as they serve the dominant national memory politics and identity purposes of a post-conflict society.

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Notes

- 1 The Museum of Homeland War in Dubrovnik was founded in 2016. Yet, what has recently been renamed into a “permanent exhibition” is the same initial smaller one which for years has been called a temporary solution awaiting the new permanent one (see www.mdrd.hr).
- 2 The museum located in the Knin Fortress, which focuses on ethnographic, archaeological, cultural-historical and geological-paleontological materials, also has a section on the Operation Storm in 1995. One textboard mentions the “intimidation, displacement, capturing, and murdering citizens of Croatian and other ethnicity (other than Serb)” from the former Krajina. (Wherever there is no reference after a quote from the exhibition, I am quoting directly from the exhibition respectively my photo-documentation of it.)
- 3 This is what the Croatian fighters are called, given that they started defending Croatia even before there was an official Croatian army. My critical-analytical use of “we” for portraying the dominant Croatian national narrative also alludes to the fact that I spent the first month of the war in 1991 in an air-raid shelter in my native Zagreb but am writing from the diaspora.
- 4 In Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, this term is clearly associated with the Nazi and Ustasha camps, just like in German.
- 5 For a discussion of the problems of demonizing language, see Alon and Omer 2005.
- 6 I refrained from formal interviews because previous experience has shown that 1) when discussing the rather recent 1990s wars, the interviewee often does not answer many of the questions referring me to others in the institution and that 2) even questions during guided tours sometimes remain unanswered due to a claimed lack of authority.
- 7 Regarding Palestinian and Israeli memorial museums, Mendel and Steinberg (2011, 195) claim that especially “these museums relate to and inform ongoing political events and conflict rather than merely offering new interpretations of past events (as many other museums do).” I in contrast argue that all memorial museums per definition relate to ongoing political events.
- 8 The audio guide, which was added to the exhibition in Croatian and English in 2020, is today also available in German. Karlovac is on the main tourist route via Zagreb to the Adriatic Sea.
- 9 A Croatian MA thesis reproduces the claim that history repeated itself four centuries later (Mihalić 2022, 24).
- 10 Whenever I don’t give a reference, I am quoting directly from the exhibition texts respectively from my photo documentation of the exhibition.
- 11 See for example the House of Austrian History in Vienna and the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, which explicitly tackles Hungarian antisemitism and responsibility for the Holocaust.
- 12 Their names were published in trial documents, so the memorials that list the names are not breaching any personality rights. The identification attempts for the remaining Ovčara victims and the search for missing persons taken from the hospital elsewhere are still ongoing.
- 13 This is based on my observations in Vinkovci, Nova Gradiška, Jasenovac, Zagreb, Karlovac, Gorski kotar, Dalmatia, Rijeka, and Istria – not complete, but extensive.
- 14 All English translations from Vukovar are mine.

- 15 He was surprised to realize later during the tour that I was not only a Croatian native but also a scholar from abroad – even though I had openly told him earlier that day – with whom he had at this point shared this opinion unintendedly.
- 16 The current Polish government is heavily attacking the concept and adding Polish heroes and rescuers of Jews, but the display of civilian fates is not disputed.
- 17 This more or less text-free Memorial House shows a documentary film that can be watched at the computer screen. Its focus is on the history of the mass grave and the excavations.

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