The Cultural Resources of Contemporary Anti-Fascist Resistance

by Aleksandra Sekulić

The rise of nationalism in the 1980s that led to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s resulted in more intense processes of historical revisionism throughout the post-Yugoslav region, in the legal rehabilitation of convicted collaborators of fascism in WWII, as well as in changes in educational programmes, the media discourse and memorial politics. Further, the final phase of erasing the traces of the anti-fascist struggle and socialist Yugoslavia was followed by a relativisation of scientific knowledge, a delegitimisation of academia and a process of restitution of nationalised property. These changes did not occur without public reaction. Mobilising civil society as the community of memory in times of the instrumentalisation of history and memory was one of the fundamental programme orientations of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination since its establishment in 1995. In the past decade, the social processes in Serbia and throughout the post-Yugoslav region indicated the need to expand the field of struggle by integrating the issues of overall social politics, privatisation, education and memory politics, and showing their interconnection. In the examples of several activities and projects, we can see how the field of independent culture still succeeded in connecting social groups and initiatives into the same struggle, and give it not only support but also important resources.

Keywords: Historical Revisionism, Commodification, Anti-fascism, Independent Culture, Serbia.

Introduction

The prime-time evening programme on national television on the 75th anniversary of the victory of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia over the German occupation army in WWII perfectly reflected the approach in contemporary Serbia’s official politics to anti-fascism. Firstly, the programme showed a rerun of the famous TV series Povratak otpisanih, produced in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) about the urban communist guerrilla activities in Belgrade under the Nazi occupation. It was followed by an episode from the TV series Ravna gora, produced and disseminated by the National Television of Serbia in 2015 and focusing on the role of the chetniks led by Draža Mihajlović in WWII in Serbia. Finally, the film Bitka na Neretvi (Battle of Neretva), one of the biggest film productions of the SFRY about one of the biggest military operations in WWII in Yugoslavia, concluded this TV evening programme. Why was this programme and its schedule so widely discussed in social media in Serbia? It is a paradigmatic episode of the absurd policy of the relativisation of the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia and the intensified historical revisionism, putting the narratives of the opposed
forces of WWII in parallel and presenting them as equally legitimate. It also shows the (in)capacity of the contemporary system to produce a response to the historical truth in cultural form. To explain this particular absurd situation, we should observe the wider political context and have a closer look at the particular items of the programme.

1. The deconstruction through revisionism

To be able to understand the political and cultural context in which that model of TV programming is possible, it is necessary to briefly recapitulate the situation of the past decades. According to the historian Olivera Milosavljević, since the 1990s, the official narratives about WWII have changed and are increasingly used to rationalise and justify the ex-Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s and the later processes of social transformation. This process of changing the narrative of the past to justify a political cause, that is, of historical revisionism aimed to deflate the notion of anti-fascism.

The complexity and depth of the subject of colonisation of the history of WWII forms the overall subject of this essay. I will try to give some insight into the contemporary process of rehabilitation of the chetnik movement (which openly collaborated with the Nazi occupation authorities in Serbia) as the most obvious operation of historical revisionism. In my view, the latter is a symptom of a larger tendency to restore the social relations dating from the time before the socialist revolution in the People’s Liberation War during WWII and the formation of the socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991). The official cultural policy and the systemic infrastructure for this change in narrative will be compared with civil society actors and the independent culture community in Serbia. This will enable us to analyse the achievements and the different forms of production, and to better understand how they influence society in Serbia and throughout the region.

1.1. The culture of resistance of the 1990s, through several examples and episodes

To be able to read the context of independent culture in Serbia, it is necessary to give a short introduction to the decades of its activity. I will use paradigmatic situations, examples of actions and gestures from a very rich history, mainly focussing on several older organisations in Belgrade with which I am most familiar, although the manifold different independent cultural actors would deserve a historical overview of their own.

Nationalist elites in the post-Yugoslav region share the imperative to dismiss the heritage of Socialist Yugoslavia in order to demonstrate their legitimacy and justify the dismantling of the old system and the establishment of new successor states. Although the rise of nationalism in culture in the 1980s produced elites who
heralded and participated in the shift of the narratives, there was also a strong division in society in Serbia. Moreover, in the 1990s, a part of the intellectuals and cultural workers created a front against the war and nationalist politics.

The anti-war movement manifested publicly at its highest in 1992 in Belgrade with the event of *Crni flor*[^1] a march of hundred thousand citizens against the war. The centre of the anti-war movement was in Serbia and gathered around the Belgrade Circle as the intellectual basis and the independent media (B92 Radio). Independent cultural centres (such as the Centre for Cultural Decontamination and the Cultural Centre *Cinema Rex*) developed an infrastructure for continuing activities throughout the 1990s and during the regime of Slobodan Milošević. As the pressure was rising, the anti-war movement relied in its actions on the experience and tactics of alternative culture and drew from the pre-war cultural avant-garde in theatre, music, literature, visual art.

These forms of culture often adopted practices of underground and alternative culture in order to maintain their flexibility. Some of them joined the protests, such as the theatre play Macbeth produced by the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, performed by Sonja Vukićević in front of police squad and protesting students in the winter of 1996 in Belgrade. Others developed a parallel infrastructure due to the regime’s occupation of public spaces; here, a good example would be the screenings of Low-Fi Video in restaurants throughout Serbia in 1999 while the Radio B92 and the Cultural Centre *Cinema Rex* were occupied.

The independent cultural centres, merging audiences and actors from the previous culture of elites and alternative culture, became a forum for writers, theorists, academics, journalists, publishers, and artists in resistance. The imperative of counteracting nationalism was embedded in the Centre for Cultural Decontamination since its first actions in the space of Pavilion Veljković in 1995. Theatre performances, numerous exhibitions and discussions created a community of the Belgrade Circle that was more accessible and growing to wider circles of humanistic disciplines and culture, but was still perceived as a centre of the previous elite culture, which now found itself in resistance. The Cultural Centre *Cinema Rex* was also intended to enable a transfer of experience between the older generation and the new one, to give voice to emerging activists and space for alternative culture, and to respond quickly to immediate issues, making use of the infrastructure of the independent Radio B92.

Some cultural activists from bigger, state-funded institutions, such as theatres, galleries, publishing houses, also made gestures of resistance, from public engagement to official resignations. One of the most emblematic actions was a massive gathering of actors, theatre workers and audiences in solidarity with Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia. They blocked the traffic in 1992, sitting on the street in front of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. This was followed by an action of composers kneeling for Sarajevo in one of the parks of Belgrade.

[^1]: Aleksandra Sekulić
Furthermore, after the army recruit Miroslav Milenković had committed suicide due to the pressure from the army to join the armed conflict in 1991, poems about him were published and a public action of lighting candles against the war was instituted as a public ritual of the anti-war movement. The art collective Led Art from Novi Sad organised performances in public spaces, responding to the traumatic everyday life in Serbia and the consequences of the war. Many street activities were organised during the student protests in 1996/7 by artists and public figures, drawing from alternative culture experience.

Figure 1. Photograph by Vesna Pavlović©. *Magbet* performance by Sonja Vukićević in front of the police and the protesting students, winter 1997.

Several professors at Belgrade University made important interventions; Professor Mirjana Miočinović’s resignation in 1992 is the most remembered one. The pressure on university intellectuals peaked with the Law on University in 1998, which gave huge powers to the state authorities and cut the universities’ autonomy. It is best illustrated with the dismissal of the department of World Literature and Literature Theory at the Faculty of Philology of Belgrade University, which was
publicly declared by the new dean in charge to be an “anti-Serbian nest”. The student protests and the resistance by professors lasted for months, up to a violent intervention at the university by para-police units of the Serbian Radical Party. After this, the whole department was reinstated, so that the resistance would not spread. Nevertheless, the clumsy statement of the dean about the “anti-Serbian nest” very well summarises the narrative constructed by the ruling party, often accusing cultural resistance activists and the anti-nationalist front to be “traitors” and “paid by Soros”.7

1.2. From 2000s to 2010s: Transition and Post-transition as a political context

In the past several years, independent culture workers and the remaining cultural centres and civil society organisations in Serbia have been attacked by the tabloids for being “traitors”, “paid by Soros and foreign governments” and are attacked or blocked by right-wing groups during manifestations at a regional level. As a good example, the festival Miredita, dobar dan, dedicated to an exchange of artists and writers from Kosovo and Serbia at the CZKD in 2018 provoked two right-wing marches and a complete blockade of a part of the city of Belgrade. How is such a precise re-enactment of the 1990s possible after 20 years?

The end of Slobodan Milošević’s regime on 5 October 2000, caused by demonstrations and strikes after fraud in the presidential elections, was perceived as the beginning of a democratic society in Serbia. The opposition front (the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS), which took the state apparatus, was heterogeneous, but united under the imperative of the EU integration horizon and the reforms needed towards that goal. It was formed under the necessity to bring down Milošević, forming a common front stretching from the political right to the left centre, from royalists to social democrats. The first government after 5 October with Zoran Đinđić (Democratic Party) as its prime minister announced reforms and the intent of returning to the international community after years of isolation and sanctions. An analysis of the economic destruction in the 1990s was published, and privatisation was planned to be one of the major motors in the reform process of transformation. The initiated transformation of social property from Yugoslavia into private property was to be finalised.9 As part of the process of EU integration, nationalised property had to be reinstated, with the Serbian Orthodox Church as one of the biggest clients. Alongside this reform, the processes of “re-conciliation” in the region and the European integration process were among the priorities of the new government.

The enthusiasm for this “new chapter” towards a European Serbia brought a wide spectrum of cultural workers and academics working on a vision of the new cultural strategy. In addition to the state-level conferences on cultural policy, where civil society was invited for the first time in 2001, the Centre for Cultural
Decontamination initiated a project called *Moderna*, which was a series of public events, theatre performances, conferences, exhibitions, resulting in a new platform of cultural policy based on *Moderna*. Building upon the Yugoslav thinkers of the 20th century, who aspired an emancipation from nationalism and a culture of national identity, *Moderna* had an emphasis on antifascism as a basic value, standing up for university autonomy, a secular state, and contemporary cultural production. Numerous participants, such as historians, writers, or art historians, demonstrated the century-long continuity in Serbia’s culture as a good basis for the next century. *Moderna* is an ambitious project, which opened a possible political horizon of emancipation and resulted in a united demand of the academic and cultural public for a new cultural strategy. It can also be seen as a proposal to the new democratic government.

The government’s cultural policy, however, reflected the overall narrative of integrative processes, trying to reconcile both the values of nationalist parties and civil society. This gradually led to the disappointment and, after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, to the disillusionment and discouragement of large parts of the culture in resistance movement of the 1990s from any further involvement in cultural politics at a national level. The processes of regional reconciliation and facing the past, supported and encouraged by the European Union, were overshadowed by processes of national reconciliation. This kind of levelling of the antifascist partisan army led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (who liberated Yugoslavia from the Nazi occupation) on the one side, and the *chetniks* of Draža Mihailović, who openly collaborated with the Nazis on the other, was presented as necessary for the unity of the Serbian nation. Following this argument, the Serbian nation was divided between partisans and *chetniks*; however, both were Serbian options, with the only difference that the communists acted as the victorious army, and the *chetniks* were collaborators, who, however, according to those narratives, collaborated with the Nazis only to fight communism, whereas initially, they were opposed to them. The construction of those narratives can be traced back to the late 1980s and was pursued throughout the 1990s, when the *chetnik* movement was revived as part of nationalist mobilisation during the post-Yugoslav wars. However, it was also used for mobilizing the opposition parties against Slobodan Milošević, who was at that time leading the Socialist party of Serbia and therefore seen as the “red bandit”, or communist. Having in mind this background of parts of the opposition block, the new governments after 2000 followed an imperative of rehabilitating the *chetniks* and of restituting the property that had been nationalised after WWII by the government of Yugoslavia.

To legitimise those processes, it was necessary to present the achievements of Socialist Yugoslavia as less important than its communist crimes. If the 1980s were marked by the published narratives of the torture in the camp on Goli Otok,10 the 2000s developed a whole industry of publications and research dedicated to dis-
covering the truth about innocent victims and “respected Serbian businessmen”, who had been convicted as Nazi collaborators. The Law on rehabilitation of 2006 and its later versions established a legal platform for this process. Considerable efforts were made during the government and presidency of Vojislav Koštunica in the mid-2000s to change street names to remove the names of the partisans and liberators of Belgrade in WWII. Further, the school programmes in history and literature were revised (even biology was under pressure to acknowledge creationism, as well as the official memory policy in general). Also, this period was marked by the rise of ultra-right organisations, and an increasing influence by Russia and the Orthodox church.

The government formed in 2008 was the result of a compromise; the Democratic and the Socialist Party of Serbia headed for a historical reconciliation, forming a coalition eight years after the Socialist Party was ruled out of power by the same Democratic Party and its partners in the opposition block DOS. Such a compromise even had a significant and positive effect on the Serbian population that was eager to push for EU integration and feared that the openly Eurosceptic right-wing parties and their nationalist politics might prevail. Although the approach towards the Balkan region and the EU was more cooperative during this period, the official politics of memory still supported a national reconciliation, opening up to more measures in rehabilitating the Nazi collaborators. Special committees were formed to uncover the remains of the victims of communist crimes. The juridical rehabilitation by the Court was seen as the final stage of re-legitimising the chetniks as antifascists. In 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party won the presidential elections. This party emerged from the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj and was established by his ex-colleagues, while Šešelj himself was on trial for war crimes at the Hague Tribunal. The party’s leader Tomislav Nikolić, also referred to as the chetnik vojvoda, took over power along with his party colleagues. His Serbian Progressive Party established a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia and formed a new government, which in its structure reflected the governments of the 1990s, with the only difference that, unlike the latter, it was strongly committed to EU integration. With the restoration of the political leadership of the 1990s came the restoration of media that diabolised every political alternative. The government was composed in a postmodern model, which included ministers who could have a left orientation, if necessary, or also a far right-one, and could opt for both the EU and Russia. They practiced an approach of post-ideological politics, inflating every political issue and concentrating the power in the hands of Aleksandar Vučić, who was first prime minister and, as of 2016, president.

The processes in the other parts of ex-Yugoslavia took similar paths. They were inspired by the anti-communist resentments of the nationalist parties of the 1990s and the post-war transition drawing their legitimacy from the victory over the communists and establishing continuity with the previous political elites who
were defied by the partisans in WWII. In the societies robbed and impoverished in the war and post-war transition, the nationalist narrative managed to prevail over social politics by occasionally refuelling regional conflicts as a topic of public discourse. These dynamics rapidly intensified after Croatia had entered the EU and no longer needed to prove its civil rights standards: a similar shift of power also occurred in Serbia, and right-wing parties gained new momentum in the whole region. The uprising in Bosnia during the Plenum Tuzla in 2013 showed how people unite in resistance against poverty and the loss of workers’ rights, which similarly shook all regional elites. Like this, the new, more rapidly developing conflicts regarding the 1990s and WWII became a valuable and often-used resource for election campaigns and disciplinary mechanisms against social dissatisfaction.

Looking back to the transition and post-transition period, we can find common denominators for all governments: privatisation and historical revisionism. The logical result of this is what Stefan Aleksić saw as a “privatisation of memory”, and includes the construction of a revised collective memory, which should hide the accumulation of capital and the re-introduction of inequality by re-legitimising the regimes before Socialist Yugoslavia. In the post-Yugoslav context, the “battlefield of memory” was opened, as Aleksić notes, to hide the role of the national elites by referring to the identity of both victims and perpetrators, and by continuously using nationalist narratives and blocking any alternative interpretation of the wars in Yugoslavia.

1.3. The revisionist march through the institutions

For this purpose, the post-war elites needed legitimisation narratives, and parts of the cultural infrastructure in Serbia, which depended on state funds, responded to those needs. Beyond the several decade-long production of sensation literature about the horrors of Yugoslavia, the TV production slowly introduced themes from the period before Socialist Yugoslavia and gradually inaugurated that period as the “golden age”, thus preparing for the more direct revision of WWII history. In order to gain wider legitimacy, in 2014, several historians in the Museum of History of Serbia prepared an exhibition entitled In the name of the people, which was to testify on communist crimes and on the merits of pre-war politicians, who had collaborated with the Nazis for the sake of “saving the Serbian people”. This narrative introduced the legitimisation of “patriotic fascism”, as noted by the sociologist Todor Kuljić. It relied on a misuse of archival material, as it mixed up victims and perpetrators, presenting them all as victims – the ones being victims of the fascists and the others of the communists. The misuse became most explicit in a presentation of the camp of Goli otok, with a photo signed with the caption “This is what it was like”: the photo, however, showed beds in the Dachau concentration camp, without noting any source. This photo was a point of departure for a wider dis-
Discussed about the legitimacy, credibility and competence of this exhibition, which was fiercely criticised by the left public, but was supported by several state institutions and the media. One apologetic statement evoked the resolution of 2 April 2009 by the European Parliament on conscience and totalitarianism, thus levelling fascism and communism and offering examples of similar memory politics from Central Europe. Accordingly, public manifestations by extreme-right organisations, and counter-actions from left ones, which protested against this specific exhibition, were treated and judged by the authorities and mainstream media as two extremes, which needed to be similarly condemned.

The intense process of renaming streets in Belgrade, erasing the memory of Yugoslav partisans, Soviet Red Army officers and victims and heroes of the war against fascism reached a breakpoint in 2008. Due to the visit of Dmitri Medvedev on the Day of Liberation of Belgrade in WWII, the city authorities abruptly decided to return to the ritual of naming streets after the heroes of the Red Army. However, they dislocated them to the more distant parts of Belgrade because the streets previously named after the liberators of Belgrade had been already renamed according to the revisionist agenda. This funny but seminal episode from the period of the Democratic Party depicts the confusion in values and the instrumentalisation of historical memory. It shows the evolution of memory politics into an absurd spectacle in 2014, staged by the new political elite. On the occasion of the Day of the Liberation of Belgrade and of the visit of the Russian president Vladimir Putin, a military parade was organised in Belgrade. There, Tomislav Nikolić, the president of Serbia, who built his political identity as chetnik vojvoda, was unable to express his thankfulness to the historical liberators, the Yugoslav Peoples Liberation Army, together with the Red Army of the Soviet Union. Due to his unease to give respect to the liberators, it seemed much easier for him to articulate his gratitude to the Russian people. It was clear how much effort was put by the Serbian government into avoiding a clear evocation of the Yugoslav partisan history, by merging the historical date of the liberation of Belgrade with the centenary of WWI, with a confusing mixture of uniforms and discourses. The only person who in his address to the confused public pronounced the name of the Yugoslav partisans without hesitation was Vladimir Putin.

There are numerous examples of incoherent and unconvincing attempts to mark dates from the history of anti-fascism, or to introduce institutional rituals, which are usually led by members of the authorities. An example in this regard is the re-enactment of the liberation of Belgrade in WWII performed as a tableau vivant with lots of costumes and military in the streets of Belgrade in 2017.

Another interesting and recent example is the celebration of 9 May, the Day of Victory over Fascism. The central manifestation was organised in a tone of anti-fascism, but it was a “nationalised anti-fascism”, to use the terminology of Boris Buden in his analysis of the regional process of historical revisionism. That means that

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Yugoslav anti-fascism, respected as one of the catalysts for victory in WWII, is now colonised by nationalism, and put in the narrative of national programmes of the newly-established states of the post-Yugoslav region. This example would imply acknowledging the Yugoslav Liberation Army, but it focused on a nationalised version of Serbian anti-fascism, also criticising the ongoing revision done by others in the region (in Serbia, this usually refers to the Croatian narrative) who tend to decrease the number of Serbian victims in the war. Simultaneously with the official spectacle, the public could read reports on the military delegation, paying respect to the monument of the chetnik general Draža Mihailović. The photo of military officers saluting in front of the monument was first questioned in its authenticity; when it was confirmed, the Ministry of Defence declared that the soldiers had gone there on their own. Through this schizophrenic policy of pronouncing both public and unofficial statements and gradually presenting them as normality, the very notion of anti-fascism is deprived of its content, and its meaning is colonised by the national imperative, which tries to treat the opposing sides of WWII equally and honours them both as the antifascist legacy of Serbia.

This is the context in which we have to place the contradictory TV programme mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Since the premiere of the TV series *Ravna Gora* on the national television of Serbia had very bad ratings in public due to its low artistic level and unconvincing agenda, the producers showed it again in a “sandwich” between two other productions from the SFRY, altogether giving an equal presentation of the two opposite interpretations of WWII. That way, *Ravna Gora* could get some audience and scratch some credibility, due to the enormous popularity and professional level of both the TV series *Otpisani* and the movie *Neretva*. This strange proceeding reflects the intention to gradually impose a revisionist narrative to the education and media discourse. Further, it demonstrates an awareness of incapacity to reach a level of cultural production which could carry *Ravna Gora* to a mass audience.

Although this revisionist process relies on the infrastructure of a media system which is undergoing a transformation and thus increasingly resembles the one from the 1990s under the Milošević regime, and in spite of programmes being continuously produced by private TV stations in order to mystify Yugoslavia and confuse the audience, there is strong evidence that it fails to complete erasing the memory of socialism. The memory of the older generation from Yugoslavia is not easily overwhelmed, and it is transferred also to a part of the new generation.

This brings us to another strategy to amortise the memory of Yugoslavia: commodification.

Reducing the experience of Yugoslavia to memories of products, brands, pop culture, and renewing those brands throughout the region was a logical process in the marketing of the region’s big companies. They recognised the possibility of a regional success, and a whole wave of Yugo-nostalgia was launched by the creation
of a new, regional market. The latter was unofficially called Yugosphere, which was a simulacrum of lost unity, created by shared music, cookies, shoes, and other products that originated from Yugoslav times. Opportunities for cultural tourism also emerged: the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, and especially the grave of Tito in his premises became central points of programmed Yugo tours.

This commodification involves the risk of fragmentation of memory, its de-contextualisation and, finally, its irrelevance.

Between and against those two processes of direct historical revisionism and Yugosphere marketing, practices of resistance are articulated and pose a considerable challenge to the devastated cultural infrastructure and the credibility of the education system.

2. The response from civil society and independent culture

Considering how state-funded and -controlled cultural institutions and media are becoming prone to censorship and auto-censorship, and how the university is subdued to constant de-legitimation, with all respect to examples of resistance and occasional positive public gestures, civil society and independent culture in Serbia are the most flexible, reliable and continuous infrastructure of anti-fascist activities. Both the experienced organisations, which draw from anti-war and anti-nationalist activities of the 1990s, and those formed in the dynamics of the 2000s and later; build a critical discourse, solidarity and cooperation platforms in the region, and try to respond to the ongoing processes of fascisation of society. Facing a cultural policy which after 2013 no longer respects or supports civil society and independent culture as an equal partner (although the financial support was never sufficient for sustainable development), many of the cultural organisations, initiatives and associations cooperate to organise joint actions and solidarity events. The initial gathering of independent culture in Belgrade in 2010, on a platform called Druga scena, led to wider networking and the formation of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia (NKSS) which now gathers more than a hundred organisations throughout the country. Civil society organisations dealing with human rights often connect and cooperate with the field of independent culture to reach a wider public. This setting resembles the 1990s, with some important differences: the internet changed the ability to spread information and create networks of solidarity; the new generation of civil society with a left orientation is engaged in activism within wider communities of citizens through actions and movements (trade unions, people evicted from homes due to the non-transparent bank loan processes, fired workers etc.); and finally, regional cooperation and European support make it easier to address common symptoms and issues in the post-Yugoslav societies. NKSS is part of the regional platform of independent culture called Ko-operativa, as well as some international platforms and networks which helped in
creating a wider context for solidarity actions and project partnerships.

To recognise anti-fascist activity, we can approach it from several imperatives of anti-fascism: the deconstruction of official narratives based on nationalism and a nationalised common history in the region, which also means a deconstruction of the nationalised and distorted history of the wars of the 1990s; the opposition to historical revisionism and to the rehabilitation of the Nazi collaborators; a critical analysis of the Yugoslav history free from both revisionist and Yugo-nostalgic sediments.

The organisations established in the 1990s had a strong reputation and experience in dealing with sensitive issues in the post-Yugoslav societies: war crimes. To justify and rationalise the massacres and crimes of the 1990s, the elites of the post-Yugoslav states deployed a wide spectrum of fake histories, comparisons of numbers of victims, denial and counter-accusations. The civil society organisations (CSOs) dedicated to discovering the truth about the wars in Yugoslavia were often under huge pressure and accused of being “traitors” in the media.

Today, the Women in Black, who have continued to perform a public ritual of solidarity with the victims of Srebrenica every year, as well as activists from the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, the Cultural Centre Rex and CSOs who have organised similar events such as exhibitions, presentations, discussions, can count on the support of new leftist organisations when attacked by the right wing and the regime media. In the 2000s, many right-wing organisations discovered that by attacking cultural events they could reach visibility and popularity. An example are the attacks on the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad in 2006, where right-wing activists invaded a debate on anti-fascism, or the interruption of the premiere of Tomislav Gotovac’s movie on the campus Studentski grad in Belgrade in 2007 by the neo-fascists Nacionalni stroj (with the leader named Führer) and the extreme-right organisation Obraz; both remained without an adequate legal follow-up. Further, in 2008, an exhibition of artists from Kosovo entitled The Exception in the gallery Kontekst in Belgrade was blocked by right-wing organisations and artworks were brutally damaged. As a reaction to these events, cultural workers and civil society activists created the association RUK (Workers in culture), as a network of solidarity to fight off such pressures and attacks.

The two oldest organisations of independent culture in Serbia, the Centre for Cultural Decontamination and the Cultural Centre Cinema Rex, have continued to offer space and infrastructure to other colleagues from civil society and independent culture, and themselves also produced projects dedicated to anti-fascism.

Nebojša Milikić from Cinema Rex launched a long-term initiative Stop to the Rehabilitation, dealing with various aspects of rehabilitation of collaborators of the fascist occupiers in WWII. This programme largely contributed to the mobilisation of activists and a wider public for protests, legal actions and media activities. The network created around this initiative, in cooperation with the Association of
Antifascists of Serbia and some new left organisations, made public gestures of protests in front of the court buildings and mobilised the media, which had a big impact on public opinion. Olivera Milosavljević, Milan Radanović and many other historians contributed to the struggle against the rehabilitation of the Nazi collaborators participating in public debates, media and academic work.

2.1. Actions against the historical revisionism related to WWII

One of the factors or perspectives of developing such a practice was the strong network of regional organisations and initiatives, which cooperated in various projects, defying the nationalist divisions of the narratives of WWII history. The central point of the nationalist discourse in the region, (mis)used to fuel the war in the 1990s and afterwards for fuelling the tensions in the region, was the memorial on the site of the concentration camp Jasenovac in Croatia. Being one of the central places for the commemoration of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia, speculations about the number of victims by their nationality and a mystification of the role of the socialist government of Yugoslavia to investigate the proportions of the crime of the ustashi camp officers was used to spread fear and hate in the preparations of the war in the 1990s. Right-wing politicians in Croatia in the last decade pushed the nationalist (neo-ustashi) discourse to the front and received a response from politicians in Serbia, which was similar in tone, but on the opposite nationalist side, and gained popularity among their right-wing oriented voters. The desecrations and hate speech at the Holocaust site again became tools for fear and spreading hate. The organisations CZKD from Belgrade, Dokumenti from Zagreb and Sense, as a part of the cooperative project The Faces of Resistance, organised a traveling exhibition on Jasenovac.

It was designed in the form of a wooden cube-like pavilion and assembled to evoke the camp interior. It exhibited information on the walls in a minimalist way with a list of the confirmed numbers of victims, the perpetrators and the dates of establishment and liberation.

The pavilion travelled in 2015 throughout the region, and was one joint, regional response of civil society to the inflammable and dangerous nationalist politics of hate. The CZKD, in cooperation with the collective Schoolmaster Ignorant and His Committees produced the long-term project Against Oblivion in 2015, which dealt with the concentration camps established by fascist occupiers in Belgrade in WWII. It was conceptualised by Noa Triester as an interdisciplinary project gathering historians, philosophers, writers, sociologists, psychologists, and involved exhibitions, performances and the production of a documentary TV series, which had a significant public impact and constituted a valuable resource for the future.

A related programme by the new political theatre in the region, entitled The Aesthetic of Resistance and inspired by the eponymous text of Peter Weiss, gath-
ered two hundred people in the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in 2015 to discuss the future resistance politics with the theatre director Oliver Frljić and his colleagues. The Collective Theory That Walks (TkH) produced a performance *Nije to crvena, to je krv* (It is not red, it is blood) directed by Bojan Đorđev, a theatre adaptation of partisan songs with great success in 2015. More recently an event titled *Smrt fašizmu: O Ribarima i Slobodi* which was written and directed by Milena Minja Bogavac and based on a story of the famous family Ribar from Belgrade who had a big role in the liberation and revolution, was performed as a response to the nationalised official manifestation of the Victory Day over Fascism in 2018.

![Figure 2. Photograph by Srđan Veljović©. Against Oblivion, seminar, CZKD, Belgrade, 2016.](image)

The memorial practices of Socialist Yugoslavia are becoming a new central point in Yugoslav studies. Numerous monuments and memorial sites, built throughout Yugoslavia after WWII, were destroyed in the 1990s. However, those which had remained are now again in the focus of a new generation of architects, artists and writers who are fascinated by such a modernistic humanistic approach. One of the key figures of this memorial architecture was Bogdan Bogdanović, whose work in architecture and other disciplines, such as literature and pedagogy, was the theme of a conference at the CZKD named The Introduction to the Whole in 2016. The film *Monument* by Igor Grubić from Zagreb was presented in Belgrade several times, as an artistic reliving of the experience of the monuments scarred by the wars in the 1990s. It received a strong positive feedback and awards later at the Belgrade documentary and short film festival. An experimental theatre production by TkH collective followed. It was titled *Budućnost pročitana u betonu i kamenu* (the future read in concrete and stone) and dealt with the monuments for the liberation from fascism in Yugoslavia. It was directed by Bojan Đorđev and premiered in the Youth Centre of Belgrade.
2.2. A shared post-Yugoslav presence against the constructed conflicts about the past

In cooperation with the collective Schoolmaster Ignorant and His Committees, CZKD initiated in 2012 a long-term project Naming IT War, which gathered anti-war activists, war veterans, workers from the destroyed or privatised social companies, students and a wider public. It included a series of discussions about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and practices of resistance to the imposition of corrupted privatisation and of nationalist narratives, which hide the truth of the wars. A similar practice was developed in CK13, a self-organised social centre in Novi Sad, where activists, cultural workers and organisations from Novi Sad have periodic anti-fascist seminars, festivals and cultural events. Both centres recognised the importance of culture as a cohesive space for the critical public. As a result, cultural production, forum space and knowledge production merged audiences and grew to be a space of resistance.

Figure 3. Photograph by Vesna Pavlović©. Performance by LED ART in a cooling truck, 1993. Today, Ognjen Glavonić’s films Depth Two and The Load deal with the transport (in such trucks) of the bodies of victims from the war sites in the 1990s.

The Centre for Cultural Decontamination initiated New Politics of Solidarity in 2011, a regional cooperation network, which resulted in numerous regional cooperation projects and performances, collected on the online platform Newpolis. Beside long-term projects, many of the projects of regional cooperation in culture
tackle this issue of politics of memory of the 1990s, and have a considerable impact. One of the examples is a coproduction by the CZKD and Qendra Multimedia from Prishtina, the theatre performance Encyclopaedia of the Alive, which was directed by Zlatko Paković and performed throughout the region. De-masking the regional officially hostile politics but enabling very cooperative business politics on the unofficial level, the play recalls how the relations between Serbs and Albanians developed through the centuries and what emancipatory politics could look like. The very fact of a cooperation between organisations and artists from Kosovo and Serbia is a political act of resistance itself, considering all the obstacles and public mobilisation against it. The imperative of dealing with the trauma repressed by the system is living in the younger generation of artists, and the filmmaker Ognjen Glavonić took a big risk, but also had a significant public impact with his film about the organised hiding of the mass graves of killed Albanians from Kosovo, with his documentary entitled Depth Two in 2016.

The film showed a visual journey following the path of the bodies, with a landscape made only of occasional forensic photos of objects and documents. The narrative consisted only of audio documents from The Hague Tribunal archive. This form managed to evade the oversaturated documentary forms on the wars in the 1990s, developing understanding and empathy with the strong visual tactics of absence of people.

A special project is also the Case Study Pertej, resulting from research carried out by Kosovo Glocal from Prishtina and the team gathered in the CZKD. It traces the strong continuity of cooperation between artists from Kosovo and Belgrade, in spite of the political obstacles and discouragement, invisible to the nationalistic mainstream. This is one of the best summaries of the position of the critical cultural public in the post-Yugoslav region: under the radar of the official politics, but defying the impossibility for decades.

The most recent example of such an ambitious endeavour was the project Testimony, produced by the CZKD in partnership with the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, and conceptualised by Noa Triester and her team of cooperatives. It investigates various aspects of testimony from the philosophical, through the forensic, artistic, literary and poetic. The regional scene for provocative political theatre presented a generation of authors like Oliver Frljić, Andraš Urban, Zlatko Paković and Borut Šeparović, who all deal with most traumatic issues in the post-Yugoslav societies and develop emancipatory processes through their projects. Art and research collectives, like Spomenik in 2008, and later the group gathered around the project Four Faces of Omarska, developed a methodology relying on forensics to address the complex and multi-layered issue of the Yugoslav wars in memory politics, economy and culture.

Further, literature festivals such are Na pola puta and Krokodil, gathering writers, critics and readers from the post-Yugoslav region, became important centres
of resistance to the national canons and the nationalist agenda in literature. One of the biggest results of these new cooperation projects was the Declaration on the common language, signed by thousands of writers and scholars, critics and linguists from the region claiming one common language instead of the national division on Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. The shock and the harsh reactions from the side of mainstream politicians proved how disruptive the deconstruction of national myths through obvious facts (like the fact that everybody understands each other) can be to the political elites.

Among the main media for literature in resistance is the magazine Reč, which was established in the 1990s and continuously opens space for post-Yugoslav dynamics in literature. In its approach, it is similar to the Beton magazine, founded in 2006, which deconstructs nationalism in literature. After repeating legal and public pressure, it remains one of the proofs of the power of solidarity, as lately also the Symposion magazine from Subotica.

2.3. A critical view on the resources of Socialist Yugoslavia

Since the 1990s, the activity of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Belgrade, which managed to educate and give production support to a new generation of artists, curators and theorists dedicated to addressing the issues of post-Yugoslav trauma, the field of contemporary art was one of the most engaged and developed in the critical apparatus. The magazine Prelom established in the Centre in 2001 gave voice to the generation who resisted the brutal erasure of Yugoslavia and the dismissal of its accomplishments, and had a critical view on the ongoing processes in post-Yugoslav societies. A sort of a summary of a decade-long activity of this specific regional network of visual art and theory initiatives was the exhibition Political Practices of (post)Yugoslav Art in the Museum of History of Yugoslavia in Belgrade in 2009, where a new generation of artists approached the cultural history of Yugoslavia from the contemporary situation. The new generation gathered around the social Centre Oktobar, where the Kontekst collective had established the platform Mašina to enable a new generation of critics, writers and social analysts to produce a critical discourse on the post-transitional situation in Serbia. One of the best examples of the transfer of knowledge and experience from the previous generation of activists and artists was the counter-manifestation to the Day of Liberation of Belgrade in 2016, when the collective Horkeškart organised a concert and an exhibition dedicated to the anti-fascist legacy. One of the examples of the activation of the resources of the Yugoslav partisan legacy in culture is the art group Kurs, whose project Lekcije o odbrani (Lessons on defence) offered a systematic approach to the archive material and the context of the partisan cultural activities. The latest regional cooperation project Pertej/Beyond/Preko 20 years was produced by the CZKD in cooperation with the Kontekst collective and...
Kosovo Glocal. More than 20 artists, groups, researchers and writers from all over the post-Yugoslav region were invited by the curators Vida Knežević and Marko Miletić to offer their reading of the resources from Socialist Yugoslavia. The exhibition of the research and production is entitled We Have Built Cities for You, and has the subtitle On the Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism. It is followed by a collection of essays, supported by illustrations from archive material and artworks.

Conclusion: the “better songs” are resounding longer

When we compare the pompous, faulty and expensive revisionist cultural production with independent culture, with an outreach throughout the region and with a richness of forms that has emerged from solidarity and cooperation, we see that culture can be a powerful display, resource and public forum of the anti-fascist struggle in Serbia and in the region of Ex-Yugoslavia in general. It is logical then that in their recent controversial Strategy for Culture (2017), the authorities in Serbia formulate as a priority of their cultural policy for there to be cultural industries inclined to the dominant powers due to their market dependence, and to preserve national identity as a priority of state-funded culture.

Their fear is understandable: the independent culture has proven its position
as an intellectual and activist generator throughout decades, and has managed not only to reproduce its vitality and sharpness even through times of war, sanctions, political pressure and lack of state support, but also to produce art and knowledge which are part of a much wider international context.

At the end of the film “The Disappearance of the Heroes” directed by Ivan Mandić in 2008, which deals with the erasure of memory of the partisan heroes from the streets of Belgrade, one of the participants of the struggle against fascism draws a parallel with today’s situation and says into the camera:

“Whatever they did or do, one thing stays: we had better songs.”

Figure 5. Photograph by Srđan Veljović©. Day of the Liberation of Belgrade, CZKD, 20 October 2018, CZKD, “Naša pjesma”.

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About the author

Aleksandra Sekulić is a PhD candidate in Theory of Art and Media at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade (Serbia), where her doctoral research is focused on experimental film. Before this, she finished her MA in Cultural Management and Cultural Policy in the Balkans, at the UNESCO Chair, Interdisciplinary studies, University of Arts (Belgrade, Serbia), and at the Université Lumière Lyon 2. Her master thesis is entitled “Archiving as a Cultural Form: Creating Video Archives and Databases”. Aleksandra graduated in General Literature and Theory of Literature from the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

Beyond her academic education, Aleksandra has worked as a programme director at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) in Belgrade since 2010, curating and producing projects such as “The Context Studies”, “Pertej/Beyond/Preko 20 Years”, “De-shaping”, “CZKD Cinema”, and others. She also worked in film production, curating and distribution at the Academic Film Centre in Belgrade from 2005 to 2009. With Branka Benčić, she curated the exhibitions “Video, Television, Anticipation” (Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade and Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 2013) and “Slobodan Šijan: Film Leaflet” (CZKD, Belgrade – LUKA, Pula, 2012). She is a member of the team of the Media Archaeology archive and programme in Belgrade, with projects realised in cooperation with the National Television of Serbia (“Media Practices of Youth Culture in Yugoslavia”, documentary film, 2010), the National Library of Serbia (Media archive of the 1990s in Serbia, 2011) and the BKV Foundation (“Voting Machine”, exhibition, 2011). She is editor of publications such as: Performing the Museum – A Reader (co-editor with Dušan Grlja, Novi Sad: Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2016), Videography of the Region (Belgrade: DKSG, 2009), Media Archaeology: The Nineties (Belgrade: CZKD, 2009) and others.
Endnotes

1 More about the context of this programming can be found in the interview with Viktor Ivančić on the Peščanik portal, https://pescanik.net/viktor-ivancic-intervju-13/, accessed 21 September 2019.

2 The film was directed by Veljko Bulajić and premiered in 1969.


4 A crni flor is a black (arm)band, which is commonly worn as a sign of mourning.


7 George/György Soros is a Hungarian-American investor and philanthropist, who is a thorn in the side of many ruling powers, e.g. today’s Hungary and Russia, due to his huge investments in promoting democracy all around the world.


10 The camp “Goli Otok” was instituted in 1948 after Tito’s conflict with the Soviet Union. The sympathisers of Stalin’s politics were imprisoned and “re-educated” in this camp, which turned it into one of the central points in dissident narratives in the SFRY.


13 Buden explains how one of the revisionist narratives acknowledges the partisan struggle to be instrumental for “the creation of the Croatian state”. Thus, anti-fascism and communism are reduced to nationalist teleology. Everything is justified as it was in the purpose of serving the nation. “Nacionalizam u svojoj historijskoj građanskoj formi nije krvni neprijatelj komunističkog sistema kojeg je taj sistem nedemokratski, dakle totalitarno progonio, nego je bio njegov strukturni element kao i njegov legitimacijski horizont. To se još danas čuje u onoj poznatoj tezi da bez partizana, odnosno hrvatskih komunista ne bi bilo samostalne hrvatske države. Ta fraza nužno reducira i komunizam i antifašizam kao svjetskoperona fenomene na nacionalnu odnosno nacionalističku teleologiju. Sve što postoji nalazi svoje opravdanje samo u mjeri u kojoj služi naciji” Interview with Boris Buden in Lupiga magazine (9 May 2016), https://www.lupiga.com/intervjui/razgovor-boris-buden-hasanbegovic-jepotpuno-u-pravu-kada-tvrdi-da-je-antifasizam-floskula (accessed 20 September 2019.

14 Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Dragosavljević, Lekcije o odbrani (Belgrade: KURS and Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, 2016).