# Suffering and Survivorship: Mythologies and Contested Narratives of War in Serbian Museums

*Rebecca Anne Damjanovic, Robert Mason*

**Abstract**

Museums that commemorate war have a uniquely influential role in determining how the nation approaches its past, and navigate highly politicized issues of loss and victimhood. Far less understood is how curatorial approaches to historical conflicts can influence museum practices regarding more recent wars. In this article, we explore how three museums of national history in Serbia narrate historical wars. Each museum is focused on articulating the story of the nation, albeit with markedly differing emphases in their collecting practices and curatorial strategies. Analysing objects and narrative texts, we suggest that Serbian historical museums engage visitors in ethical questions and topics that are often otherwise silenced. We draw attention to the resurgence of deep historical narratives, emphasizing Serbs' connection to the environment, faith, and landscape, as a means to assert the continued relevance of historical wars to contemporary national identity. In doing so, museums seek to engage in the fraught politics of memory relating to the Yugoslav Wars.

**Keywords:** Historical injustice, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Civil War

## Introduction

The territories of the former Yugoslavia have seen their international positions transformed in the past twenty years. Slovenia and Croatia have acceded to the European Union, and incorporating the remaining states is a stated strategic priority for the EU. Governments across the former Yugoslavia are seeking to manage public opinion in this swiftly changing context, as longstanding national identities are challenged, and established histories of conflict must be revisited. This is especially so in Serbia, where the pivot to Brussels and the EU has been sharply contested, drawing on Serbians' long history of negotiating great power interests in the region.

Museums are a key area of public investment for Serbia, alongside a proliferating number of sites placed on the UNESCO Tentative World Heritage List. Many such sites have been co-opted to articulate narratives of Serbian statehood and nationalism that remain contested in society as well as in the region more broadly. These heritage sites reveal how histories of territorial contestation are being reframed, as society grapples with new ways of understanding historical conflict in the region. Museums are at the centre of these national debates and must navigate fraught historical narratives amid rapidly changing public debate.

As with many states, war is strongly constitutive of national identity in Serbia. The experience of war, loss, and victimhood is particularly potent across the former Yugoslavia more broadly, and narratives of military conflict remain highly politicized and polemical throughout the region. In this context, we explore how major museums of national history in Serbia are narrating historical wars in novel ways, as well as how other less prominent museums are engaging with difficult histories of conflict. Significantly, this has involved silencing mythologies of the Second World War that hitherto constituted a major component of museum practice.

Museum & Society, March 2023. 21(1) 74-86 © 2023, Rebecca Anne Damjanovic, Robert Mason. ISSN 1479-8360

We also draw attention to the resurgence of deep historical narratives, which emphasize Serbs' connection to the environment, faith and landscape as a means to justify the continued relevance of historical wars – and as a means to understand the legacies of recent conflict.

## Approach

Our discussion of museums in contemporary Serbia is framed by the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. While Serbia existed long before the twentieth century state, its relations with its neighbours was transformed by the Yugoslav experience. That state reached its zenith under the dictatorship of Josip Tito, who rebuilt the country after the Second World War and guided it to rapid economic expansion during the 1960s and 1970s. The precarious balance that Tito engineered between the constituent republics of Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) rapidly fell apart after his death in 1980. Thereafter, rising nationalism and economic collapse in the late 1980s precipitated a major crisis. As living standards dropped precipitously in the early 1990s, the federated republic disintegrated into civil conflict that would lead to the genocidal violence of the Yugoslav Wars.

The decade of conflict that followed involved horrifying violence against civilians and military personnel throughout the 1990s. In the aftermath of the war, geographical borders had been altered and intercultural relationships shattered by ethnic violence and competing claims to victimhood and cultural landscapes. This article focuses on the Serbs and the contemporary legacies of their wartime experiences, but we acknowledge that Serbs were also protagonists in the suffering of others. The establishment of a collective memory of Serbian suffering became a key part of propaganda used to incite violence during the Bosnian and Kosovo Civil Wars. However, while a new Republic of Serbia would emerge from the violence in the late 1990s, many Serbs remained in self-governing enclaves elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia. Their presence remains a source of instability and nationalist anger up to the contemporary moment.

International narratives of Serbian culpability emerged strongly from the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, and were further invigorated during the secession of Kosovo from Serbia in 1999. Many Serbs had perceived the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former-Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s as a means to denigrate Serbs, and to punish the nation collectively for the actions of a few. The NATO-led bombing of Belgrade in 1999 consolidated their perception further. The 79-day bombing campaign led to the deaths of several hundred civilians, as well as military fatalities, and significantly angered and traumatized Serbs throughout the region. The ongoing sense of victimization at the hands of the international community consolidated Serbian sentiment that they had been unjustly singled-out as perpetrators of a conflict that had deep historical roots.

National museums are recognized worldwide as being at the centre of modern states, functioning 'as authorities on history through selective recollections that strategically define the parameters of their nations and citizenry' (Anderson 2018). This strategic affirmation of those who are included in the nation is particularly noticeable for regions whose lands have been historically contested. While museums might harness historical conflicts to enable visitors' reflection on the rights of minorities (Clark 2007), they frequently privilege national narratives of victimhood that justify violence against others (Apsel and Sodaro 2019). Similarly, exhibitions in such spaces often recognize that lands have been historically home to many different ethnicities. Yet, in frequently presenting such historical periods as chaotic and threatening, museums can undermine minorities' contemporary claims to inclusion in the national narrative. Thus, while Apsel and Sordaro (2019) see museums as 'sites of persuasion' to advocate for more just and inclusive societies, they can also be sites at which the rights of others are refuted, denied and silenced. It is the expression of this paradox in Serbia that we explore in this article.

Museums are 'sites of historical consciousness' (Anderson 2018), whose meanings emerge through the interweaving of complex narratives. The most powerful of these narratives can be states' struggle for independence and freedom from colonization and imperialism. Within this tradition, museum narratives often seek to establish an unbroken tradition of

nationhood, connecting the pre-colonial state directly to that which emerged upon independence (Mason and Bhattacharya 2021). Museums' collecting practices and exhibitions also provide a means to connect contemporary narratives of nationhood to the past. As has been noted for elsewhere in the world, institutions' collecting practices can been central to establishing claims to a unique contemporary national identity (Garrigan 2012; Achim 2016). In this manner, centuries of contested presence in landscapes can paradoxically be represented in museum exhibitions as the basis for an ethnically homogenous contemporary community (Gil 2016).

Museums that commemorate war provide unique curatorial approaches to the nation and its past. Narratives of sacrifice, suffering, courage, solidarity, and triumph (Winter 2012) are presented as being constitutive of a more 'just' contemporary nation (DeLugan 2015). In this manner, museums invite visitors to position themselves within national narratives of war, urging people to reflect on their own patriotism in the light of past sacrifices (Porzgen 2016). In doing this, Winter (2012) suggests that museums are 'trying to represent the pain of others', but these martial mythologies can also be conceptualized as trying to suggest historical actors' pain is shared in part by contemporary visitors. In this manner, historical conflicts and sacrifices can be symbolically conflated with contemporary antagonism and hostility to others (González 2014).

Deep historical narratives of conflict and contestation are pervasive throughout the Balkans, but so too are the legacies of more recent experiences of violence. The Cold War dictatorship of Tito was formative for the region, but there has been little scholarship on museum practices associated with the period (see for example Pintar and Ignjatović 2011). A number of museums in Eastern Europe draw attention to nationalist dissent during the Soviet occupation of the Cold War, affirming a sense of unbroken national community that recalls other museum practices following occupation. However, as Alberti and Nehring (2022) argue compellingly, the Cold War's role in the formation of historical memory is transformed by the fact that it was a conflict without a European war. Museums struggle to deploy tropes of heroic valour without battles, and historical narratives can fracture without an overarching sense of chronology and purpose. Rather than concern themselves with grand narratives, Europe's museums of the Cold War have tended to focus instead on everyday life, prioritizing nostalgia and affective attachment to quotidian objects of memory (Pohrib 2016). Such a presentation is unusual in museums of war and oppression, and signals a key point of departure for Serbian museums in their treatment of the period.

Unlike previous research on museums of the Cold War in Europe, this article is concerned with territories that were governed by dictatorship but not through foreign occupation. East European museums of dictatorship have drawn heavily on the genocide of the Second World War to reinforce their historical experiences of the Cold War (Manchin 2015). Many use the exemplary victimhood of Jewish people under the Nazi regime to establish narratives of their own collective victimhood during and after the Second World War (Hackmann 2018). This trope frequently co-opts the Jewish experience and projects it onto local acts of resistance against Nazis, as well as acts of massacre and genocide by Axis forces. This was used pervasively in regional museums within the former Yugoslavia from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s.

Many museums in the former Yugoslavia were deeply concerned with the legacies of the struggle against Nazi Germany and its local allies. Monuments and museums were established by the government throughout the 1950s, and repeatedly expanded in subsequent decades, in an effort to associate popular resistance to the Axis and the trauma of massacres with a collective history of socialism in the new Yugoslavia (Putnik 2016). This did not deny the identity of Serbian or other nationalities within Tito's state but nested these identities within a broader Yugoslav narrative of solidarity and resistance to oppression. As memorial parks, tombs, and museums proliferated in local urban spaces throughout Yugoslavia, so too did the potential to 'nest' scales of local, regional, and national identities within museums' wartime narratives (Roppola et al. 2019).

Tito's attempt to co-opt the Second World War into a Yugoslav heritage of solidarity and socialism was severely challenged in the decades following his death. Language, which had previously framed the region's history through positive tropes of multicultural coexistence or cultural crossroads (Dragićević Šešic and Rogač Mijatovič 2014), gave way to narratives

of pervasive fracture and enduring nationalist enmity. Rather than solidarity, and in the midst of terrible suffering, the new republics sought 'active policies of memory' (Pavličìć 2016) that emphasized their exclusivist claims to territory. While peace activists have subsequently sought to use networks of museum professionals to reduce interethnic tension (Cvjetićanin and Vežić 2017), the region 'remains affected and burdened by its recent history of conflict' (Cvjetićanin and Vežić 2017: 77).

## Methodology and Case Studies

Our article explores the use of objects and textually based displays in three major national museums in Serbia. We analyse historical narratives in order to understand how museums' presentation of violence can destabilize official accounts of conflict relating to the Yugoslav Wars. We draw particularly on Freier's (2013) work that explores how objects can be presented as witnesses to trauma and injustice. In this manner, objects interact with narrative text to engage visitors in ethical questions and topics that are often otherwise silenced.

The article is based on repeat museum visits to a range of sites from 2017 and 2019. Author 1 visited the museums on a number of occasions, where she discussed displays with curators (GU Ethical Clearance Number GU Ref No: 2019/054). She did not disturb visitors to discuss exhibits with them, nor did she photograph them. She did however photograph objects and take extensive notes during her visits. These photographs and notes were then discussed collaboratively with author 2 on her return to Australia. Neither author is Serbian, although author 1 is married to a Serb. The project emerged through close collaboration with the Australian Serbian community however, involving discussion through interviews and focus groups about how they perceive heritage and museums in Serbia.

The article is based on three major museums of Serbian history. The Serbian National Museum in Belgrade is the nation's pre-eminent museum of national history, housing the nation's most treasured cultural artefacts. The Valjevo National Museum is located in a small city of 90,000 people in the north of Serbia, and is closely engaged with the region's local history. The Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade is located within the same complex as Tito's Mausoleum, and explores the Yugoslav state from the early twentieth century to its collapse and legacy. Each museum is focused on articulating the story of the nation, albeit with markedly differing emphases in their collecting practices and curatorial strategies.

The Serbian National Museum was first established in 1884 and has a history of relocation and closure. It found its current home in the former national bank building in 1950, but was closed soon after for renovations and not officially reopened until 2018. Owned and managed by the state, the museum prides itself on the 400,000 items on display as well as many more in its vaults. The museum is in the busy historical centre of the national capital, marking the start of a pedestrian-only zone that is popular with both locals and tourists alike. Visitors to the museum walk through a series of chronological exhibition rooms, each with didactic panels in Serbian and English.

The lower floor begins with the representation of the region's prehistorical occupation and extends to the Roman Empire, before visitors proceed to a section on medieval Serbian history. Three broad chronological periods are outlined to the visitor: the region's settlement in the prehistoric period, its importance to the Roman Empire, and the establishment of the Serbian Orthodox Church with Kosovo at its centre. Docents are careful to tell visitors that the objects in the latter section were acquired as a result of the NATO bombing campaign and attacks on religious heritage sites by the Kosovo Liberation Army. No written text is presented to support their claims for the objects' connection to these contested lands.

Located approximately one hour from Belgrade is the Valjevo National Museum. The city had been an important manufacturing and trading centre, before becoming a major hub for wounded soldiers during the First World War. It is now a major tourist attraction, based both on its well-preserved dual Ottoman-Serbian heritage centres and the region's role in the earliest nationalist uprisings in the 1800s. Located close to the banks of the river in the bustling historic centre of the city, the museum is situated in the eighteenth-century lodgings of the local ruler. First established during the Tito era in 1951, the museum has since continued to provide a significant attraction for visitors to the town.

Visitors are guided through the exhibition rooms in a clear sequence, and each section of the museum is divided by automatically closing doors that seal off the preceding exhibition space. The displays in the museum are again divided by broad chronological categories: historical settlement dating back to prehistory, an imperial Roman connection, the medieval period, and a final section on key individuals in the city's history. As with the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade, the Roman period seeks to differentiate the region from its period of Ottoman occupation. More broadly, the museum is largely focussed on Valjevo's centrality to Serbian national history. Conflating its rich Orthodox sites with a broader national history, it consciously ignores the prominent built heritage of the city's Ottoman and Islamic past.

The final site discussed in this article is the Museum of Yugoslavia. Unlike the other two museums, this is no longer a national museum, although it purports to tell the history of the Yugoslav nation. It is located six kilometres from the city centre in Belgrade. The museum was included because of its significance in retelling historical events throughout the Yugoslav era. The Museum of Yugoslavia opened in 1996 as the Museum of Yugoslav History, drawing on the pre-existing Museum of the Revolution of Yugoslav Nations and Ethnic Minorities, which had been founded in 1959 and had been concerned with the unifying role of socialism across Yugoslav society. That museum was amalgamated with the Memorial for Josip Broz Tito (established in 1982) to form the current institution. The museum considers itself to be a 'museum laboratory – a field of research experiments and creativity, the environment where Yugoslav heritage … will be reflected upon' ('Museum Laboratory'). As such, it seeks to situate itself firmly within the tradition of Yugoslav museums championed by Tito himself.

The museum describes itself as a collaborative space for curators, artists and community members to exhibit multiple interpretations of Yugoslavia. The 'Figures of Memory' permanent exhibition aims to articulate one rendering of a collective memory of the period through a series of visitor messages, written in response to depictions of rituals and ceremonies from the end of the Yugoslav era. Through this display of objects and facilities, 'the exhibition explores how different social groups create and maintain the memory of Yugoslavia, expressed through the continuing tradition of leaving messages, as well as through the changing nature of these messages, highlighting their importance for the creation and maintenance of collective memory' ('Figures of Memory').

Together, these museums offer a representative sample of approaches to national history in major Serbian museums. While they do not include smaller local museums, such institutions often relate broadly to larger museums in their approach to metanarratives of national history. By including the three sites, we hope to demonstrate novel approaches to the telling of national mythologies of the past and its connection to more recent conflict.

## Establishing Deep History

Visitors to the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade begin their exploration of national history with a section of the exhibition depicting a 'civilized pre-history'. The section uses large wall-to-ceiling sections of ceramic ware and striking precious artworks, alongside detailed textual panels, to establish a claim for an unbroken cultural connection to the land through the presence of advanced 'civilized' society. Where other museums might present prehistory as being somewhat detached from national historiographies, the Serbian curators work to ensure that the claim for cultural continuity from prehistory 8,000 years ago is clear to contemporary residents.

These prehistorical Serbs are not only members of a 'civilized' prehistory but are portrayed as having been peaceful and uncontested in their claims to the land. In the Serbian National Museum, the exhibition has an extensive panel that depicts peaceable farmers first settling in the Vinča region from the 'first centuries of the fifth millennium BC'. The museum draws visitors' attention to the 'traces that … point to communities' care in their consumption of food and energy resources, and [that they] lived for generations in a stable natural environment' ('The Peaceful World of Farmers?'). The lack of militarization and of contestation creates a powerful sense of time outside chronological history, in which the region was prosperous and without war.

The museum in Valjevo similarly makes claims to the peaceful nature of the inhabitants' existence, focusing on domesticity and the growth of permanent settlement (Figure 1). Dense

textual information is interspersed with dioramas and displays that reinforce the palaeolithic origins of contemporary inhabitants. These displays emphasize the natural environment, weaving, and farming, presenting the human presence as having been closely aligned with a benevolent natural environment rather than in tension with nature. Visitors are told that these local histories 'should not be observed in a regional and isolated sense. It has an important place in the prehistory of Serbia and south-east Europe' ('Neolithic Wall Panel').

*Figure 1: 'Civilized Pre-history', National Museum of Valjevo. Photo by R. Damjanovic.*

Both the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade and Valjevo National Museum continue the claims to unbroken culture and custodianship of the land in their consideration of rule by the Roman Empire. Rather than present this as a violent occupation, the Roman presence is portrayed as benevolent, and a genuine exchange that enriched Serbian civilization, religion, and economy. It was the 'civilized' Roman Empire that was 'finally' able to 'integrate a whole spectrum of others' into a coherent Serbian territory for the first time ('Roman Empire', Serbian National Museum, Belgrade). The emphasis is on a civilization able to withstand the peaceable incorporation of others, and of high cultural achievements. In Valjevo, the museum credits the eventual weakness of the Roman empire in Serbia to the 'invasions of Barbarians, people who didn't belong to Greek-Roman traditions' ('All Roads Lead Out Of Rome').

## Narrating Medieval Glory

Displays relating to the medieval period affirm the importance of Christian narratives for museums to establish cultural continuity and Serbs' enduring presence in the landscape. Both of the major museums include extensive discussions on Serbian Orthodox Christianity, connecting it to Roman traditions of religion and imperial Orthodoxy. In both spaces, the displays reflect the enduring customs and beliefs that inform 'the whole life of a community and, consequently, of an individual' ('Medieval Period', Valjevo National Museum). These individuals are merged into an apotheosis of the Serbian nation through its medieval religiosity, in which rooms such as 'The Nation at its Peak' connect major Serbian figures with Biblical characters through exquisite medieval artworks.

By focusing on those medieval churches in Valjevo that remain standing, the museum subtly contests claims that the region is inherently multicultural, emphasizing the medieval past as a period of peace, industry, religiosity, and 'Serbianness'. In one information panel, the museum reiterates that Serbia was at its peak in the mid-fourteenth century. The panel evidences this through the history of the Nemanja family, who established the Serbian kingdom

and Church, and whose names are immediately recognizable to Serbian visitors. It explains that the medieval Serbian state was weakened by the 'spreading of Turkey, the Ottoman state, on the very soil of Europe'. This premonition of Serbia's military defeat at the time of its greatest religious glory is potent for visitors, for whom the reference to 'the field of Kosovo' is ominously well-known. The defeat in 1389 and loss of Kosovo to the Ottoman Empire may have presaged the collapse of the medieval Serbian state, but it secured an iconic place in the nation's historical imagination.

Reflecting its status as the national capital, the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade has a significant focus on the emergence of Serbian Orthodox Christianity in the territory of Kosovo specifically. Without mentioning the Kosovo War of 1999, the museum incorporates the destruction of religious heritage into a deeper historical claim, which refutes attempts to erase Serbian heritage in that contested space. The museum narrative more broadly continues to weave the medieval period into visitors' contemporary experience. Churches associated with the Nemanja family, such as Novo Brdo in Kosovo, are referenced as being key to the Serbian state's formation. Similarly, displays draw attention to the destruction of monasteries in Kosovo under Ottoman rule, whose marble was subsequently used to construct the Sinan Pasha Mosque in nearby Prizren.

When visitors engage with the displays (such as Figure 2), there is a general assumption that the fragments of church buildings that are on display are the result of centuries of gradual ruination. Yet, docents problematize this. On one occasion, a docent interrupted our visit to suggest that a number of the stones are actually the result of the bombing and conflict during the Kosovo War. This conflict included the targeting of Orthodox churches by the Kosovo Liberation Army opposed to the territory's incorporation in Serbia. Other images in the room undermine this claim, but the careful recoding of information by docents is noteworthy nonetheless.

*Figure 2: Artefacts from Novo Brdo in Kosovo, Serbian National Museum, Belgrade. Photo by R. Damjanovic.*

On a subsequent visit to the museum, after having asked permission to take photographs, docents and staff became animated by my presence as a foreign visitor. Many were eager to provide additional context for objects that they worried would not otherwise be understood. One guard alone spent more than half an hour discussing religious artefacts and their connection to the original historic building pictured nearby. Only when he was satisfied that I understood the historical and contemporary connection between artefact and Serbs' presence in Kosovo was he happy for the visit to continue.

In another room, and with no didactic panels present, docents and guards again took the lead in contextualizing objects. In this space, the docent and guard shared a story of how a partially destroyed church bell had come from a monastery in Kosovo, and that the priests had buried it in the ground during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, until it was safe for the bell to be excavated and moved to the museum. Textual content elsewhere did not fully support this claim, suggesting the evacuation had occurred in the 1950s, but the intervention remains significant for its importance to the museum staff. In both rooms, docents were clear that it was important I understood that the religious objects had come from Kosovo churches, destroyed and damaged in the most recent war – a war that had also precipitated widespread bombing in Belgrade.

## Towards Freedom

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a pivotable period for the Balkans, and for Serbian claims to its territory in particular. Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia all emerged from Ottoman occupation in wars that caught the West European imagination amid the Romantic movement. A series of conflicts with the Ottoman forces, but also with Ottoman supporters and Serbia's other neighbours, led to the emergence of a recognizable independent Serbian state. Contemporary museums do not portray this as the innovative attainment of statehood, but rather as a return to cultural expression and a political entity that had endured under centuries of oppressive Ottoman occupation. This restoration of Serbian custodianship of land, faith, and a cohesive ethnic community is a powerful trope in the country's national museums.

While the period is axiomatic to the history of the Serbian people and nation, the two national museums place differing emphases on the nineteenth century. The exhibition devoted to the emergence of the Serbian state is the largest display in Valjevo, where exhibits seek to situate the region's economic and social changes within a broader national history. In the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade, as might be imagined in the nation's capital, the era is given a less prosaic role in favour of a heroic history of providential national emergence. Major works of art depict images of the people rising to overthrow foreign subjection, many in traditional peasant clothing. Exhibitions engage with the history of 'Great Men' and the political leaders who catalysed the nation to claim its place as a free state.

The National Museum in Valjevo's approach to national liberation is unusual within museums of conflict. Rather than focus on heroic sacrifice in battle, it focuses on heroic sacrifice through care in the city's military hospitals. The city was converted into a major military hospital centre during the First World War, when Serbs fought the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Ottoman Empire alike. The decision to focus on this conflict is not surprising, given the city's leading role in supporting the Serbian army that was led by Field Marshal Mišić during the nearby Battle of Kolubara. This fact does not mitigate from the museum's unusual focus on the role of care in constituting the national community. Displays focus on women's domesticity and traditional gender stereotypes, in order to foreground a national community that finds expression in solidarity extending beyond the frontline battlefield. Women's journals appropriate traditionally masculine language of heroic patriotism, in a national effort in which the pursuit of 'humanity was above all virtues' ('Journal "A Housewife"').

The Valjevo museum balances the discussion of women with its parallel description of the military leader Miloš Obrenović. In a similar way to other pivotal battles of liberation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this focus on a single male leader offers a synecdoche for the nation and its capacity for salvation (Mason 2019). Less commonly, it makes clear that this patriotic effort had the apparently laudatory result that 'Turkish inhabitants left their estates and moved to the fortress-towns, where they felt safer' ('Nineteenth Century Development'). That Valjevo famously still retains its dual town centre, preserving the rich traditions of the town's Ottoman residents, is not mentioned in its pre-eminent museum. The fleeing of pro-Ottoman inhabitants is instead presented as a time of cultural growth and the reassertion of earlier primordial characteristics of Serb residents, as churches were rebuilt in an independent Orthodox Serbia. The continued reference to the landscape as exclusively and legitimately occupied by a single ethnicity is striking in the museum, given the region's

long history of predominantly peaceful multi-ethnic cohabitation.

**Surviving Histories**

Notably absent from both national museums is history from the Second World War onwards. This silencing of the wartime era is noteworthy, given its crucial significance in establishing a national narrative during the Yugoslav era. Yet, the museums resist referencing this seminal period, preferring the history of classical and medieval eras as representative of a less contested period of Serbian history. Despite rich histories of local resistance to Nazi occupiers, museums avoid the temptation to mythologize the Second World War, with its legacy in many people's imagination of Tito's rule and the Yugoslav state.

The decision to cease the historical narrative before the establishment of the communist state is often jarring in museums supposedly concerned with key eras of the nation's history. In Valjevo, for example, the museum's substantive displays end immediately following the First World War. To exit the museum, visitors must pass back through the exhibitions relating to this war, celebrating King Petar and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as well as local wartime liberators. In comparison, the treatment of the Second World War is perfunctory at best. Contained in a small annex to the First World War section, it is limited to a small collection of weapons whose only textual explanation is a printed piece of paper that contrasts sharply with the formal signage elsewhere in the other displays. Valjevo's relationship with Tito is admittedly problematic, and the town had been a nationalist stronghold during the Second World War. Such narratives problematize the depiction of a single Serbian people, united and peaceful, but their omission is nonetheless a significant act of historical silencing.

Within the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade, references to the divisive Second World War are similarly extremely limited, and are framed within a narrative of post-war development under Tito. While there is no detailed discussion of the conflict, the art gallery within the museum provides a less direct space to reflect on the impact of the war. Panels in the exhibition suggest ever-deepening social divisions that would only be healed by the subsequent 'building of a new society' ('Symptoms of Social Reality'). It is this socialist society that the national museums refrain from exploring, preferring to position the communist period as an aberration from nationalist narratives of the Serbian people. Their strategy in this regard echoes museums' depiction of countries occupied by outsiders, presenting an anomalous period in the nation's otherwise unbroken history of independence.

The national museums' attitudes are set in relief by the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. Detailed discussion of the pre-Second World War period would be outside the museum's mandate, although notably it does not seek to articulate a narrative of workers' liberation preceding the formal communist government. The museum elides the question of ideology, preferring to focus on Tito himself and his triumphant creation of Yugoslavia as a Great Power. Photographs connect him with US Presidents or laud the 1972 State Visit by Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom. Yet, the museum also takes care to distance Tito from suggestions of excess, focussing on his careful cultivation of an image of frugality.

Discussions of the constituent nations and people of Tito's Yugoslavia are largely absent from the museum. Rather than attempt to connect with folkloric narratives of nature and religion seen elsewhere in Serbian museums, this museum focuses on the industrial advancements that occurred under the united Yugoslav state. Much time is spent on the post-war reconstruction and industrial advancements that occurred in the late 1950s, with everyday objects used to emphasize a sense of nostalgia, curiosity and pride in a nation that no longer exists. Voluntary labour campaigns are discussed as having been 'of the greatest importance' in the construction of new railways and factories that represented Tito's dream of a Yugoslav people and state. Drawing on Marxist framing, the museum praises the workers' advancement and industrial progress that characterized Yugoslavia, and superseded the country's constituent nations. These latter are represented by maps displaying images of Serbians, Croats, Slovenes, and others in folkloric national dress. Such displays are incongruent with other museum practices in contemporary Serbia, positioning the constituent nation's identity in the historical past rather than being relevant to the country's future.

Despite this framing of national identities, it is the Museum of Yugoslavia that engages

directly with the violence of the 1990s and Yugoslav Wars. In doing so, the museum distances the violence from contemporary nationalist Serbian politics and locates it in the 'foreign' country of socialist Yugoslavia. Our argument in this regard is supported by Pintar and Ignjatović (2011), who argue that the decision to force the Yugoslav Museum to allow Slobodan Milosevic to lie in state at the museum was intended to signal the symbolic death of socialist Yugoslavia and the perverse outcomes of the artificially created state.

There is a lack of curatorial direction on how the visitor should engage with interpretating the objects on display. One of the most prominent displays in the museum is a collection of propaganda from the Yugoslav wars (Figure 3). Display cases are filled with memorabilia from the early 1990s, as the country descended into acrimony and violence. Political posters depict men who would become opposing wartime leaders, placing them incongruously next to each other without comment. Pamphlets and other memorabilia from elections are similarly placed alongside one another in a jarring juxtaposition of wartime adversaries. Given that visitors are well-aware of the violence that was to follow the period, the electoral ephemera reinforces a sense of Yugoslavia's inevitable decline amid irreconcilable differences following the death of Tito. The imminence of violence conveyed by the political artefacts (and the lack of any reference to broader conflict and suffering) locates culpability with the opposing politicians of the time, rather than any collective national guilt.


*Figure 3: Collection of propaganda*

While the museum is careful to demarcate Yugoslavia historically from the contemporary moment, it does recognize the legacy of its collapse. One panel acknowledges that the inclusion of the political display was not without contention. The method of procurement often depended on the skill of the curator who collected the material. 'Some political parties were ready to cooperate with the Museum and timely [sic.] selected a part of the printed material for our collections. A number of parties refused, because of the prejudice that we were "Tito's museum", to give their materials and we were forced to remove already pasted posters of [sic] the walls or to ask members to provide us with their materials' ('The Museum Fund After 1996').

In such statements, the reality of the museum's position becomes clear. Despite attempts to confine Yugoslav history as an historical aberration, or to ignore the violence and cruelty of the 1990s, the museum's patrons recognize the ongoing legacies of the wars. Nationalist politicians retain a strong ongoing authority in contemporary Serbia, and historical memory is deeply politicized more broadly. In this situation, Serbian museums must approach more recent history with great trepidation.

## Conclusion

In this article we have analysed the ways in which museums co-opt history to support disputed claims to territory, formulating a language that is supportive of contemporary attitudes without engaging directly in highly divisive debates about recent civil wars. Exhibitions that narrate the dissolution of Yugoslavia, for example, reach back millennia to legitimize Serbs' claims about contemporary conflict. Through such exhibitions, the museums deliberately reframe historical narratives in the light of current political contexts.

Both national museums use a similar tripartite approach to the presentation of history. The museums chronologically narrate Serbian history from a civilized prehistorical period, which emphasizes the supposedly peaceful occupation of the landscape stretching back millennia. Exhibitions then proceed to highlight the region's connection to the Roman Empire, commencing a narrative of cultural development that reaches it apogee in the displays dedicated to medieval Serbian history. Such culture is presented as singular and Orthodox, with other communities' histories presented at the periphery of the cultural landscape, reinforcing the legitimacy of the unbroken Serbian Orthodox presence.

The primary difference in all three museums is the representation of narratives associated with twentieth century conflicts. This is unsurprising since the period was the subject of intense politicization under Tito, who used the Second World War to cement a sense of modern Yugoslav identity. Rather, museums use the nineteenth century period of liberation from the Ottoman Empire to reinforce Serbs' claim to unbroken cultural connectedness and nationhood. The formation of Yugoslavia, with its very different narrative of intercultural harmony is largely set aside.

Only the Museum of Yugoslavia engages with the period from the Second World War to the 1990s in detail. The museum's objects and texts focus on Tito and his hopes for the Yugoslav state, rather than any discussion of ordinary citizens' lives under his rule. Unlike other museums within Serbia, the museum is able to discuss the civil wars that followed Yugoslavia's dissolution. By framing the country as the artifice of a single man, Tito, the significance of the hope for a multiethnic cohabitation of territory is marginalized. Similarly, the violence of the civil war is contained within the historical context of Yugoslavia's collapse. In this manner, the museum is consistent with other national museums throughout Serbia. By disregarding the Yugoslav period, Serbian claims to an unbroken cultural connection to the land are reinforced and uncontested.

Received: 16 May 2022
Finally accepted: 16 September 2022

## References

Achim, M. (2016) 'The National Museum of Mexico: 1825-1867', Museum History Journal, 9 (1) 13-28.

Anderson, S. (2018) 'The Construction of National Identity and the Curation of Difficult Knowledge at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights', Museum Management and Curatorship, 33 (4) 320-43.

Alberti, S. and Nehring, H. (2022) 'The Cold War in European Museums – Filling the 'Empty Battlefield'', International Journal of Heritage Studies, 28 (2) 188-99.

Apsel, J. and Sodaro, A. (eds) (2019) Museums and Sites of Persuasion: Politics, Memory and Human Rights, New York: Routledge.

Clark, D. (2007) 'Sites of Memory or Aids to Multiculturalism? Conflicting Uses of Jewish Heritage Sites', Sociological Research Online, 12 (2) 1-15.

Cvjetićanin, T. and Vežić, A. (2017) 'Museum, Peace and Reconciliation: The Impact of the Balkan Museum Network', in Diana Walters, Daniel Laven and Peter Davies (eds)

Heritage and Peacebuilding, 77-91, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

DeLugan, R. (2015) 'Museums, Memory, and the Just Nation in Post-Civil War El Salvador', Museum and Society, 13 (3) 266-79.

Dragićević Šešić, M. and Rogač Mijatović L. (2014) 'Balkan Dissonant Heritage Narratives (and Their Attractiveness) for Tourism', American Journal of Tourism Management 3 (1B) 10-19.

Freier, A. (2013) 'Memorial Museums and Material Witnesses: Framing Objects as Witnesses to Trauma', MA Thesis, Department of Cultural Studies, Queens University, Ontario, Canada.

Garrigan, S. (2012) Collecting Mexico: Museums, Monuments, and the Creation of National Identity, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gil, M. (2016) 'Exhibiting the Nation: Indigenousness in Chile's National Museums', Museum and Society, 14 (1) 82-97.

González, P. (2014) 'Transforming Ideology into Heritage: A Return of Nation and Identity in Late Socialist Cuba', International Journal of Cultural Studies, 19 (2) 139-59.

Hackmann, J. (2018) 'Defending the Good Name of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015-18', Journal of Genocide Research, 20 (4) 587-606.

Manchin, A. (2015) 'Staging Traumatic Memory: Competing Narratives of State Violence in Post-Communist Hungarian Museums', East European Jewish Affairs, 45 (2-3) 236-51.

Mason, R. (2019) 'The Battle of Cinco de Mayo: Memory, Myth, and Museum Practices in Mexico', Museum and Society, 17 (1) 37-51.

Mason R. and Bhattacharya, D. (2021) 'Discordant Colonialism: Museums and the Emergence of Indian Independence in the Former Territories of French and Portuguese India', International Journal of Heritage Studies, 27 (12) 1296-309.

Pavličìć, J. (2016) 'Dissonant Heritage and Promotion of Tourism in the Case of Serbian Medieval Monuments in Kosovo', Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 14 (3) 189-205.

Pintar, O. and Ignjatović, A. (2011) 'National Museums in Serbia: A Story of Intertwined Identities', in Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (eds) Building National Museums in Europe, 1750-2010, 779-817, Bologna: EuNaMus Reports.

Pohrib, C. (2016) 'The Afterlives of Communist Things: Archiving Feeling in Post-Communist Romania', European Journal of Cultural Studies, 19 (6) 724-43.

Porzgen, Y. (2016) 'Siege Memory – Besieged Memory? Heroism and Suffering in St Petersburg Museums Dedicated to the Siege of Leningrad', Museum and Society, 14 (3) 412-30.

Putnik, V. (2016) 'Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future', Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 14 (3) 206-11.

Roppola, T., Packer, J., Uzzell, D. and Ballantyne R. (2019) 'Nested Assemblages: Migrants, War Heritage, Informal Learning, and National Identities', International Journal of Heritage Studies, 25 (11) 1205-23.

Winter, J. (2012) 'Museums and the Representations of War', Museum and Society, 10 (3)

150-63.