

War Memorials and their Impact on Reconciliation: The Case of Vukovar

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Abstract: War memorialization initiatives recognize and preserve the occurrences of past suffering in societies emerging from violent conflict. Furthermore, an intrinsic association also exists between memorialization and the reconciliation. However, determining the contribution memorialization provides to the reconciliation process of the former parties in the conflict is debatable. This paper addresses memorialization initiatives as an important instrument for the reconciliation process. Specifically, it looks into the role of war memorialization in the town of Vukovar in Croatia with regard to the reconciliation process between Croats and Serbs there. Vukovar has a dense concentration of Croatian War of Independence (Homeland War) memorial centers and commemorative events. Vukovar's war memorialization alternatives exclude the remembrance of ethnic-Serb victims*, thereby hampering the reconciliation of the former adversarial parties in the town. More efforts must be invested in to ensure the memorialization of what the Serbians suffered.

Keywords: the past, memorials, victims, former conflicting parties, reconciliation.



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* The term victims and losses throughout the article refer to people killed during the Vukovar battle.

Introduction

Memorialization is a relatively new phenomenon in transitional justice. The International Centre for Transitional Justice defines memorialization as an essential component of the transitional justice approach (Bret et al., 2007). The United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violation of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law emphasizes satisfaction as a form of reparations, a category under which memorials fall. According to Barsalou (2014:49), memorialization initiatives can be authentic sites at the locations where atrocities occurred such as graves; constructing sites as monuments, walls of names, and museums; and activities such as peace marches and temporary exhibits as commemorations.

Nowadays, memorials are found in post-conflict societies such as Rwanda, Cambodia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Hercegovina, among others. Memorials are believed to play a quasi-judicial role in giving victims the sense that the truth about their past atrocities has been recognized (Hajayandi, 2014). On individual and societal levels, memorials may serve as adequate places for mourning (Buckley-Zistel & Schäfer, 2014:1). Furthermore, they may also be utilized as a tool for reconciliation in societies as they emerge from violent conflict (Kwon & Faust, 2006:120). However, any debate about the connection memorials have with reconciliation warrants explanation of the precise meaning of the notion of reconciliation. For some, reconciliation is construed as forgetting and forgiving, whereas others see it as a change of attitudes, beliefs, or relationships concerning a certain matter (Barsalou, 2014:54). The literature on post-conflict reconciliation also uses the term social reconstruction as a synonym for reconciliation (Weinstein & Stover, 2004:14).

The function of memorials in the context of reconciliation has been a subject of contention among transitional justice scholars. Some claim that memorials honor and remember the deceased, provide evidence of past atrocities, create official narratives, and increase emotional understanding (Buckley-Zistel & Bjorkdahl, 2017:254). In this way, memorials contribute to reinstating the relationships between the conflicting parties. For instance, the Rwandan High Commissioner has noted the memorial sites across the country to have supported reconciliation (McCan, 2013). Others such as Rieff (2016)

argue that memorials do not necessarily contribute to reconciliation but instead have the potential to deepen the division between the former adversaries as well as keep the wounds alive, such as happened in the Balkans and Northern Ireland.

To explore whether memorials support post-conflict reconciliation, this paper focuses on the case of Vukovar, a town in Croatia. Vukovar represents an interesting case study for analysis because it has the densest concentration of memorials and memorial centers to the Homeland War.

The article examines how the memorialization initiatives regarding Vukovar's war have impacted the reconciliation between Croats and Serbs in the town. This paper defines reconciliation as the process of restoring friendly relations (Staub, 2000:376) between former opposing parties. Do Vukovar Serbs and Croats acknowledge the past wrongs and accept each other or do they still consider each other as opponents? The paper supports the argument that having each party to the conflict determining the truth about the past (Kriesberg, 2007:89) and acknowledge it (Govier, 2009:38) is necessary for reconciliation.

The study argues the Vukovar's war memorialization initiatives to have hampered the reconciliation between Croats and Serbs in the town due to Serb losses being excluded from the memorialization.

The paper begins by outlining some key points about the war in Vukovar. The second section discusses the memorialization of the Vukovar battle victims as a crucial component for the transitional justice process. Next, it elaborates upon the war memorialization sites and commemorative events and their impact on the reconciliation process between Croats and Serbs in the town.

Vukovar's Past

Vukovar is a town in eastern Croatia, close to the border of Serbia. Croats and Serbs have always been the two main ethnic groups in the town. They had had good friendly relations until the Homeland War began in 1991. During the war, Vukovar was surrounded by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary forces and were supported by the local Serbs of Vukovar for three months (Vukovar fell in November 1991). Vukovar's citizens experienced immense suffering. Overall, 3,000 people died during the battle. According to the present and doubtlessly incomplete records from the Croatian

Memorial Documentation Centre of the Homeland War, 350 Vukovar Serbs died in the battle, and 57 went missing. The final losses on the Serbian side during 1991, particularly in the battle of Vukovar, have yet to be ascertained on the basis of source documentation (Živić & Ružić, 2013). Apparently, Croatia suffered heavier fatalities. Aside from the extensive human suffering and losses, the vast majority of buildings in town were demolished, and thousands of non-Serbs were expelled (Kardov, 2004:229).

Although a large number of Serbs have abandoned Vukovar, Serbs together with Croats compose the two main ethnic groups in town. Today, 34% of the population are estimated to be Serbs, with the rest being Croatian (State Institute for Statistics of the Republic of Croatia, 2021). Ethnic division persists, and tensions continue to run high in the town.

Remembering the Battle of Vukovar: Reconciliation Challenges

Post-conflict reconciliation is a complex and multi-dimensional process consisting of various components. The literature suggests that reconciliation requires shared truths (Kriesberg, 2007:89) and acknowledgment (Govier, 2009:38) about the violent past. This means that the former adversaries must find some agreement on who the victims are and who is responsible for the victimization (Rosoux, 2015:17). This helps victims overcome their trauma and move on to some degree. However, considering that the parties of conflict always have opposing narratives about the past, accepting the truths remains a challenge.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the domestic courts in both Serbia and Croatia have established a factual record of what happened in Vukovar. Nonetheless, the records fail to be recognized and internalized by the Vukovar Serbs and Croats. The two communities in Vukovar also have confrontational views about who started the conflict in the 1990s (Ven, 2015), which is also an issue the ICTY has already clearly determined (Prosecutor V. Mile Mrksic et al., 2007).

Thus, the question that arises is how could these two groups restore their relationships when they do not agree on fundamental issues? The problem of opposing truths is exacerbated by the war memorialization initiatives in town. War memorialization in Vukovar is centered predominantly on the heroism of the fallen Croats soldiers and their

sacrifice for the Homeland War, as well as the civilians who died. The memorialization is manifested in diverse and ongoing commemorations events, memorials, and more. This fully reflects the Croatian war narrative by excluding the 300 Serb victims from remembrance (Cruvellier & Valinas, 2006:3), and putting collective guilt on the Serbs. As a result, mistrust has increased among the communities. George Santayana argued that “memory may almost become the art of continually varying and misrepresenting the past, according to one’s interests in the present” (O’Neill & Hilton, 2009:15). In the case of Vukovar, the historical facts about the Serbian losses are disregarded, with the Croats using memorialization initiatives as a powerful instrument to control the memory of the past by aiming to gain legitimacy and power. The marginalization of historical facts through memorials as a tool of transitional justice is contrary to reaching the goal of reconciliation, whereas reaching a consensus concerning the past crimes is a path toward reconciliation.

Croatian and Serbian suffering in Vukovar cannot be compared, due to the Serbian war losses being significantly smaller in scale. However, acknowledging the Serb victims must not be overlooked. Acknowledging and remembering the suffering and losses of both sides are acknowledged and remembered is crucial for Vukovar Croats and Serbs to have a good future. Only in this way can members of both communities feel involved and not left out.

Non-Inclusive Memorialization

Kandic emphasized that the war in Vukovar was a tragedy for all its citizens (as cited in Clark, 2013:24). The municipal authorities have erected several memorials in town in memory of the war.

Memorialization provides society with the opportunity to foster reconciliation, but in Vukovar, however, this opportunity has yet to be used adequately. Subsequently, such memorials remain contested by the Vukovar Serbs. The following elaborations of memorial sites depict the Croats’ lack of acknowledgement regarding Serb suffering.

One of the most famous monuments in town is the white cross in the center of town that was constructed in memory of all victims of war (Vukovar Tourist Board, n.d.). Nevertheless, one must note that the coat of arms of Croatia is engraved on the cross and emphasizes the Croatian suffering. This is an example of memorials being used

to portray the Croatian sacrifice and their triumph rather than to acknowledge the past (Cruvellier & Valinas, 2006:). Additionally, this symbol highlights the dominance Croats have in town, (Baillie, 2013, p. 8), which could also be perceived as a provocation to the local Serbian population. Important to note is that Croatian war veterans influenced the memorials' construction (Clark, 2013:125), thereby contributing to the one-sided remembrance. For instance, plaques with the inscriptions *Braniteljima Vukovara* [To the defenders of Vukovar] can be found in a few memorial landscapes as gifts from former Croatian combatants (Clark, 2013:125). Despite the evidence that approximately 6% of Vukovar Serbs had fought on the Croatian side during the war (Pilic, 2009), the term "defenders" only refers to the ethnic Croat veterans (Naef, 2013:2). This is because, according to the Croatian war narrative, the Serbs are collectively guilty of the atrocities committed during the Vukovar battle. This kind of distorted interpretation of the past promotes furthering the dominant Croatian narrative of the past in the Vukovar society, especially among the young generations. In addition, these memorials give a strong impression to outsiders that all the belligerents on the side of Croatia were ethnic Croats.

The situation is similar at many memorials. For instance, following the fall of Vukovar in November 1991, approximately 10,000 people were interned in the Velepromet camp, a warehouse. The victims were predominantly but not exclusively Croats. The co-president of the Croatian Association of Camp Inmates of Serbian Concentration Camps acknowledged that Serbs had also been imprisoned and mistreated in that camp (Rehak, 2008), yet the memorial of Velepromet's victims states, "At this place during the year of 1991, Croatian defenders, children, women, and the elderly of Vukovar were imprisoned, tortured, and killed." In this way, Vukovar's memorials have provided no room for Serb memories or experiences. The Vukovar Croats undeniably experienced greater losses than Vukovar Serbs; however, this must not be a justification to overlook the Serbian suffering. The way the past is remembered in Vukovar affects the political resentment and ethnic distance in the sense that it emphasizes not only Croatian victory, but also disregards remembrance of the victims from the Serbian side.

Another popular memorial is the Memorial Home Ovcara, which preserves the memory of at least 264 wounded Croat soldiers and civilians who had been taken from the hospital, then executed and buried in the Ovcara farm. It was the worst atrocity committed during the war in Croatia due to the vulnerability of the victims. The site provides a

multimedia exhibition of wartime events in the hospital, as well as pictures and names of the victims. The memorial's pamphlet states that non-Serbs had been executed by Serb aggressors in Ovčara (Clark, 2013:127). In this way, it fails to distinguish Serb civilians from Serb perpetrators and encourages the collective guilt of Serbs. In this way, the memorialization has been basically converted into the struggle for reconciliation.

The only memorial for Serbian victims known to exist is in a village near Vukovar. Serbs were discouraged to list the names of victims on it until 2011 due to the fear of attacks from Croats (Naef, 2013:13). Different groups must be allowed to take memory initiatives without being interrupted by the dominant groups (National Transitional Justice Working Group Zimbabwe, n.d). Still, Vukovar Serbs face challenges in commemorating their victims.

The examples set out above strongly support the argument that memorials in ethnically divided societies usually honor only a secluded ethnic group (Barsalou & Baxter, 2007:7), the Croats in this case.

After a conflict, societies are more divided than they had been; however, the way the past is remembered plays a crucial role in reconciliation (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). Tendencies to remember one group more than others deepen the division of former parties in conflict. Vukovar authorities should ensure memorialization initiatives that recognize and honor the victims of both sides. This idea is appraised by Serbs while strongly objected to by Croats (Clark, 2013:129). For instance, in 2016, the former Vukovar mayor refused to allow the erection of a memorial dedicated to Serbian victims (Telegraf, 2016).

Such memorials would eventually allow the suffering of both parties to be acknowledged as well as encourage dialogue and mutual respect between the two ethnic groups. Doing this might also open the way to facilitating the reconciliation process. The possibility of having an inclusive remembrance in Vukovar under these circumstances, however, remains open and questionable. Similar to the memorial sites, the commemoration events in Vukovar also emphasize Croatian victimhood while excluding Serbian losses.

Commemoration Practices

Vukovar Remembrance Day is marked annually on November 18. The commemoration program is organized by the municipal authorities and veterans' groups and last up to four days or longer. The program consists of various activities such as marches, conferences, and exhibitions. Homages are held in other parts of the country as well (*Croatia Week*, 2015).

Milosevic (2018) stated that commemoration initiatives encourage remembering the past and thereby contribute to keeping the wounds alive. This is what occurs in Vukovar. For instance, on the 20th anniversary of Vukovar's fall, Croatian Prime Minister Kosor emphasized that society must bond with the past to ensure that it is not forgotten (Clark, 2013:31). Similarly, media coverage constantly promotes this message (Vladisavljevic, 2019). The war events become a part of both individuals and the state and become unforgettable. Yet, too much emphasis on the past can prevent society from moving forward. Vukovar is also constantly commemorated at the international level. The Croatian representatives in the European Parliament present Vukovar as a victim of the two totalitarian regimes of communism and Serbian fascism (Milošević, 2017:900). As such they consider remembering Vukovar to be not important only for Croatia but also for all of Europe because of its contribution against totalitarianism (Milošević, 2017:900). Moreover, Vukovar is associated with Strasburg. Strasburg became a city of peace and reconciliation between France and Germany after World War II, and Vukovar is similarly presented as a "symbol of peace and reconciliation" in the Balkans (Milošević, 2017:900).

On the other hand, the commemoration of Serb victims in Vukovar consists of a small ceremony at the cemetery side of the town. Serbs do not visit Vukovar memorial sites and avoid participating in the commemorations (Naef, 2013:13). In addition, the ethnic division also remains stark in the educational system. Pupils in the Vukovar schools visit all the memorial sites apart from the Serbian ones to gain insight into the town's history (Ven, n.d.). On Vukovar's Remembrance Day, Serbs leave the town or stay inside (Naef, 2013:13). This is understandable in my view, because why would they attend commemoration ceremonies when they themselves are deprived of remembrance?

Excluding a certain group from the remembrance (in this case, the Serbs) can contribute to fueling renewed cycles of conflict (Ruwanpathirana, 2016:8). In Vukovar, a central subject that contributes to the way the past is remembered is the educational system. Serbian and Croat pupils go to separate schools and are taught different history lessons (Vladisavljevic, 2019). Croatian pupils learn about the past based on the Croatian narrative, whereas Serbian pupils have lessons grounded on their ethnic group's narrative. Hence, the conflicting history lessons promote further divisive versions of the past by strengthening the ethnic attitudes between both of Vukovar's ethnic communities. Furthermore, the official use of the Serbian script (i.e., Cyrillic) is banned by the town's council, in exemption to the towns State Minorities Law (Javanovic, 2015). Many Serbians and Croats work together in Vukovar, but their reconciliation is far off. The causes for the committed crimes and the suffering cannot be forgotten. Just as they have the right to remember, they also should be given the right to move on (Milosevic, 2018:63). Therefore, more balanced and inclusive memory initiatives would be a decisive step toward improving ethnic relations. Nevertheless, some progress must be noted as having been made in the relationships between Croatia and Serbia. A good example in this respect is the visit of Serbian President Tadic to the Ovcara memorial in 2011 and his apology for the crimes committed by Serbs (Tanjug, 2010). Both the Serb President Tadic and the Croatian President Josipovic have expressed willingness to re-establish relations between the two countries (Tanjug, 2010). Moreover, representatives of a Serbian non-governmental organization attended a commemoration ceremony in Vukovar in the same year (Milanovic, 2012:39). Nonetheless, these acts should be viewed with skepticism, because commemorations are often used as tools to achieve political goals rather than to actually offer homage to victims (Milanovic, 2012:5). At that time in 2011, Serbia and Croatia both needed to show their will to reconcile due to both countries' interests in accession to the European Union.

Finally, Vukovar's memorialization practices have contributed to greater awareness of the nexus between memorialization and reconciliation. What is perhaps important to note is that no perfect method exists for reconciliation (Bloomfield et al., 2003:13). Thus, one cannot expect memorials to be the panacea for reconciliation. In addition, different initiatives, measures, and contributions that deal with the past should be encouraged and supported, including but not limited to justice and accountability efforts and school book reforms. Lastly, each society should design reconciliation initiatives

based on their contexts. Any initiative to promote reconciliation must be carried out with caution and must involve members from all the affected groups.

Conclusion

Memorialization of the past is an essential element in the transitional justice approach. Memorialization initiatives are found in post-conflict societies around the world. Various post-conflict communities have demanded the erection of memorials in order to move on from the past (Hamber et al., 2010:397). Yet, whether or not memorialization initiatives support reconciliation efforts is a controversial matter. The elaborations in this paper show Vukovar's war memorialization to have hampered reconciliation between the Croats and Serbs there.

In Vukovar, war monuments and commemoration events are a source of collective memory that depict the heroism and victimhood of Croats while excluding Serbian losses from remembrance. Such a divisive memorialization not only strengthens the division between the two ethnic groups but also threatens their future relations.

Vukovar authorities must establish inclusive memorialization initiatives to ensure both side's losses are acknowledged. Only in this way can memorialization initiatives contribute to rebuilding friendly and neighborly relationships among the members of the two ethnic groups in town. Still, memorialization alternatives must be complemented with other measures such as justice and accountability efforts as well as school book reforms.

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