

Objects with an Imagined Home

Yugoslavia's Heritage as a Diasporic Object

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ABSTRACT

How do we approach an object that lost its country of origin, its context and source community? The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia left little room for the people of the newly formed states to share their living experience, therefore making it impossible to share the interpretation of the history and heritage remaining as the relic of the former state. During the past three decades the heritage field of the respected region operated mainly with concepts of dissonant, mutual, and shared heritage when attempting to determine who, how and why should deal with the historic objects made during the Yugoslavia's existence. This process had its limitations, and the above posed questions were largely left unanswered. Since the 2000s a clear demand for defining and managing these objects as the outsider interest in all-things-Yugoslav entered its growth phase. Still, the consensus on the status of these objects and the values they embody has not been accomplished. The question is, why? One possible answer lies in the disappearance of the source community. In its initial structure, it is gone, and the objects' home is now only imagined. This paper attempts to investigate the notion of a diasporic heritage by approaching it as objects that lost their home but didn't not change the place they inhabit. Today, highly popular Yugoslav memorials and monuments dedicated to WWII can be interpreted as diasporic objects: objects equally building the *imaginarium* of a home for the deconstructed communities in the region and for the actual diasporic communities that are still recognized as Yugoslav by their surroundings.

Keywords: Diasporic object, Monuments, Heritage, Yugoslavia, Imagined home.

1. INTRODUCTION

While Europe celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall and the conclusion of the Cold War in 1989, the process of dissolution of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was prepared and it assumed its violent shape two years later (Petrović 2015). The *de facto* civil war within the territory of the former SFRY lasted for almost the whole decade and fundamentally destroyed any sense of stability, security, as well as any possibility of anticipating the future, for the communities once constituting Yugoslavia. The level and severity of casualties varied within the territory of each newly formed state causing a significantly different living reality, and consequently a radically different collective recollection of the approximate history. From one side, the Republic of Slovenia activated the military in protecting its borders and managed to make its exit from the SFRY without an armed conflict, but in return it left thousands of people without citizenship for decades. From the other side, the Republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia were sites of the bloody armed conflicts, ending the ordeal with numerous war crimes committed, one finally recognized genocide in Srebrenica, and a still-to-be-recognized ethnic cleansing in Croatia. The Republic of Serbia was not affected with an open armed conflict within its territory, but as the successor of Yugoslavia it involved its official army and

paramilitary formations in destruction, looting and mass-killings in Bosnia and Croatia, without ever officially recognizing its participation in the civil war.

During the 1990s, everyday life was formulated differently, with people fighting for their survival, within more than difficult socio-economic circumstances, accompanied by a very tangible threat to life itself. The new political elites used the fear and insecurity of the citizens to further (re)enforce ethnic divisions within their states. The ideologies of nationalism flourished and until this day the communities once constituting Yugoslavia are trying to find their way out from installed hegemonies. “Othering” and searching for distinctions within the small differences became the norm. Attempted survival instigated a flow of migration movements both within SFRY territory and beyond its borders.

The Yugoslav diaspora, established as a community already since the 1950s primarily in Austria and Germany (Rašić 2022), was joined by an influx of new community members, first by the refugees escaping the armed conflicts, and later by economic migrants leaving the territory strongly affected by economic and mobility sanctions. The “new” migrants brought with them ethnic divisions, that until the very end of the twentieth century did not alter the structural balance of Yugoslav diaspora.

A plethora of contexts (to be outlined below), each claiming its right to specificity, unsurprisingly resulted in many variations in both abilities and intentions to recollect, keep, and use the heritage sites erected in the memory of the WWII that had been meticulously constructed and built since the birth of the socialist Yugoslavia. These objects functioned in several dimensions from four- to two-dimensional formats, that were either to be pilgrimed in public or to be taken to the private domain of both the local and international Yugoslav community. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia left close to no possibility of shared experience for the communities inheriting the state’s past and objects made to celebrate the once achieved victory and status of equal in the global context.¹ Alongside the apparent inability of communities residing in today’s North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia to connect to each other based on some level of shared experience, the continuous tampering with notions of national (and very often nationalistic) values deepened the gap between nations and nationalities that once constituted Yugoslavia. Therefore, reaching any type of consensus on matters of far-gone past events such as the Second World War is even today, potentially, an effort made in vain.

The need of the newly formed states to clearly distance themselves from the former communist system in most cases resulted in the neglect and even erasure of monuments erected to celebrate the joint and multi-ethnic nature of the WWII liberation struggle within the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Horvatinčić 2020; Đorđević 2021). The official relation of the contemporary states towards the past was not by any means a direct reflection of the needs of the communities they represented. However, in public discourse, the not insubstantial number of people still carrying the sentiment of the shared past and advocating for reconciliation were declared nostalgic. They were labelled as being unable to look forward to the glorious future ahead, that in contemporary reality positioned this territory seemingly forever at the European semi-periphery (Blagojević and Timotijević 2018). Within the every-day turmoil that the contemporary moment still carries within the territory of Former Yugoslavia, regardless from the level of integration in the international community each state achieved on its own, the question of how the heritage of the former state should be approached remains. What do these sites represent today, when their home is only imagined? Would understanding them as diasporic objects provide a possible path to investigating their significance for source communities and the established “Yugoslav” diaspora?

¹ Socialists Federative Republic Yugoslavia (at that time; Democratic Federative Yugoslavia) was one of the four countries founders of United Nations in 1945 (Jovanović 1985), and it was one of the founding countries of the Non-Aligned Movement uniting almost all freed colonies in 1961 (Jakovina 2011).

2. YUGOSLAVIA AS A HOME, YUGOSLAVIA AS HERITAGE

2.1. Imagined home

Starting from the early 1950s, migratory movements of Yugoslav workers resulted in the formulation of a rather coherent diasporic community. It was a community that was by no means homogenous but did take a level of pride in being Yugoslav, often recognizing the idea of returning to the homeland as one of its longings. In most cases the “temporary” economic migration never ended. The kept wish of returning to the country of origin led to the first generation migrant workers never fully integrating in the societies of the host countries. They remained in the limbo of the constant movement between two homes, between two cultures. The liminal reality of the transnational social space often materialized within the space of a transport means between the host country and homeland (Krzyżowski 2011, 55). This state supported economic migration resulted in almost one million Yugoslavians living outside of the state borders by the end of 1970s, forming a significantly large community that remotely lost its homeland with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Their first true encounter with the disappearance of the homeland occurred when they were joined by people fleeing the war either as officially recognized refugees or through the means of family ties with the already established diaspora. The rather sudden influx of the new members, severely traumatized by the consequences of the raging nationalism, strongly impacted the already established diasporic system in the host countries, bringing the divisions that were rapidly disintegrating the imagined homeland to the somehow achieved homeostasis of the diaspora.

Following the end of the war with the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, the process of reintegration of the new states started at different speeds for each country. The first to be fully integrated into the international organizations and communities were Slovenia and Croatia, with the others still struggling to reach this goal. A wave of new economic emigration started already in the mid 1990s, when a significant number of highly educated (predominantly engineers) individuals left their country of origin in search of economic stability. The still ongoing migratory activities do not necessarily strive towards associating with the established Yugoslav community abroad. The newcomers brought with them an intentional discontinuity with Yugoslavia, its state system and its heritage as the official political and societal policy of the new national states occupying the space of the former Yugoslavia. However, it is clear that the common refusal of associating with the established diaspora is not only linked to the ethnic determination and the recent history of 1990s and the devastating civil war. Rather, it is based on the initial social and cultural capital that the new economic migrants carried with them since the mid 1990s, that now meant an influx of highly educated migrants.

The perception of what the homeland is for the two groups significantly differs. The initial Yugoslav diaspora had a unified perception of what the home they left was: from micro locality to macro perspective of one Yugoslav state, they watched disappear from a distance. The diasporic influx instigated by the war and appearance of the national states, and by economic migration later on, was a result of surviving a severely traumatic experience and the second diasporic wave arrived with rapidly growing ethnic distrust. However, on arrival at their new places of residence this second diaspora was faced with a unified perception of the group they might belong to, based on the passports they carry. Regardless of the strictly defined national divisions being formed in the actual home countries, the host societies approached the new migrants as Yugoslav. The outside world marked and still marks this community as an entity that does not exist and in certain ways forges the continuity of Yugoslavia as an imagined homeland outside of the borders of the former country.

2.2. Yugoslav WWII heritage – a short history

The dichotomy in perception of what constitutes the post-Yugoslav diaspora and how it internally defines itself today, in many ways coincides with numerous dichotomies in perception of the material heritage objects that remains scattered throughout the SFRY territories. This material heritage holds an interesting position within the collective memory of Yugoslav diasporic community(s) as well. The most interesting case for investigation in this context is the corpus of monuments and memorials

dedicated to WWII. These monuments were objects built to celebrate the achievements of the joint effort made by the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia, overpassing the determinations of local, ethnic, or ideological belonging. They were designed as objects embodying the essence of what made SFRY special in the international context.

The WWII memory network consisted of both large- and small-scale monuments and memorials built to visualize the new founding myth of the afterwar Yugoslav state. A significant part of fashioning the official myth of the past was the conceptualization and building of this memorial network, as a form of the state's didactic cultural production (Klaić 2011). These objects were a means "to master the past in order to control the future. Even though monuments mostly commemorated fallen soldiers, they were also used to articulate a spirit of optimism and collective will, directed towards a utopian classless society" (Musabegović 2012, 20). Their construction was governed by veterans' association - SUBNOR established in 1947. Although SUBNOR had the most vital role in deciding and instigating the construction of monuments. When possible the projects were conducted in consultation and through participation with local authorities/communities. In this way the issues of official memory were kept within the structure of private remembrance, in so achieving a cohesion between public and intimate sense of ownership over memory objects.

However, what makes these sites so interesting today is the aesthetic solutions that were selected for their construction. The experimentation with the sculptural form and the development of the Yugo-specific typology came after 1948 when the aesthetics of socialist-realism was abandoned in the state funded artistic production (Klaić 2011). The human form in its realistic shape was abolished from the new visual vocabulary, and a novel set of forms were experimented with and introduced to the production of historical sculpture in public space. The attention given to constructing the desired tangible presentation of WWII victory resulted in impressive and immersive visual solutions. In the past two decades, a high level of regional and international attention has been given to a certain number of monuments belonging to the introduced memorial network, based on the specificity of the visual language employed in their making. These monuments are "a genuinely specific memorial typology that linked the memory of WWII to the promise of the future brought forward by the socialist revolution. Instead of formally addressing suffering, modernist memorial sites were intended to catalyze universal gestures of reconciliation, resistance and modern progress" (Kirn and Burghardt 2011, 6).

These monuments and memorials have been diligently venerated during the Yugoslavia's existence and following the beginning of the civil war and the state's dissolution they endured different fates. On most occasions they were ignored (until seen as politically useful for the nesting of new national narratives), or in the most extreme situations they were destroyed. Regardless of the chosen method of forgetting, both approaches were used as a means of distancing the new national states from their predecessor. This approach did not consider that through such action the new states undermined the ideals of antifascism, solidarity, equality, and social justice. The values of the imagined home of Yugoslavia that marked both Yugoslavia's inhabitants and the Yugoslav diaspora alike as proud and rightful members of the global community, were placed in shadows.

In addition to their complex contemporary faith, objects belonging to the WWII memorial network, have a rather complex history of transferring from four-dimensional to two-dimensional visual format. For example, objects such as monuments are by nature dependent on the space they are situated in. They inhabit sites and the presence of the community is crucial for keeping them relevant. However, already with the first wave of *Gastarbeiter* migrants, large memorial sites necessarily needed to be transferred into a movable format, such as small statues, or printed material, if they were to be placed into the new homes of Yugoslav diaspora. In many cases, the production of portable objects was started almost immediately after the construction of a monument. For the day of the official opening, and later of the annual commemoration, monuments were placed within the graphic solution of the booklets, calendars, coat pins, and other materials. Furthermore, with the development of the domestic tourism, intended equally for the local inhabitants and for the diaspora on their visit to the homeland, elaborated maps and guidebooks were printed, always accompanied by exciting photographic materials (Jokanović and Đorđević 2022). In this way, monuments were turned into memorabilia - an

object that can have a prized position in the home and that can stand as a reminder of the identity elements of a proud Yugoslav. This process of change of dimensions of an object, and therefore of its primary purpose, occurred at the memorial sites themselves following the dissolution of Yugoslavia as well and its results will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

3. YUGOSLAVIA'S HERITAGE AS A DIASPORIC OBJECT

In the early 2000s, WWII memorials slowly gained importance once again. Either as objects that can be appropriated by the new (often nationalistic) governments, or as objects gaining significant prominence within the global context, especially among brutalism-loving communities. They entered the public arena within the non-Yugoslav context due to the peculiarity of their aesthetic solution. In many ways they became colonized objects, recognized as a thing of taste, collected, and transported into a different context. As Vladimir Kulić concludes, the exposure they are given through international projects, such as Jan Kempenaers' photo book *Spomenik* (2010, also see Victoria and Albert Museum 2015), which mark these monuments only by numbers without their names and inscriptions, need to be recognized as acts of orientalizing and colonization of the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain. He states: "Rather than becoming identifiable in their own right, socialist buildings have only become further integrated into the economy of digital images, with the same anonymous detachment that ignores both their original meaning and their artistic merit" (Kulić 2018, 3). In these terms, the WWII monuments of Yugoslavia can be understood as diasporic objects "that are detached from their place of origin; through their subsequent use and ownership they are invested with new sets of meanings." (Pechurina 2020, 3). Furthermore, they can be interpreted as a new ethnographic object of the European East, placed neatly in the context of world culture museums or within the Wunderkammer setting such as the V&A Museum in London.

Regardless of how tempting it would be to step into deliberating the context of the former Yugoslavia region within the framework of (post)colonialism, the issues that might appear far overpass this article. The monuments of WWII will therefore be examined from the perspective of the two-fold function of diasporic objects, defined by Anna Pecurina as objects "connecting migrants with their distant homes and cultural heritage they also act as reminders of the sense of detachment from those settings and experiences. In this sense, as a migration experience itself, the meaning of diasporic objects is ambivalent and simultaneously refers to experiences, feelings and attachments that are both familiar and strange and continuously reinvented through the course of everyday life." (Pecurina 2020, 3).

3.1. Heritage without heirs, diasporic object without a home

With the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the texture of the community residing within its borders was permanently altered, and the creation of new national states deeply rooted in ethnic determinations caused a significant level of tensions among what were once Yugoslav people. The thorough detachment from the notions of the shared experience and identity instigated sometimes radical detachment from material heritage built during the former state's existence. In the process, these objects were left without an official heir community for close to two decades. Today when new interest in them is established, the national appropriation of these sites the diverse state agencies and NGOs vocally supporting national hegemonies mainly claim their right to this heritage, either to destroy it or to use it to actively revise history (Karačić, Banjeglav and Govedarica 2012). Within the former state's borders the community still identifying Yugoslavia's heritage as its own reduced over the years. Or to better phrase it, they retain from stepping into the public space and to demand not to be excluded from the political conversation by being marked as only Yugo-nostalgic. Their revival was followed by both local and international heritage appropriation and these monuments are today from one side used as a way for confirming rightful belonging to intranational organizations (such as the European Union) the new national states. From the other they are discovered as the Antiquity (Ziolkowski 1990) of the twentieth century, as a presentation of what communist Eastern Europe looks like. However, the situation differed within the initial Yugoslav diaspora that by this time had reached its third and fourth generation, almost fully integrated in the host societies. These communities now

with only an imagined homeland that can no longer be found on the map, in some cases successfully managed to transfer the perception of the former homeland identity to the scale of the local context. They focused on their villages, cities, and regions of origin, without focusing on the broader context of Yugoslavia. A potent example of WWII monument remaining still as a diasporic object in a literal way is the “Memorial Center Lipa pamti” in the town of Lipa on the border between today’s Slovenia and Croatia (see Memorial Center Lipa pamti 2022). The Memorial Center was established in 2015 to tell the story of WWII history and the experience of the Lipa’s inhabitants during that time. The establishment of the Center is an example of a truly bottom-up approach to heritage production, that was partially initiated and financially supported by the Yugoslavian diaspora that finally returned home. However, the Yugoslav notion is not a significant part of the presented narrative, but the local character of the described events and the former institution (operating until 1989) takes primacy, as the less problematic and provocative approach.

Today, the WWII memorials of the former Yugoslavia function as proper diasporic objects, nested somewhere in the transnational social space of the Yugoslav diaspora, with both positive and negative connotations added to them. From one side, their aesthetic form successfully penetrated the visual vocabulary of the community, as the symbol of the once achieved greatness of post-WWII Yugoslavia’s ability to partake in the global occurrences (now in the fourth generation usually consumed as matter of aesthetic pleasure). On the other, they are a painful remainder of the future-not-reached and expectations unfulfilled, that were left behind by the war and economic migrants of the 1990s. However, for an object to function as a diasporic one it needs to have a place of origin. It needs to carry all the contextual significance of the home. It needs to be an embodiment of the values that bring comfort within the process of integration (in this case, either as reminder of rightful belonging to a global current of ideal, or as a reminder of what was intentionally left behind). The question is, what occurs when an object that achieved its diasporic status loses its home, and can the new homeland be imagined?

The answer to this question does not belong to the positive-negative spectrum but opens room for re-deliberating the meaning-making process of heritage as a physical marker of intangible societal contexts. The WWII memorials of the former Yugoslavia lost their home almost thirty-five years ago, and the values they were built to mark faded into the background of the new imperatives of making strong national states. They are used only when proof of continuity is needed for the new national states, and when more urgent issues can be set on the sidelines. However, they do live a life of their own within the spaces where the new imagined communities still have a meeting point, and where they can constitute a new format of a homeland, that is at the same time tangible and intangible. They still occupy the same physical space, within the same territory, and the once silenced Yugoslav community within the region can slowly step into public space. On the other hand, their imagined homeland exists within a space where new imagined community is possible, a community that is not based on physical location and where the Yugoslav diaspora is being joined by the community migrating without actually moving. With the development of digital means, the diasporic objects that lost their homeland have a possibility of building an imagined home on different terms. The physical locality and the material position of the memory do not necessarily demand a physical site anymore, but they can master a new type of physicality.

4. OBJECTS WITH AN IMAGINED HOME

According to the most recent official demographic research in Serbia, conducted at the end of 2022, there is a slow but steady rise of the number of people declaring themselves as Yugoslavian (Government of Serbia, n.d.). Their number is by no means large enough to be considered as a critical mass that can impact any type of state policy. Nevertheless, this increase should be interpreted within the context of what elements and values their identity carries. In their sets of values as well as in their apparent longing for the homeland, that is not left behind but lost, this community still functions as a diasporic one, but as a community migrating without moving. Nevertheless, they must not be seen as nostalgic consumers of Yugoslavia’s heritage, but as the potential source makers of Yugoslav heritage.

In this respect, a distinction needs to be made between Yugoslavia's heritage and Yugoslav heritage. In this context it may be vital for understanding where and how an imagined home of the previously described diasporic objects has been gradually formed. The distinction is rather obvious, even though it is rarely discussed in this manner. Yugoslavia's heritage refers to objects and ideals the past country put forward and materialized as heritage, such are WWII monuments. On the other hand, Yugoslav heritage can be defined as the numerous beneficial aspects of almost a welfare state that was introduced by the former system. The two do not exist in isolation from one another. The process of their appearance, however, can formulate the imagined home for the objects that lost their initial source community, and that can potentially have an impact on the contemporary reality (even in terms of the diasporic transnational social context).

Interestingly, the Yugoslav diaspora, regardless of its internal ethnic distinctions, is often still recognized as one by the host societies and their administration. This implies the existence of a source community outside of the borders of the former Yugoslavia region. The lack of distinction between small differences has led to a continuity of a functioning community coming from this territory and the similar overcoming of divisions imposed during the past thirty years can be noted within the region as well. The historical distance and the more pressing issues of colonization instigated an active construction of the *imaginarium* of a home, of a society that knows the importance of the common good and that in this sense belongs to global tendencies as a rightful participant. The diasporic objects constituted by WWII memorials often found their place among memorabilia in the new dwellings of the Yugoslav diaspora and were, thus, granted the possibility of once again gaining meaning. They carry the understanding of fifty years of a more collective ideology: the sense of common property, common responsibility, and common benefit. Within the galloping colonization of resources affecting the region now referred to Western Balkans², either natural or human ones, the claim of shared responsibility and a right to clean land and dignified living and working conditions became a priority in the past two years. Maybe for the first time since the year 2000, when the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević was taken down, the diasporic and regional communities stood in support and pride of the publicly displayed ideals. The symbols of a WWII victory appeared anew, though through a different media. The new imagined home is formed, and maybe a new interpretation of the objects that were made as Yugoslavia's heritage can follow. If used as more than objects of taste, surpassing their forms and aesthetic, they might become sites of practices that remember and adjust the realities the contemporary communities are facing within their actual and diasporic reality.

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² The term Western Balkans encompasses countries once belonging to SFRY (excluding Slovenia) joined with Albania.

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