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## **DISTORTION OF HISTORY IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASES OF STARO SAJMIŠTE AND JASENOVAC<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The research will focus on the misuse of historical facts related to the Staro Sajmište camp in Serbia and the Jasenovac camp in Croatia from the 1980s until 2022. Analysis of legislature, proposed and passed, related to Staro Sajmište and its memorialization will be additionally researched, as well as different historical narratives about responsibility for crimes connected to Staro Sajmište. Also, memory politics and Holocaust remembrance in the cases of Serbia and Croatia, and its evolution since the end of Socialist Yugoslavia will be analysed. The central part of the research will be focused on the rise of distorted narratives regarding selected camps that will be analysed through the activities of selected historians, researchers, politicians, and public figures. Their public statements, lectures, expertise, and misuse of facts will be researched.

**Keywords MeSH:** Holocaust, Jews, COVID-19

**Non MeSH:** Distortion, Revisionism, Jasenovac, Staro Sajmište

### **Introduction: from the breakup of Yugoslavia to new memory politics in Serbia and Croatia**

Socialist Yugoslavia ended in a violent dissolution. However, its dissolution wasn't the only violent process of the transformation of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe [1 p381-4], Other cases of violent conflict which marked the 1990s and 2000s took place in the former USSR, of which the most important are the wars in Chechnya (1994-1996; 1999-2009), the war in Georgia (2008), and the first and second

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wars in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 [2 p98-104]. The former communists in most of the former Yugoslav states had to adapt to the new circumstances after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the USSR [3 p22-5]. That process was more successful in the cases of Croatia and Slovenia than in Serbia, but what was common for all of them was their transformation into nationalists in a matter of months and years in the late 1980s. The best and leading chameleons were Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman [4 p16-24]. In a changing world, they applied advanced media mechanisms, such as live tv coverage, to highlight their patriotism and emphasize their role as guardians of the “chosen” people [5 p5-6].

What was very specific about the main protagonists of the Yugoslav wars and the former leading communist leaders that became nationalists is how they mobilized selected groups of their partners in crime in order to change the historical narratives and make sure that specific ethnic groups were portrayed as victims of Socialist Yugoslavia (*Knjiga o Milutinu, Genocid hrvatskog jezika itd.*) [3 p21-3]. Journalists, artists, historians, and members of academia and scientific communities were needed for these projects, and, although most of the Yugoslav conflicts ended in the 1990s, the importance of these groups and their collaboration with states and/or parts of states’ institutions has continued until today. The reason for that is their need to justify their mistakes (and often their criminal responsibility). Another important reason was that, in the case of most of the former Yugoslav states, lustration never happened – in contrast to Central and Eastern European countries. The former communists and state-sponsored nationalists were either part of the Communist Party or were collaborators of the state and its institutions. Political leadership since the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia until today has stuck with the guiding idea that the nation is exclusively comprised of an ethnically homogenous group and, hence, the only political framework in which individuals can act. Political parties changed names since the early 1990s but their structures and members have not [5 p24-31].

In both Serbia and Croatia in the period after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the main motivation for the delegitimization of communism was not that it wasn’t democratic enough, but that it was not nationalistic enough. The irony is that both political elites of the “young Europeans” (Serbia and Croatia) were former communist apparatchiks from the Communist Party of Serbia and Communist Party of Croatia and their satellite bureaus and agencies.

The post-Yugoslav region is the best example of how states changed very recent historical narratives to mobilize support and legitimize ethnic conflicts by the misuse of history.

*The process of national redefinition, and harnessing fragments of history that support this new national vision, continued (and continues) from the 1990s through the consolidation of statehood in the post-Yugoslav states until today.* [6 p232]

Although the research of memory politics and its misuse for populist reasons by local political elites and their satellites is an already-researched topic, [75] it is still important to understand the power of memory politics not only for daily political pur-

poses, but for the distortion of history and the Holocaust in the cases of Serbia and Croatia.

Jelena Subotić's *Yellow star, Red star Holocaust remembrance after Communism* (Žuta zvezda, Crvena zvezda: Sećanje na Holokaust posle komunizma) [8] is a recent, very important publication dealing with that matter. One of the most important findings of Subotić is that post-communist countries misused the Holocaust in searching for their own genocides, where they can be only victims, never collaborators or perpetrators. In that process, Jews are simply removed or sidelined in the history of the Holocaust and replaced by other ethnic groups [8, p292]. She also claims that the ontological insecurity of identities of contemporary post-communist Serbia and Croatia shapes their memory of the Holocaust [8, p30]. This process took place at the same time as the rehabilitation of quislings and their later glorification – which continued to develop after the 2000s despite both countries focusing on EU accession. In the case of Croatia, that meant justifying the establishment of the fascist Independent State of Croatia and its support for the Axis powers [6 p232]. In Serbia, the main goal of the revisionists was, at first, to equalize the role of partisans and chetniks in World War Two [9 p136-8] and later to rehabilitate the convinced quislings and their collaborators like Spasoje Drenjan Zeka and Joseph Ginder [9 p140-141]. In both the Serbian and Croatian cases, the Catholic and Orthodox churches were involved in the processes of rehabilitating some of the quislings, their collaborators, and anti-Semites, who marked Yugoslav society in the 1930s and 1940s. [10 p502-4]

What was the common legacy in Yugoslavia and other communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe was that the memorializing of the Holocaust became marginalized. Jews were not perceived as the main victims of the racist Nazi system and their allies and collaborators, as the focus was on the grandiose victory of the Soviet army and communist fighters. In the case of Yugoslavia, the focus was on the partisans and their successful fight against the Nazis and their allies. Communist fixation on the military and ideological struggle against antifascism didn't allow any space for Jewish victims in Eastern European socialist post-1945 Europe [8, p38]. A similar but distorted memory of the Holocaust marked the same space after the end of the Cold War.

Holocaust memory is one of the most important European cultural memories, especially since the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the European Economic Community into the European Union in 1993. For the former Warsaw Pact countries, it was important to blend in the collective memory of the Holocaust [8 p39; 11]. Still, the memory of the Holocaust in the former communist states that joined after 2004 is very different and, in their Manichean perception, it was important to stress that the other totalitarian system of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – communism – was the main villain [8 p41]. In post-communist Europe, communism is the main “evil,” because only by emphasizing communism and its negative legacy could new Europeans portray themselves as the actual victims and the “new Jews.” In the case of Serbian society during the last years of Yugoslavia, it was important for Slobodan Milošević and his political leadership to stress that his ethnic group was the biggest martyr of World War Two, World War One, that it suffered under the Ustasha regime, and, of course, was not represented fairly in socialist Yugoslavia [1 p348-350]. Franjo Tuđman, a former

communist general and unsuccessful historian who became the first Croatian president after the collapse of Yugoslavia, stressed the autochthonous nature of Croatian culture, “*The emphasis was on things Croatian and on the revival of Croatian national consciousness.*” [3 p23] The Croatian political leadership also built up connections with part of the Croatian diaspora that represented heirs of Ustasha perpetrators. For them, the revisionism of World War Two history and rehabilitation of Croatian collaborators was the most important mission in the new Croatia. For both leaderships, especially after the Yugoslav wars started in 1991, it was crucial to portray themselves as the main victims of World War Two.

According to Jelena Subotić, Serbia followed one of the patterns used in former communist countries – memory inversion – which would mean that there is no Holocaust denial, but the main focus is switched to other ethnic minorities that were targeted by the Ustashe, Nazis, and their allies. [8 p45] The extreme example of this can be seen in the book of Gideon Greif, *Jasenovac Auschwitz of the Balkans*,<sup>2</sup> where the author increased the number of those killed in Jasenovac from 700,000 to 800,000 [12]. The same historian (Greif) was involved in a more recent distortion of history and genocide denial after he was appointed by Republika Srpska to be part of a committee on Srebrenica. [13,14] Greif’s actions eventually led to the cancellation of his Order of Merit (one of the highest German orders), as it was proven that his report in the Srebrenica committee contradicted the case law of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the International Court of Justice, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide [15]. Still, Greif received the Sretenje Order (one of the highest Serbian orders) in 2018, and, in his follow-up interview, praised the first Serbian archbishop of the 13<sup>th</sup> century for helping Jews [16].

Other former communist countries like Croatia follow a different path, as they apply memory divergence [8 p46]. The Holocaust is separated from other genocidal practices that happened in World War Two, so that it is attributed solely to the Nazis. The main purpose for this is so that Croatians can’t be held responsible for crimes committed against other ethnic groups (mostly Serbs) [8 p46]. This was additionally important during the early stage of the Yugoslav wars, when the Ustasha movement and its visual and other symbols were rehabilitated for the purpose of national unity against the enemy. As Subotić states, this method helps in keeping national self-purity [8 p46]. In the later stage of this mechanism of memory divergence, the focus of remembrance shifted to Croatian victims of the partisans that were portrayed as innocent, although the vast majority of them were not. The peak of this saw Bleiburg became a new symbol of the “Croatian Holocaust” in the 1990s, which became accepted among part of Croatian society [17 p1-25; 8 p169]. Editors of the “Hrvatski holokaust” state that Serbian communists killed between 200,000 and 600,000 Croats. A very apologetic review of this volume was later published in one of the leading scientific journals in Zagreb [18 p1051-63].

What can be followed in the cases of both Serbia and Croatia is a phenomenon that was explained by Ewa Plonowska Ziarek as a narcissistic identification with Jew-

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<sup>2</sup> The book was published in Serbian, English, and Hebrew.

ish suffering [19 p320] that leads to the cult of ethnic self-victimization, which eventually drifts away from victims of the Holocaust. Serbian and Croatian protagonists were not creative but they adopted mechanisms that were already developed in more successful Eastern European countries.

### **Sajmište and Jasenovac from the late 1980s until 2020**

Staro Sajmište, which is more commonly called Sajmište, is the most important site for the Holocaust in Belgrade because most Belgrade Jews perished there [20,21]. Sajmište was originally planned as Belgrade's first Fair Centre (the name *Sajmište* in Serbian means "fair") on the left bank of the Sava River opposite the Sava Slope Bastion of Kalemegdan Fortress in Belgrade [22]. By the fall of 1941, most Jewish men had already been killed in another location in Belgrade – *Topovske šupe* – and the former Belgrade Fair, with plenty of pavilions and in a very convenient and spacious location, was ideal for the creation of the *Judenlager Semlin* – the "Camp for Jews Semlin/Zemun" [21 p45-51]. Inmates included the elderly, women, and children, most of whom were Belgrade Jews or Jews from Banat. In total, up to 7,000 of them were killed there between December 1941 and May 1942 [20 p35-42]. At the end of the war, of the 33,500 Jews that lived in pre-war Serbia including Vojvodina, around 80% were killed [8 p81]. During the immediate post-war period, in 1948, Sajmište was used as a convenient location for the future location of the new socialist Belgrade on the left side of Sava – New Belgrade. Sajmište became home to many facilities and offices that were used for engineers, workers, youth brigades, and others [20 p68-76]. From 1952, Sajmište became home to members of the Association of Fine Artists of Serbia (ULUS), where its members – artists – found a lot of space in the former pavilions [20 p80-1]. Other residents of Sajmište, apart from artists, included poor members of the Roma community of Belgrade, who lived in barracks there until 1960, when they were removed to the neighbourhood of Ledine [20 p84]. Still, until the 1970s, there was not a single memorial or even a plaque that marked the former camp. The location of the former camp was even supposed to become the new Opera, as planned by Belgrade's city authorities [20 p105-6].

The first commemorative plaque was erected in 1974, where it was stated that the German Gestapo established a camp with the help of domestic collaborators, and that over 40,000 people from all over our country were killed [20 p106]. Jews were not the only victims of the camp but there was still not a single mention of the Jewish camp which was the last residence for most of Belgrade's Jews.<sup>3</sup> This plaque was removed in 1984 and a new, slightly bigger plaque was erected with the same text, but this time it was placed on a little plateau – not on the wall of the building, which was a significant progress [20 p110-1]. A sudden interest of the political elite in Sajmište in the late 1980s can be observed. Belgrade's mayor, Aleksandar Bakočević, in his spee-

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<sup>3</sup> The former Zemun camp, after all of its Jewish inmates were killed, was used as *Anhaltenlager* – detention camp for political prisoners. Of about 15,000 prisoners, around 6,000 died, and only 120 of them were Jews. While according to Koljanin, from over 30,000 prisoners around 10,500 were killed. [20 p47-8; 21 p455].

ch next to the Sajmište plaque, mentioned how important the site was, without mentioning the Jewish inmates of the camp [8 p93]. In the final years of Yugoslavia, the call for a new, more impressive Sajmište monument was organized by the city's authorities and the proposal by sculptor Miodrag Popović won the first prize. Still, although the opening was planned for May 1989, it took six more years until it was finally erected in 1995 [20 p118-21]. It is important to mention that the total number of victims of both camps at the site of Sajmište was enlarged to 40,000, although by the 1980s it was already known that the total number was not higher than 18,000. This tendency of increasing the number of victims would become characteristic in Serbia, especially after the wars in Yugoslavia started. The next important step for the memorialization of Sajmište was connected to the foundation of the Museum of Genocide Victims in Belgrade in 1992. This was done as part of the war propaganda of Slobodan Milošević and his allies. The Holocaust was (mis)used to tell the story of Serbian suffering as the main goal of this politicized research institution [8 p98]. Serbian historian Miloš Ković, in the 2000s, became one of the most prominent agents of memory inversion narrative. After conducting pseudohistorical research, he claimed that Serbs were the first victims of the genocide [23] and that the Serbian nation had been the victim of genocide more than any other, and that they are the biggest victims of "white racists," along with Russians, Jews, and Poles [24]. Ković was following the already-established hypothesis of other historians who worked for Milošević's apparatus and who claimed that the Croats were a "genocidal nation" and that the Jasenovac camp was worse than Auschwitz. During the war years but also in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sajmište was neglected, similar to most of Belgrade – the new poverty and the rise of criminality led to the shady privatization of many plots and former pavilions that reshaped the image of Sajmište with car repair shops, gyms, restaurants, schools, playgrounds, new barracks, and unhygienic houses [25]. While Sajmište was sinking in negligence, the Croatization of Holocaust remembrance was growing. This tendency had a few directions that were important for Sajmište:

1. As Sajmište was a camp governed by the Nazis, assisted by quislings from Belgrade and not by the Ustasha, it was not seen as an important place of martyrdom and was left to decline until 2016; [26]
2. As the process of the rehabilitation of collaborators continued from the Government of Vojislav Koštunica, the process related to the memorialization of Sajmište had to slow down, as Serbian collaborators of the Nazis were assisting them in running both camps at Sajmište; [9 p141-4]
3. As bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia were burdened by the misuse of the history of both sides, the Croatian quisling state was blamed for Sajmište [8 p109].

In January 2017, the long-awaited Law on Sajmište was presented to a selected audience that also included Jewish communities. The Law on the Foundation of the Memorial Centre for Victims (*Zakon o Ustanovi spomen-žrtve*) was a great example of memory inversion; it primarily focused on the genocide of the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia and also defined that the genocide against Serbs was also conducted by Albanian collaborators in Kosovo and Metohija during World War Two [27].



This law faced very strong criticism from Jewish communities, along with experts and the international community. After it was drafted in 2018 to include more precise autonomy for the Museum of the Holocaust within the memorial, it was finally withdrawn [8 p112]. Such attitudes towards Holocaust remembrance also show a very interesting polarization when it comes to state legislation. Although the rehabilitation of collaborators happened from the time of Vojislav Koštunica (in the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the Serbian state passed its most comprehensive Jewish restitution law in 2017, which strictly followed the Terezin declaration of 2009 [28], which was also successfully implemented [29 p614-6].

Jasenovac was a concentration and extermination camp established in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which operated from August 1941 until April 1945, and it was the biggest concentration camp in occupied Yugoslavia during the war [30]. Apart from being the biggest camp, it was infamous as the site with the highest number of murdered inmates in the entirety of Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> Jasenovac wasn't just a single camp but presented a complex of camps that operated on a wider area between Krapje on the Sava River and Stara Gradiška, also on the Sava. The first two camps were closed after four months, but new ones were opened in late 1941: Jasenovac III and Jasenovac, which were operational until April 1945 [32]. The camp at Stara Gradiška was also known as Camp 5 in the system of KL Jasenovac [33]. Jasenovac was, at the same time, a death camp, forced labour camp, and a transit camp for inmates that would be later transported to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. The main victims in the camp were Serbs, Jews, and Roma from the territory of the NDH. Out of that number, more than half were women and children under 12 years old [34]. Apart from them, other victims were Croats, Muslims, Slovenes, and others [35]. In the first post-war years, the new political authorities were cautious and preferred not to mention the scale of crimes in the NDH, as, for most of them, the Nazis couldn't be held accountable [8 p148]. For a few decades after the war, Jasenovac remained unmemorialized. That changed in 1966, when the monument, "Stone Flower", was erected by the architect Bogdan Bogdanović [36]. Two years later, in 1968, a memorial museum was opened. Until the end of the Second Yugoslavia, it was among the most important places for school trips and other educational visits. That all changed when Yugoslavia fell apart. It was fortunate that the memorial in Jasenovac wasn't destroyed during the war years of the early 1990s – out of about 6,000 World War Two memorials in Yugoslavia, around 3,000 were destroyed, and 700 among them were considered to be of exquisite artistic or cultural value [8 p162].

During the war of the 1990s, Serbian forces acquired control of the Jasenovac memorial. They took most of the documentary material with them to the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina across the Sava River. Maybe the material was saved in such a manner, but it would be later misused for political exhibitions that were supposed to prove the "genocidal tendencies of the Croatian nation" [8 p172]. Jasenovac was a forgotten place for several years in Croatia, until the Social Democrats replaced

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<sup>4</sup> The history of the Jasenovac concentration camp was a very well-researched topic, from the first post-war years until today. The biggest debate that is still the main reason for distortion is the actual number of Jasenovac victims. One of the most precise articles concerning this was written by Vladimir Geiger in 2013 and 2020 [31,32].

the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in 2000. One of the results was the restoration of the “Stone Flower” in 2002 [37], as well as the successful recovery of the majority of museum objects, along with the first official visits of state representatives [38,39]. Jasenovac was an important place for the construction of a slightly schizophrenic narrative of Croatia’s partisan past, as prime minister Ivo Sanader constructed a “formula” in 2004 that was supposed to praise antifascism but condemn communism [8 p177]. The construction of that narrative was important for parts of the Croatian political elite because they could blame the communists and portray Yugoslavia as an equally oppressive totalitarian system in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While at the same time, they could cherish the antifascist struggle and therefore omit their responsibility for the rehabilitation of World War Two collaborators. In the meantime, a new place became the focal point for the commemoration of World War Two victims, moving to the tiny Austrian town of Bleiburg where, in the last days of World War Two, partisan forces had a final clash with retreating Ustasha forces and other collaborators from occupied Yugoslavia [40]. This was important as it represents a very clear example of what Subotić named the case of memory divergence in the practice of Holocaust remembrance [8 p46]. The circumstances surrounding the commemoration and distortion of Jasenovac got worse in the period 2015-2018, as the right-wing HDZ took power in Croatia again<sup>5</sup> [40 p388-92]. When historian Zlatko Hasanbegović became Minister of Culture in the new HDZ government, the European image of the government was jeopardized, as he was considered revisionist and prone to justifying quislings in World War Two [42,43]. One of the most serious revisionisms was made by the film director Jakov Sedlar, who released a documentary film in 2016 titled: *Jasenovac – The Truth*, which is a great example of a Holocaust-denying documentary [44,45]. The director received an award from the city of Zagreb in 2017, which led to an international scandal [46]. Sedlar repeated two of the most important lies that remain popular among revisionists: minimizing the number of victims, reducing them to 15-20,000, although the established number is between 80-100,000 [30]; and stressing that the accepted history was fabricated and that the camp managed by partisans, where they executed Croats and other enemies of the state – another completely false statement, which is important for the false claim of the so-called “Triple Jasenovac Camp.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2016, there was another scandal including a Croatian veteran association – Croatian Defence Forces (HOS) – with the erection of a memorial plaque just next to the Jasenovac memorial. The plaque was dedicated to killed comrades of the HOS. But, taking into account the Ustasha-style slogan that was on the plaque, it was an obvious mockery of the Jasenovac memorial and its victims [49]. After fierce opposition from other political parties, minorities and activists, a solution was found in the removal of the plaque to a few kilometers away [49]. The best example of how a revisionist narrative about Jasenovac became present in the years before the COVID-19 pan-

<sup>5</sup> Another useful insight into commemorations of Jasenovac from 2014 to 2017 can be found on the site of the Framnat project [41].

<sup>6</sup> This is one of the main narratives of Holocaust deniers and revisionists that organized the association which was supposed to research the “triple Jasenovac camp” that was apparently the bloodiest after 1945, when partisans used it. [47, 48].



demic is when even the Croatian president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, came up with the idea of an international commission that would help in discovering the truth about Jasenovac [8 p183].

### **Distortion of history from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic until 2022: Staro Sajmište and Jasenovac**

Staro Sajmište has been a popular topic since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Just immediately before, members of the National Assembly of Serbia adopted the Law on the Staro Sajmište Memorial Center on February 24 with a majority vote of 159 (out of 250) – with the purpose of, as stated in the proposal, *fulfilling the duty of keeping a permanent memory of the victims of the Holocaust and the WW2 genocide* [50]. This time the law was drafted along with members of the Jewish community and had a clear structure and aims that could help ensure good governance of the memorial. Another important component of the law was that it also included the location of Topovske Šupe, where most Belgrade Jewish men were executed during the war. This location was in danger, as it was the proposed site for a future shopping mall, but the site was protected after the law was passed and it should remain safe [51,52]. The biggest challenge for the lawmakers is the implementation of the law and, although it was supposed to become active in January 2021, the locations of both Sajmište and Topovske Šupe still look neglected and far from ready to be open. The first step was the renovation of the central tower in Sajmište, which is in very poor condition, and solving legal issues surrounding property in the area, as there are many different owners, objects, and tenants that wouldn't be able to continue to work there if the law would be implemented and the Memorial start to work [53].

One of the important examples of distortion of the Holocaust happened in the second year of the pandemic, during the commemoration of Victory Day, when, during an official event that was conducted by the City of Belgrade, Draža Mihailović was portrayed as an equal to Josip Broz Tito in the fight against fascism [54]. Apart from that, the musical part of the ceremony was marked by a selection of marching bands that were very popular with Serbian quislings [55]. The public reaction was immediate and organizers were accused of revisionism, as they didn't provide a clear answer but an unclear justification [56]. Apart from marching bands that were popular during quisling Milan Nedić's time, the audience had the pleasure of listening to Desanka Maksimović's "Krvava bajka" (Bloody Fairytale), which was a very popular poem during socialist Yugoslavia. Therefore, in the end, the organizers lumped everything together: partisans, četniks, and quislings [57]. This was not a sudden nor surprising development, as it became popular to blur the lines between different sides in official commemorations of the most important dates in World War Two [58]. The year before (2020), at a Victory Day commemoration in the city of Niš, the guest of honour was condemned war criminal, General Vladimir Lazarević, who served a sentence in Hague before his "patriotic appearance" for that event [59]. Also worthy of notice was the activity of the Russian Ambassador, who became a promoter of revisionism in Serbia in a very open manner [59]. Similar activities of Russian officials became an official narra-

tive of Russia since they openly embraced Holocaust distortion after beginning their aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 [60]. Russian President Vladimir Putin's narrative, which he used to justify his criminal acts and war crimes, quickly became Anti-Semitic and was also fed to revisionists and deniers in the Western Balkan region [61]. A statement from the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, in June 2022: *Some of the worst antisemites are Jews; Hitler may have been the scion of Jews; And the fact that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a Jew does not mean he does not represent neo-Nazism and antisemitism*, [62]; was an important sign for Russian collaborators in Serbia in academia, NGOs, journalists, artists, sportspeople, and others to adjust *their* narrative about the Holocaust as well. In the public space and debate in Serbia, Sajmište was not as important as Jasenovac, which was more renowned, especially after the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine. The lack of activities regarding the implementation of the law also contributed to that.

Jasenovac has been a more magnetic topic for revisionists in both Croatia and Serbia since the outbreak of the pandemic. In the years prior to COVID-19, the most important and influential revisionist in Croatia was film director Jakov Sedlar, while the most active was Ivan Vukić – a journalist and amateur historian [47]. Among other active revisionists, it is important to mention John Ivan Precela, Nikolaj Tolstoj, and Rudolph Rummel, who are important because they minimize or justify the actions of the Ustasha in World War Two, and because they are also among the main proponents of the imagined *Croatian Holocaust* in Bleiburg and elsewhere [63]. Still, the role of members of the academic community and some influential members of the Catholic church was important in the distortion of history in the case of Bleiburg and Jasenovac. One of the most active individuals during the last two and half years of the COVID-19 pandemic was historian Blanka Matković, who is influential within the Croatian far-right. She uses her status as a researcher at Warwick University to promote false narratives [64]. Her distortion of Jasenovac and World War Two history, and the responsibility of the Ustasha movement are extreme enough not to be able to get close to the mainstream historiography. Together with Stipo Pilić, she is a founding member and president of the distortionist Croatian Historian Society – HDP Dr. Rudolf Horvat [65]. She published one of the most comprehensive revisionist monographs about Jasenovac with Pilić in 2021: *Jasenovac and post-war Jasenovac camps, the geostrategic point of Greater Serbia politics and a propaganda initiator of its spread to the West* [66]. In the book, Matković and Pilić misuse sources in order to make an alternative history of Jasenovac in which Gideon Grief's "Auschwitz of the Balkans" is reinvented as a "collection and labour" camp [67]. Historian, Rory Yeomans, stated the following about the term authors use as "Jasenovac (Serbian) mythology":

*"Jasenovac mythology", whatever its source, as evidence of Greater Serbian propaganda which seeks to hold Croatian society "in permanent subservience" to the Serbs for their "alleged genocide" instead of seeking the "historical truth". [67]*

Matković has also established a strong relationship with individuals from the Croatian far-right establishment, such as former MP, Željko Glasnović (who became an MP for HDZ, which he soon abandoned) [68]. Matković expressed gratitude to Glasnović for his long-term support and for his help in breaking through the media

blockade [69]. In November 2018, Glasnović was the guest of honour at an event of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), a German neo-Nazi party, when they held a party congress in Büdingen in Hesse. In his statements there, he connected ISIS with Bosnian Muslims and “Greater Serbian imperialism” [70,71]. In March 2019, Glasnović visited Lebanon as part of the Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF), a far-right pan-European political party. He also took a short trip to Syria on a Russian jet in a delegation led by Roberto Fiore, the leader of Italy’s Forza Nuova party with Udo Voigt MEP from the NPD, Belgian nationalist Hervé Van Laethem, and Slovakia’s neo-Nazi leader Marian Kotleba [72]. Members of the delegation were hosted by Lebanese prime-minister Michel Aoun, as well as by Ammar al-Moussawi, Head of Hezbollah’s international relations and foreign affairs department. Glasnović visited the graves of Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon. A common interest for all these European politicians was that they share a belief in Holocaust denial [73].

During the second year of the pandemic, in July 2021, Matković, along with her colleague Pilić, held a promotion of their revisionist book on Jasenovac in Glina [74,75]. It could be claimed that the decision to hold the promotional public event in the town of Glina – the location of massacres in 1941 where Ustasas killed most of the Serbs from that region, and which was declared a crime of genocide – was a premeditated provocation [76 p179-82,1 p119-20]. Blanka Matković’s revisionism is obvious, clear, and easy to follow, so she can be considered an extremist that doesn’t belong to mainstream academia, contrary to another important revisionist historian that was very active during the pandemic, Vlatka Vukelić [77,78].

Associate professor of history at the Faculty of Croatian Studies at the University of Zagreb, Vlatka Vukelić’s stances towards Jasenovac and Croatian quislings during World War Two are a great example of an archaeologist who became an incompetent historian and a revisionist [79]. A few years before the outbreak of the pandemic, she became a teacher of contemporary Croatian history, which included World War Two, when her revisionism was given the opportunity to be shared with students [80]. Even before the pandemic, she was involved in the promotion of the revisionist Holocaust denier, Ivan Vulić’s book about Jasenovac in 2018 in her hometown of Sisak [81]. During the pandemic, she took part in the promotion of the revisionist book of Matković and Pilić in Sisak in the Hall of John Paul II [82].

Vlatka Vukelić had a very picturesque description of the Jasenovac memorial gathering, when she called the attendees zombies [83]. She was attacked by a member of the Jewish community in Zagreb after she took a very clear Holocaust-denial stance, when she claimed that Jews left their property with the Catholic church and planned to come back from the US to where they left – but, as she says, *that unfortunately or fortunately didn’t happen* [80,84].

Another important example of distortion that occurred and was indirectly connected with Jaxsenovac revisionism concerning Jasenovac was conducted by the Archbishop of Sarajevo, Vinko Puljić, who has been also a cardinal since 1994. His complete lack of willingness to publicly mention Jasenovac while serving mass for victims of Bleiburg in the spring of 2020 is a good example of such distortion during the Covid pandemic. The mass was called a commemoration for the “innocent Croatian

people” – how he referred to Ustasha members and their allies who were killed by partisan forces in May 1945 [85]. Cardinal Puljić’s mass for the “innocent” victims of Bleiburg that was held on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2020 was a sad and important example of how the open rehabilitation of war criminals was organized under the false pretext of reconciliation [86]. The cardinal was marked as one of the most important and influential public figures among Croatians, especially observant Roman Catholics in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia [87]. He was retired by Pope Francis in January 2022 but, just before that, he received one of the highest medals for guarding Croatian identity and his high success in interreligious, humanitarian, and cultural activities. However, that also included the transfer of the remains of one of the most important Catholic prelates who was active during the Ustasha reign – Ivan Šarić, the archbishop of Sarajevo during World War Two [88]. The activities of Cardinal Puljić were important as they followed a similar pattern of rehabilitation and glorification of quislings, masked under a false call for reconciliation, which is nothing but national unification under the banner of revisionism. The similarity with the Serbian case is clear.

At the same time, it is important to mention other extreme stances about Jasenovac that come from the other side of the border, when the fabrication of numbers also represents the mocking of victims. In that respect, the interview of Miloš Ković is among the best examples, as he stated the fabricated number of *something around 500,000 – 600,000* [89]. This kind of distortion is essential for the empowering of revisionist Croatian historians and public figures, as these enlarged numbers quite often provide a justification for Croatian revisionists to minimalize the actual number [90]. What can be found as common features among historians and others that share the views of Miloš Ković and Emir Kusturica [91,92,93] – apart from the fact that they are not professionals and, in most cases, have insufficient knowledge about World War Two history – are historical revisionism, a propagation of conspiracy theories, along with business and other connections with the Kremlin [94]. Distortions of World War Two history in Serbia since the beginning of the Russo-Ukraine war have become an integral part of the Russian narrative, where the “collective West” is to blame for all the miseries of the Serbian nation, as it wishes to destroy “the Orthodox world,” which is defined by the Kremlin [95]. When it comes to distortion, that attitude has a follow-up stance that Croats and their Western partners are also responsible for three genocides of Serbs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that Serbs are bigger victims than Jews, as they didn’t suffer just one genocide, but three [96,97].

## Conclusion

Serbian and Croatian societies used nationalism in the terminal stage of Yugoslavia for national mobilization on the eve of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. In both cases, political elites remained, to a large extent, the same and societies never experienced lustration or a change of policymakers, as opposed to most of the former Warsaw Pact states, which were more successful in their European integration. Still, their policy of Holocaust remembrance wasn’t unique and followed different patterns from former communist states in Europe. The biggest change in the last few years in Serbia has

been the rise of revisionism, not only among historians, but among other influential individuals and groups that are backed by Russia. During the pandemic, Staro Sajmište was not an important topic as the law concerning it was not implemented and there was not much debate about its future programs or other activities. In the Croatian case, after the complete switch to Bleiburg as the main topography for World War Two commemoration in the 1990s, distortion regarding Jasenovac remained strong but limited to extremists and marginalized groups, although the encouragement they received from right-wing politicians just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for the spread of revisionism. There is also an evident correlation between revisionists in both societies when it comes to minimalizing or maximizing the number of victims in Jasenovac. For extremists and revisionists on both sides, it has been crucial that the other side remains active, as it provides the necessary substance for their existence and justification for their further activities.

### Rezime

Distorzija istorije u toku trajanja pandemije Kovid-19 posmatra se kroz primer Starog Sajmišta u Srbiji i Jasenovca u Hrvatskoj i prati na koji način se u oba društva menjao odnos prema Drugom svetskom ratu i kulturi sećanja Holokausta od strane političkih elita i njihovih saradnika od kraja 1980-ih, kao i evoluciju tog procesa do 2022. U slučaju obe države mogu se pratiti obrasci koji su karakteristični i za druge zemlje bivšeg Varšavskog pakta, koje su sećanje na Holokaust iskoristili za stvaranje nacionalističkih mitova i istorijski revizionizam. Takva distorzija istorije bila je neophodna za pravdanje kvislinške prošlosti, ratnih ciljeva i aktera tokom trajanja ratova koji su obeležili raspad Jugoslavije, kao i oblikovanja kulta žrtve. U odnosu na Staro Sajmište, rad analizira evoluciju tog prostora i sećanja na logor, kao i zakonsku regulativu. Karakteristično za revizioniste u Srbiji jeste veza sa ruskim uticajem koja je postala posebno očigledna nakon početka pandemije i početka ruske agresije na Ukrajinu. U slučaju Hrvatske i Jasenovca, revizionisti su dobili značajan podstrek od političara desnice. U odnosu na manipulaciju ukupnim brojem žrtava Jasenovačkog logora važna je uzajamna povezanost revizionista sa obe strane koji smanjivanjem, odnosno uvećavanjem broja žrtava podstiču ekstremiste i njihove revizionističke stavove.

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