

Monuments for World War II: Memory and Oblivion in the Balkans and Central-East Europe

Edited by
Areti Adamopoulou / Anna Maria Droumpouki



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Monuments for World War II: Memory and Oblivion in the Balkans and Central-East Europe
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Edited by Areti Adamopoulou / Anna Maria Droumpouki

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Old Fairground Monument in Belgrade



Fig. 1. Monument to the Old Fairground Victims. In the background is the Old Sava Bridge (Stari savski most), built by the German occupying forces in 1942, and the recently built Belgrade Waterfront (Beograd na vodi) across the river. Belgrade, Serbia. Photo: Dimitrije Matic, January 15, 2024.

Dimitrije Matic

Old Fairground Monument in Belgrade

Abstract

This article focuses on the official politics of memory and commemoration at the Old Fairground Monument in Belgrade, from the time of its construction in 1995 until the adoption of the “Law on the Old Fairground Memorial Site” in 2020. Built by the Yugoslav government in 1937, the complex was converted into a concentration camp by the Nazi military administration during WWII. As a site of such historical importance, it witnessed significant changes in the dominant discourses of victimhood over the years, with different agents of memory competing and cooperating on the same memorial grounds.

Апстракт

Тема овог рада је анализа званичне политике сећања и комеморација код споменика на Старом сајмишту у периоду између његовог подизања 1995. и усвајања Закона о меморијалном центру „Старо сајмиште“ 2020. године. Подигнут од стране југословенске владе 1937. године, комплекс Старог сајмишта је у току Другог светског рата претворен у концентрациони логор од стране немачких окупационих власти. На меморијализацију тог простора у наредним деценијама знатно је утицала честа промена званичних политика према прошлости, као и различити актери сећања чији су се специфични наративи на том спомен-месту преклапали и сукобљавали.

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Introduction

The Old Fairground (Staro sajmište) complex was built by the authorities of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the late 1930s. It was originally intended to become the largest international fairs and exhibitions site in Southeast Europe. Built on the left bank of the Sava River, directly facing the centre of Belgrade, it stood out thanks to its prominent central tower and the surrounding pavilions, which were assigned to different countries and their delegations.¹ However, the outbreak of WWII and Yugoslavia’s occupation set off a process of repurposing the Fairground complex. In April 1941 Yugoslavia was occupied and partitioned by the Axis powers, with Serbia coming under the direct control of the German military administration.

In the summer and fall of 1941, a widespread antifascist uprising erupted in Serbia led by the joint forces of communist Partisans and royalist Četniks. Nazi officials responded with severe reprisals and mass atrocities against civilians. In addition to the local Serb population, the small Jewish community was also targeted. From the early days of the occupation, special anti-Semitic measures were applied and the first concentration camp was established in August 1941. The camp Topovske šupe, located on the site of a former military base, was active until December 1941 and its operation coincided with the first phase of the Holocaust in Serbia. During this phase, most of the Jewish men from Belgrade and Banat were imprisoned in Topovske šupe and executed by the end of the year. The second and final phase lasted until the spring of 1941, when Jewish women, children, and the elderly were sent to the death camps set up in Serbia. During this second phase, between December 1941 and May 1942, the central site of extermination was officially known as the Jewish concentration camp “Zemun” (Judenlager Semlin), located in the former Fairground complex. It is estimated that between 11,400 and 11,700 Jews from occupied Serbia were killed during the Holocaust (nearly 90% of the total pre-war population), 86% of whom had been prisoners in the Topovske šupe and Old Fairground camps.²

After the extermination of the Jewish community, the Old Fairground continued to operate as a concentration and forced labour camp under a new name (Anhaltelager Semlin), until its closure in 1944. Although it remained under Gestapo control, the new prisoners were mainly Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska – NDH) and occupied Serbia, incarcerated either for being members of the Partisan and Četnik movements or as hostages taken during reprisals against civilians from insurgent territories. Some inmates from other concentration camps —such as Jasenovac from the Independent State of Croatia— were sent to Anhaltelager, as were prisoners from Greece and Albania who were on their way to other camps in occupied Europe. In April 1944, the Fairground compound was hit during the Allied aerial bombing campaign of Belgrade, which caused severe casualties and infrastructure damages. Eventually, Fairground came under the control of the Croatian Ustaša forces between May and July 1944, when it was officially closed as a prison camp. The number of prisoners of Anhaltelager is estimated at around 32,000 and the death toll from executions, malnutrition, or disease was almost 11,000.³ (Fig. 1)

The liberation of the country and the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia created a largely ideological memorial framework through

¹ Jovan Bajford, *Staro sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja* [Old Fairground: A Place of Memory, Forgetting, and Dispute] (Beograd: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2011), 26–27.

² Dragan Cvetković, *Od Topovskih šupa do Sajmišta: Kvantitativna analiza холокауста у окупираној Србији* [From Topovske šupe to Sajmište: Quantitative Analysis of the Holocaust in Occupied Serbia] (Belgrade: Muzeji žrtava genocida, 2021), 247–250.

³ Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom sajmištu 1941–1944* [German Camp at the Belgrade Fairground 1941–1944] (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992), 448–450.

which the events of WWII were interpreted. The Communist Party and the state promoted a specific politics of memory through various social organisations, institutions, and social activities, such as education, museums, the construction of monuments, and the holding of public commemorations. This culture of remembrance emphasised a heroic image of the war, in which the partisan struggle formed a central part of the historical narrative of WWII. In this context, the civilian victims whose suffering was not directly connected to the revolution and resistance, occupied a subordinate position in historical memory.⁴ Thus, the Old Fairground site was left neglected and the pavilions were used for youth labour activities, as art studios or to provide housing to illegal residents. The authorities' ambivalence toward the future of the site continued in the following decades. Although the first memorial initiatives date back to the late 1950s, the government proposed other plans for the area, including the construction of a monumental opera house or a military museum.⁵ Nevertheless, in the 1980s, several factors contributed to the revival of public interest in commemorating the victims of WWII in Yugoslavia, giving rise to new initiatives for the symbolic reconstruction and reimagining of the Old Fairground.

Change of Narrative and the Erection of the Monument

Although initial initiatives dated back to the 1950s, the first commemorative plaques at the Fairground site were installed as late as 1974 and 1984. Both conveyed a similar message to the public, in keeping with the official narrative of Partisan heroism and the collective portrayal of civilian casualties as “patriots” and “victims of fascism”. Furthermore, the inscriptions on the plaques presented an exaggerated number of the death toll in the camp, had factual errors and made no direct reference to the Holocaust.⁶ However, the death of Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), the emerging socio-political and economic crises in the country, as well as the rise of nationalisms, made the government and the ruling League of Communists realise that WWII memorial sites could foster and strengthen the official ideology of “brotherhood and unity of nations and nationalities”, the joint struggle against fascism, and Partisan heroism and martyrdom. It was for this reason that authorities paid more attention to the Old Fairground site in the 1980s. Annual commemorations started being held there on May 9 (Day of Victory Over Fascism), which would also become known as the Old Fairground Concentration Camp Day. This was followed by organised school trips, public lectures about the camp's history, the establishment of the Association of Former Prisoners of the Fairground, and an official decision in 1987 designating the area a Site of Cultural Significance.⁷

Nevertheless, the Fairground still lacked a monument as a central commemorative symbol. “Commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some

⁴ Heike Karge, “Sajmište, Jasenovac, and the Social Frames of Remembering and Forgetting,” *Filozofija i društvo* 4, no. 23 (2012): 108; Davor D. Stipić, “Однос према Холокаусту у Југославији (1945–1991)” [Attitudes towards the Holocaust in Yugoslavia (1945–1991)] (PhD diss., University of Belgrade, 2021), 333–334.

⁵ Olga Manojlović Pintar, Aleksandar Ignjatović, “Prostori selektovanih memorija: Staro sajmište u Beogradu i sećanje na Drugi svetski rat” [Spaces of Selected Memories: Old Fairground in Belgrade and the Memory of WWII], in *Kultura sjećanja 1941: Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti* [Culture of Memory 1941: Historical Breaks and Overcoming the Past], eds Sulejman Bosto, Tihomir Cipek and Olivera Milosavljević (Zagreb: Disput, 2008), 95–112.

⁶ Stipić, “Однос према Холокаусту,” 159, 168–169; According to Stipić's findings, one of the main reasons behind the exaggerated number of victims in the official discourse throughout socialist Yugoslavia involved the desire to perpetuate the narrative of the Partisan liberation war and use the large number of victims as proof of its magnitude on a global scale.

⁷ Bajford, *Staro sajmište*, 111–117.



Fig. 2. Miodrag Miša Popović, Monument to the Old Fairground Victims and the Memorial Plaque, 1995. Belgrade, Serbia. Photo: Dimitrije Matić, January 15, 2024.

instances, annihilation”.⁸ Monuments have proven crucial for almost all significant places of memory, especially those intrinsically linked to mass war atrocities. Far from being just an object, a monument imparts on every site of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) a more profound meaning and a special connection to the past through three essential aspects – the material, the symbolic, and the functional.⁹ The latter two are of the utmost importance for representing a link between the past and the present. This was the case in Serbia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the fall of communism and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia induced a change in the public perceptions of WWII. Regarding the Old Fairground, the monument selection process proved rather complicated. A public call for the construction of a monument in Jajinci, the site of summary executions and mass graves during the war, was announced in 1986. The proposal submitted by Miodrag Miša Popović (1925–2005), a sculptor and professor at the University of Arts in Belgrade, was the runner-up and was selected to be installed at the Old Fairground instead. The following year, officials decided to place the monument near the Sava River to be visible from the Old Town of Belgrade and mark the route by which the prisoners were transported (Fig. 2).¹⁰

However, the monument's installation was delayed and was only completed in 1995. By that time, circumstances had already changed significantly. The dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authoritarian regime of Serbian President Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006) and the country's economic collapse had reshaped the overall societal landscape. These developments were accompanied by a narrative of Serbian victimhood, shared by the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and most of the opposition, portraying Serbs as the greatest (if not the only) victims of WWII and the post-war period. Furthermore, in 1992, the government institutionalised this view of the past by introducing a new public holiday (the National Remembrance Day of the Holocaust, WWII Genocide and other Fascist Crimes Victims), celebrated on 22 April in memory of the prisoners of Jasenovac who attempted to revolt and escape from the Ustaša concentration camp. Beyond an intention to honour the victims, the shaping of this new politics of memory also went hand in hand with the values of Serbian nationalism. Moreover, the SPS government intended to keep the remnants of the old Partisan memorial framework and combine them with the new narrative, thus presenting the Serbs as the only Yugoslav nation that had fought against fascism in the 1940s.

This became particularly clear at the unveiling of the monument and of a new memorial plaque at the Old Fairground on April 21, 1995, which established a new commemorative practice of honouring the victims on the new, instead of the previous (May 9), national holiday. Per Popović's conception, the abstract monument was a cracked form of a circle representing the cycles of life and death.¹¹ It was unveiled by the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) Zoran Lilić (b. 1953) and the Mayor of Belgrade Nebojša Čović (b. 1958). Meanwhile, the inscription on the commemorative plaque symbolized the fusion of two discourses. The first victims of the camp mentioned in the inscribed text were “patriots” and “participants in the National Liberation War”,¹²

⁸ John R. Gillis, “Introduction – Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

⁹ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 14.

¹⁰ Stipić, “Однос према Холокаусту,” 165, 173–174.

¹¹ Nenad Makuljević, *Memorija i manipulacija: Spomenička politika u Srbiji 1989–2021* [Memory and Manipulation: Politics of Monuments in Serbia 1989–2021] (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2022), 14–15.

¹² National Liberation War (Narodnooslobodilačka borba – NOB) was the official name of the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia, highlighting the war efforts of the Partisan communist movement.

signifying the endurance of the old communist rhetoric. In contrast, the second part of the inscription commemorated specifically the Serb victims from other parts of Yugoslavia, especially those executed by the Hungarian regime in Novi Sad in 1942, and those who had perished in Jasenovac.¹³ The Holocaust and genocide perpetrated against the Roma population may not have been omitted from the official speeches at the ceremony or from the memorial plaque, but their brief mentioning nevertheless implied their inferior significance and marginalization compared to the memory of Serbian civilian victims,¹⁴ as well as the regime's need to draw parallels between past and present.

Such parallels were an integral part of both Lilić's and Čović's speeches. The Yugoslav president started his address by recounting the history of the camp and the Nazi crimes committed there, but he then juxtaposed the supposed difference between past and present antifascist values. Lilić accused the United Nations (and particularly Western countries) of abandoning antifascism and the fundamental principle of the equality of all nations. He went on to condemn the international community of "erasing Yugoslavia and the Serbs from the list of WWII victors" and "portraying Serbs outside Yugoslavia as the new occupiers."¹⁵ He then tried to draw a connection between this and the continuing conflict between Belgrade and Washington over the wars of the 1990s, claiming that the inmates of Old Fairground "saw the Allies in April 1944 as their approaching liberators" but instead "were greeted by American carpet bombing of the camp."¹⁶ Čović further asserted that "the key distinction between victims and perpetrators no longer exists."¹⁷

The precise organisation of commemorative activities around the Fairground and the new memorial was decided in the following years. Special memorial services honouring the victims were held twice a year (on 22 April and 9 May), attended by the highest officials of Yugoslavia, Serbia, the City of Belgrade, and the Army, as well as by veterans organisations, members of the Jewish and Roma communities and clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The event would start with a memorial service dedicated to former camp prisoners and the Serbian victims of WWII and would conclude with a liturgy at St. Michael's Cathedral (Saborna crkva) dedicated to the Serbs who perished in the genocide in the Independent State of Croatia. This type of ceremony, which was fully established in the second half of the 1990s, comprised several key elements: placing more emphasis on the Serbian casualties from the Independent State of Croatia (thus turning the Fairground into an "outpost" of Jasenovac) and neglecting the Holocaust victims, giving Orthodox prelates a more prominent role in the commemorations, and using the Fairground memorial site as a platform for criticising Western policy towards Serbia and comparing it to Nazism.¹⁸ These characteristics became particularly pronounced in 1999,¹⁹ when the events were held in the midst of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia.

¹³ Bajford, *Staro sajmište*, 172–175, 181–182.

¹⁴ Jovan Byford, "Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization: Holocaust Memory in Serbia since the Late 1980s," in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 532, 535; Tamara Trošt, Lea David, "Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24, no. 2, (2022): 232.

¹⁵ D. Knežević, "Лилић: Југославију би да уклоне са списка победника над фашизмом" [Lilić: They Would Like to Remove Yugoslavia from the List of Victors Over Fascism], *Politika*, April 22, 1995.

¹⁶ D. Vujičić, "Опомена историје" [Warning of History], *Večernje novosti*, April 22, 1995.

¹⁷ Jovan Zarić, "Против рата и злочина" [Against War and Crime], *Borba*, April 22/23, 1995.

¹⁸ Bajford, *Staro sajmište*, 183–187.

¹⁹ "Страдање нашег народа се наставља" [The Suffering of Our People Continues], *Glas javnosti*, April 23, 1995; "Патријарх Павле служио парастос жртвама геноцида" [Patriarch Pavle Served the Memorial Service for the Victims of Genocide], *Politika*, April 23, 1995.

The Old Fairground in the Twenty-First Century

The overthrow of Milošević in 2000 profoundly changed Serbia's socio-political landscape. An ideologically diverse coalition, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (Demokratska opozicija Srbije – DOS), took power in Belgrade, but its members were able to find common ground on one thing only: a strong anti-communist stance. The new politics of memory completely reversed the perception of WWII compared to previous periods. The official interpretation coming from the new political elites in Belgrade was centred around the narrative of two anti-fascist movements –the Partisans and the Četniks. However, precedence was markedly given to the royalist Četniks, emphasising their resistance, support from the Western Allies in the first half of the war, and formal allegiance to democracy and constitutional monarchy. At the same time, other aspects, such as collaboration, the pronounced Serbian nationalism and the war crimes against Muslims, Croats, and communists, were marginalised, while the image of Partisans was mainly reduced to the portrayal of their post-war retribution and repressive policies.²⁰

The politics of Holocaust remembrance did not undergo such a drastic transformation. Jewish victims remained part of a master narrative of Serbian suffering during the war.²¹ However, both internal and external circumstances had changed. The main objective of Serbia's foreign policy since 2000 has been joining the European Union (EU). The great attention given to the treatment of Holocaust sites across Europe (fostered by numerous global and European declarations and a network of transnational organisations promoting genocide memorial culture), sparked a similar wave of attention to the history of the Holocaust also in Serbia and the Old Fairground.²² Seeing it as part of its EU accession efforts, Serbia sought to become a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) by promoting special education and Holocaust-related programs. Serbia was finally admitted to the IHRA as a full member in 2011. Furthermore, in 2005, Belgrade declared the 27th of January as Holocaust Remembrance Day following the adoption of the United Nations General Assembly "Resolution 60/7 on Holocaust Remembrance" on November 1st of the same year.²³ The first official ceremony was held in 2006, when Serbia's Prime Minister, Vojislav Koštunica (b. 1944), unveiled a new plaque at the Topovske šupe site, condemning in his speech all forms of Holocaust denial.²⁴ However, Belgrade's participation in international commemoration initiatives was not always straightforward. No high-ranking official from Belgrade attended the ceremony commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp on January 27, 2005. The President of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marović (b. 1955), cancelled his trip citing health reasons, while the Minister of Defence, Prvoslav Davinić (b. 1938), did not even make it out of Belgrade's airport due to a reported malfunction in his plane. The media nevertheless criticised the lack of readiness and the absence from such an important event, calling it a "diplomatic blunder" and "our shame".²⁵

²⁰ Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 85–93.

²¹ Dubravka Stojanović, *Populism the Serbian Way* (Belgrade: Peščanik, 2017), 183–186.

²² Despina Syrri, "The Story of Staro Sajmište Concentration Camp, Produced/Producing Europe," *European Review* 20, no. 1 (2012): 32.

²³ "Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 1 November 2005, 60/7. Holocaust Remembrance," United Nations General Assembly, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/tmp/6806555.39035797.html>.

²⁴ "Koštunica: Odbaciti svako negiranje zločina" [Koštunica: Denounce Every Denial of Crimes], *Danas*, January 28/29, 2006.

²⁵ Ana Čubela, "Naša sramota" [Our Shame], *Blic*, January 29, 2005; Biljana Čprajak, "Дипломатски гаф" [Diplomatic Blunder], *Politika*, January 29, 2005.

Internal factors also played a very important role, which was especially evident in the Fairground case. Despite the prevailing discourse on Serbian suffering, the new authorities did not develop a coherent plan for the many memorial sites, including the Old Fairground, associated with mass atrocities. In the first decade after the change of government, several projects for the symbolic reconstruction of the Fairground complex emerged, which included reviving its original purpose as an exhibition location, constructing a memorial site, its complete demolition, and establishing a Museum of Tolerance that would foster democratic values and deal with the authoritarian past.²⁶ In the meantime, the Fairground's facilities remained neglected, with the surrounding pavilions sold or leased, used for restaurants and nightclubs or inhabited by illegal residents. Furthermore, the political changes that followed the ouster of Milošević precipitated the economic transformations and strengthened the capitalist economy. This meant an upgraded role for the country's new financial elites. The prime location and the derelict buildings at the Old Fairground and Topovske šupe aroused their interest and gave rise to development plans that included the construction of business centres and shopping malls on those sites. Belgrade's main site related to the Holocaust and mass atrocities was thus gradually being transformed into a "grey zone", deprived of its significance as a memorial place, becoming instead an "anthropological non-place" suitable for public manipulation.²⁷

Commemorations and memorial activities at the Fairground site were also affected by other changes, some of them institutional. According to Dejan Ristić (b. 1972), a former advisor at Serbia's Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Affairs, in charge of the protection of war memorials and sites of mass atrocities, the transition from the FRY to the Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003, transferred the jurisdiction over the official politics of memory (protection and renovation of monuments, official commemorative events, etc.) from the federal to the republic level.²⁸ This development gave Serbia more autonomy in commemorative activities both domestically and internationally, but did not contribute to the establishment of coherent commemorative policies for either the Holocaust or WWII as a whole. The 2005 anniversary was a perfect illustration of the level of confusion and indecision. Although the government did not officially organise the main Holocaust commemoration events, it was one of their main sponsors. The first event was held on 27 January at the Sava Centre in Belgrade, jointly organised by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia and Montenegro and the Tanjug News Agency. The event was attended by the highest government, military and municipal officials, highlighting its importance.²⁹ However, this time the authorities apparently missed the opportunity to directly organise the central ceremony (held annually on 22 April). Instead, the Serbian government merely invited the public to attend the commemoration ceremony coordinated by the organisations preserving the memory of the genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia and the Church.³⁰ Once again, officials became mere participants in these events. A special characteristic of this ceremony is that, although the central commemoration is held

²⁶ Manojlović Pintar, Ignjatović, "Prostori selektovanih memorija," 109–111.

²⁷ Srđan Radović, "Градски простори од места до неместа, и vice versa: случај београдског Старог сајмишта" [City Locations from Place to No-Place and Vice Versa: A Case of the Belgrade's Staro Sajmište], *Zbornik radova Etnografskog Instituta SANU*, no. 26 (2009): 145–160.

²⁸ Dejan Ristić, interview to the author, March 7, 2023.

²⁹ "O Aušvicu – 60 godina posle" [On Auschwitz – 60 Years Later], *Jevrejski pregled*, February 2005.

³⁰ "Istina o genocidu – uslov mira i stabilnosti" [The Truth about Genocide – A Condition for Peace and Stability], Government of the Republic of Serbia, 28.3.2005, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/23901/istina-o-genocidu-uslov-mira-i-stabilnosti.php>

at the Fairground monument,³¹ it also entailed activities and lectures dedicated to genocides that occurred throughout the twentieth century (such as the mass reprisals by Turks against the Armenians in 1915 and the Greeks in the early 1920s, the killings of the Serbs in WWII and the annihilation of Jewish and Roma communities).³²

Overall, the principal characteristics of the politics of memory regarding the Holocaust in the first decade of the twenty-first century have shifted between marginalisation and instrumentalisation. Jewish victims were encompassed in the narrative of Serbian victimhood and mentioned primarily as the victims of the Croatian Ustaša regime, while the Holocaust remembrance guidelines adopted as part of the EU accession process have failed to meaningfully change the situation.³³ Therefore, the Holocaust in Serbia and one of its central sites, the Old Fairground, remained invisible. Official discourse often omitted the Jewish victims from the Fairground, while the site further deteriorated as a result of incoherent future planning, ever-changing urban development proposals, and frequent acts of vandalism and theft of memorial plaques near the monument.

Continuities and New Developments After 2012

Another crucial political change occurred in 2012. The Democratic Party lost the election, paving the way for the new coalition government formed by the Socialist Party of Serbia and the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS). SNS was founded in 2008 by a group of politicians who split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party, embraced moderate principles, and turned in favour of the EU accession process. The Progressive Party quickly became the dominant political force in Serbia under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić (b. 1970).³⁴ His rise to power was marked by new authoritarian tendencies, the marginalisation of the opposition, increased political corruption, and the suppression of press freedom and independent institutions.³⁵ However, it took time for the new ruling party to define its policy toward the past.

Regarding the Old Fairground complex, the first changes that affected it were implemented at the institutional level. Officials from the City of Belgrade and the Municipality of New Belgrade reached an agreement in 2007 to establish a memorial centre at the Fairground site to study and present the history of the former concentration camp, but very little was actually done in the years that followed. In 2013, Belgrade's Democratic Party-appointed Mayor, Dragan Đilas (b. 1967), decided to set up an expert committee to revive the project. However, the SNS-SPS coalition took over the municipal reins that same year, reshuffling the committee. The new members sought to reintroduce the old narrative of the "comparative martyrdom" of the Serbs and Jews, thereby reducing the commemorative activities to only the Serbian

³¹ "Dan sećanja na žrtve genocida u 20. veku" [Remembrance Day for the Victims of Genocide in the 20th Century], Government of the Republic of Serbia, 22.4.2005, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/26161/dan-secanja-na-zrtve-genocida-u-20-veku.php>; "Парастос жртвама геноцида" [Memorial Service for the Victims of Genocide], Serbian Orthodox Church, 22.4.2005, accessed November 30, 2023, <http://arhiva.spc.rs/old/Vesti-2005/04/22-4-05-c.html#par>

³² Milan Bulajić, ed., *Jasenovac 1945–2005/06.: 60/61 godišnjica herojskog proboja zatočenika 22. aprila 1945: dani sećanja na žrtve genocida nad Jermenskim, Grčkim, Srpskim, Jevrejskim i Romskim narodima* [Jasenovac 1945–2005/06.: 60/61 Anniversary of the Heroic Breakout of Prisoners on 22 April 1945: Days of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide against Armenian, Greek, Serbian, Jewish, and Roma Peoples] (Belgrade: Pešić i sinovi: Fond za istraživanje genocida, 2006)

³³ Byford, "Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization," 543.

³⁴ Vučić has held some of the most significant political positions in Serbia, initially as the First Vice President of the Government (2012–2014), then as Prime Minister (2014–2017) and then as President of Serbia since 2017.

³⁵ Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 46–47.

victims and the Jasenovac camp.³⁶ Meanwhile, Topovske šupe fell into oblivion. The lot was sold in 2013 to the Delta Holding company, which had plans to build a mega shopping mall on the grounds. The sale of the former concentration camp complex and the corporate plans for the site provoked significant protest from the Jewish community and relatives of former prisoners.³⁷ In response, Delta Holding claimed it had intended to allocate part of the plot for the new memorial, and rejected accusations of Holocaust erasure, stating it collaborated with an Israeli company on the project.³⁸ Public outcry, including from state officials, the ambassador of Israel and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, ultimately forced the investors to suspend further construction plans. The status of the site has remained since unresolved.³⁹

On the other hand, the new municipal authorities in the capital took additional symbolic initiatives to honour the victims of the Holocaust in Serbia. In July 2014, the City Council approved a proposal from the Jewish community to declare May 10th a Victims of the Holocaust Remembrance Day. City Manager, Goran Vesić (b. 1969), explained that the specific date was chosen to commemorate the day in 1942, when the Nazi occupiers had proclaimed Serbia was “free of Jews” (Judenfrei).⁴⁰ Vesić added that the City intended to educate young people about the horrors of the Holocaust, thereby preventing such heinous crimes from ever happening again.⁴¹ This decision introduced additional day of commemoration for the civilian casualties of WWII, with the official ceremonies mostly held at the Old Fairground memorial. Nevertheless, the site itself remained largely unchanged. Little was being done to prevent further deterioration of the complex, all the while officials presented successive draft laws on the public status of the site. Some scholars, activists, and NGOs insisted that the law drafting process was not transparent, that there was no public debate on the matter, and that the government was trying to appropriate the historical narratives. Moreover, they contrasted the neglected state of the left bank of the Sava River with the official inauguration of an opaque project called Belgrade Waterfront, which was supposed to completely transform the neighbourhood on the right riverbank into an area with modern buildings and business centres.⁴² This sort of criticism could be linked to the wider strengthening of competitive authoritarianism in Serbia since 2012. In addition to weakening independent institutions, such regimes are known to use informal rule patterns, diminishing rule-based institutions while leaving formal democratic mechanisms intact.⁴³

³⁶ Jovan Byford, “Put do ‘srpskog Yad Vashema’: Manipulacije povijesti logora Sajmište i Jasenovac” [The Path to the ‘Serbian Yad Vashem’: Manipulations of the History of the Sajmište and Jasenovac Camps], in *Jasenovac: manipulacije, kontroverze i povijesni revizionizam* [Jasenovac: Manipulations, Controversies and Historical Revisionism], eds Andriana Benčić, Stipe Odak and Danijela Lucić (Jasenovac: Javna ustanova Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2018), 106–107.

³⁷ “Tržni centar na mestu logora” [Shopping Mall at the Camp Site], *B92*, June 2, 2013, 2023, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2013&mm=06&dd=02&nav_category=12&nav_id=719289.

³⁸ Ivan Ivanji, “Naše smrti i vaš život” [Our Deaths and Your Life], *Vreme*, September 13, 2013.

³⁹ Danilo Trbojević, “Мапирање друштвене амнезије у Београду: идеологија, политика и економија заборавља у пет тачака” [Mapping Social Amnesia in Belgrade: Ideology, Politics, and the Economy of Forgetting in Five Points], *Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida*, no. 7 (2015): 136–137.

⁴⁰ However, Vesić made a small factual mistake. By May 10, 1942, the last Jewish civilians from the Judenlager were executed in the gas van, which marked the end of the most brutal phase of the Holocaust in Serbia. Different German military authorities reported to Berlin that “Serbia was free of Jews” sometime later; Valter Manošek, *Holokaust u Srbiji: vojna okupaciona politika i uništavanje Jevreja 1941–1942* [Holocaust in Serbia: Military Occupation Policy and the Destruction of Jews 1941–1942], trans. Agnes Eremija et al. (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ: Draslar partner, 2007), 180–185.

⁴¹ “Sećanje na žrtve Holokausta obeležavaće se 10. maja” [The Remembrance of Holocaust Victims Will Be Commemorated on 10 May], City of Belgrade, 22.7.2014, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.beograd.rs/lat/secanje-na-zrtve-holokausta-obelezavace-se-10-maja/>.

⁴² Trbojević, “Мапирање друштвене амнезије у Београду,” 150–151.

⁴³ Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism*, 111.

The government soon showed renewed interest in the Old Fairground and the lingering issue of its renovation and transformation into an appropriate memorial site. In February 2017, authorities proposed a new law that envisaged its transformation into a Serbian Yad Vashem. But unlike Yad Vashem, the proposed memorial centre would commemorate broader themes of “genocide, the terror of the occupation and war crimes” over the course of the twentieth century in Serbia, guided by the “proud Serbian tradition of freedom”. The preamble to the bill described at length how Serbia was a “small nation, but one of large historical character,” which only fought “wars of liberation and defence” and which is “honourably belonging to nations with the greatest victims in recent history, and especially in the two world wars.”⁴⁴ Thus, the issue of the Holocaust was once again marginalised, while the old nationalist rhetoric was symbolically reintroduced into official discourse. Public dissatisfaction, concerns voiced by the Jewish community and certain human rights organisations, and a lack of political will to pursue the matter further resulted in yet another draft law getting shelved. At the subsequent commemoration held at the Fairground on May 10, there was no mention of the bill.⁴⁵

The issue concerning the preservation and protection of the Old Fairground site resurfaced in early 2020. After repeated announcements and postponements throughout 2019,⁴⁶ a draft “Law on the Old Fairground Memorial Site” finally entered the legislative process in January 2020.⁴⁷ Some key features of the previous bills were removed, most notably the plan to create three separate memorial centres (dedicated to Jewish, Serbian, and Romani victims of genocide in the entire territory of former Yugoslavia), while other solutions were added. Lawmakers intended to create a single memorial centre on the completely reconstructed Fairground compound, which would also include the Topovske šupe site. Under this law, the Centre would specialise in the fields of museology, education, scientific research and preserving the memory of the victims. Moreover, the law defined some key terms (such as genocide, genocide against the Serbian people in the Independent State of Croatia, Holocaust, Samudaripen, war crime),⁴⁸ but not without a certain degree of incoherence. The responsibility of Nazi Germany was clearly stated in all definitions, but the role of the NDH was emphasised only where it concerned Serbian casualties, thus missing the opportunity to also highlight the racial policies of the Ustaša regime against the Jewish and Roma people.

Adoption of the law and debate on the issue were relatively quick and efficient. Minister of Culture and Information, Vladan Vukosavljević (b. 1966), said that the law had been drafted after consultations with experts and descendants of former detainees, and that it was modelled on similar museums dedicated to the victims of Nazism (the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland and the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial in Germany).⁴⁹ The law was finally passed on February 24,

⁴⁴ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 78–79.

⁴⁵ “Вулин: Српски и јеврејски народ – народи слободе и поноса” [Vulin: Serbian and Jewish People – Nations of Freedom and Pride], *Večernje novosti*, May 11, 2017.

⁴⁶ “Zakon o Starom sajmištu do kraja godine u Skupštini: sećanje i istraživanje” [Law on the Old Fairground in the Assembly by the End of the Year: Remembrance and Research], *B92*, October 16, 2019, 2023, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2019&mm=10&dd=16&nav_category=11&nav_id=1604499.

⁴⁷ On the website of the NGO initiative Open Parliament (Otvoreni parlament), it is possible to track the entire parliamentary procedure, the debates and the passing of the law: “Zakon o Memorijalnom centru ‘Staro sajmište’” [Law on the Old Fairground Memorial Site], Otvoreni parlament, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/akt/4245>.

⁴⁸ Zakon o Memorijalnom centru “Staro sajmište” [Law on the Old Fairground Memorial Site], *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, no. 15/2020

⁴⁹ “Dvadeset i peto vanredno zasjedanje, 18.2.2020, 2” [Twenty-fifth Extraordinary Session, 18.2.2020, 2], Otvoreni parlament, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/transkript/7777?page=2>.

2020 with 159 votes in favour and one abstention.⁵⁰ The ruling parties (the progressives and the socialists) voted in favour, as did members of the Serbian Radical Party. Independent MP Miladin Ševarić (b. 1949) abstained from voting because he believed the proposed memorial complex would be “more Jewish than Serbian” and that a different one should be erected instead, that would honour “the Serbs who perished in genocides throughout the twentieth century”.⁵¹

The law was passed under very specific political circumstances. Authoritarian tendencies had grown stronger over the years, and in 2019 most opposition parties decided to boycott parliamentary sessions, citing a lack of transparent decision-making and democratic dialogue. This boycott would produce a new parliament without any opposition parties (except Albanian and certain Bosniak minority parties) after the general election of June 2020.⁵² Furthermore, 2019 heralded a new phase in the politics of memory. Authorities decided to give greater emphasis to the official remembrance of WWII, especially of the genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia, mainly through changes of street names. This process was marked by the erasure of Yugoslavia from public space. Streets named after places in Croatia or the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina were replaced by the names of figures from national history, historical eras and events that commemorated Serbian suffering.⁵³ Numerous factors were fuelling these changes in the politics of memory. The strengthening of the victimisation narrative went hand in hand with the consolidation of the hybrid regime in Serbia. At the same time, official relations with Croatia continued to deteriorate, thus enabling the propagation of this discourse. This was nothing new. Since the early 1990s, remembrance of WWII has served as an important memorial battleground for the regimes in both Belgrade and Zagreb, but the political use of memory intensified under Vučić.⁵⁴

In the context of the Old Fairground, such processes brought about new changes in the remembrance landscape. In 2021, the area near the Fairground was named the Riverbank of the Victims of Jasenovac and a new memorial plaque was unveiled at the site during the official commemoration on April 21, 2022.⁵⁵ In addition to the renewed tendency to portray the Fairground as the “outpost” of Jasenovac,⁵⁶ these decisions exemplify the functioning of state-capture mechanisms and the consolidation of all decision-making processes in the hands of a single political figure. The authorities adopted both decisions as the president’s “personal initiatives” without much institutional deliberation. The redevelopment process unfolded similarly. Construction work on the central tower finally began in July 2022, but the building of the former

⁵⁰ “Detalji glasanja za Zakon o Memorijalnom centru ‘Staro sajmište’” [Details of the Vote on the Law on the Old Fairground Memorial Site], *Otvoreni parlament*, 24.2.2020, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/glasanje/4245>.

⁵¹ “Dvadeset i peto vanredno zasjedanje, 18.2.2020, 4,” *Otvoreni parlament*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/transkript/7777?page=4>.

⁵² Dejan Djokić, *A Concise History of Serbia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 520.

⁵³ Sonja Čirić, “Pretvaranje metropole u provinciju” [Transforming the Metropolis into a Province], *Vreme*, January 13, 2022; Dimitrije Matic, “Changing Street Names in Belgrade as a Reflection of the Political and Ideological Development of Serbia in the 21st Century”, *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju*, no. 2 (2023): 75–79.

⁵⁴ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*, 72–77; More on the political use of the Holocaust in mutual accusations between Belgrade and Zagreb during the 1990s in: David Bruce Macdonald, *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁵⁵ “Обала реке Саве од данас обала Јасеновачких жртава” [The Bank of the River Sava from Today is the Bank of Jasenovac Victims], *Politika*, November 30, 2021; “Na Starom sajmištu otkrivena spomen ploča posvećena žrtvama logora Jasenovac” [A Memorial Plaque Dedicated to the Victims of the Jasenovac Camp Unveiled at the Fairground], *N1*, April 21, 2022, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/na-starom-sajmistu-otkrivena-spomen-ploca-posvecena-zrtvama-logora-jasenovac/>.

⁵⁶ The plaque from 2022 contains a significant inaccuracy, with the claim that the Fairground became part of the Jasenovac concentration camp complex in the summer of 1942.



Fig. 3. Central Tower of the Old Fairground, reconstruction in progress. Belgrade, Serbia. Photo: Dimitrije Matic, January 15, 2024.

German pavilion was excluded from the complex by an official decision. Despite public outcry and significant on-site protests, authorities proceeded with the demolition of the pavilion in June and July 2023 to make way for a new road.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the Topovske šupe site has remained in a state of neglect. Restoration of the complex has not yet started, and many private businesses have yet to be relocated from the grounds (Fig. 3).

⁵⁷ Sonja Čirić, “Nemački paviljon logora Staro sajmište je ipak srušen” [The German Pavilion of the Old Fairground Camp Demolished after all], *Vreme*, July 3, 2023.

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