



Memoriscapes, Tourism, and the Environment in Croatia

Slow Memory and Sites of Conflict and Slow Violence

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Abstract

What is the relationship between memory, tourism development, and environmental transformation in areas impacted by armed conflict? This article examines the Croatian War of Independence through the lens of slow memory in four Croatian regions, highlighting varied impacts on the country's memoriscapes. By studying the physical and social legacy of the violence of the war thirty years after its conclusion, the authors trace the slow transformation of violence—from active to subtle—in spaces marked in great contrast by rapid change and development. The short distance from the Adriatic coast to the hinterlands of Slavonia and Dalmatia is counterbalanced by economic growth and a deflection away from the 1990s in the former and lingering, if not intentional, evidence of conflict, marked ubiquitously by museums and monuments in the latter. This article argues that practicing slow memory can provide an alternative to dominant narratives that neglect, erase, and silence legacies of the conflict.

Keywords

violence – slow memory – tourism – environment – Croatia – memory abuse – narratives

1 Introduction

Since the end of the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995), known locally as the “Homeland War,” Croatia has seen widespread transformation of its political, cultural, and physical landscape as it has shifted from its Yugoslav past on the European periphery to a constituent member of the European Union. These transitions have been marked not only by economic upheaval and major demographic shifts, especially in terms of the minority Serb and rural populations of Croatia, but also by the morphing of warsapes into memoryscapes, an ongoing, that is, slow, process also witnessed across the post-Yugoslav space.

Warsapes have been broadly defined by some scholars as landscapes characterized by “brutal violence, political volatility, physical insecurity and the disruptions and instabilities that exist in many civil war zones that different social actors navigate through” (Korf et al. 2010, 385). However, we take note of Detlef Briesen’s idea that wars also result in “complex war-landscapes” that lead to changes in “people’s view of their environments just as much as the war environments change people” (2018, 13–14). Therefore, we conceptualize warsapes as sites that not only experienced violence but that also resulted in new relationships between communities and their surroundings, whether they be agricultural land, tourist zones, or sites of memory. To better understand and shed light on these transformed relationships between local communities and their environments, slow perspectives are used to highlight how neglected, abandoned, and violently targeted landscapes, natural resources, and sites of memory represent manifestations of violence that have lasted much longer than the armed clashes that occurred between 1991 and 1995.

The manifestations of long-term violence revealed in our work have most often been observed through suppressed and contested memoryscapes: the public memory of the Serbian minority, divergent memories of the socialist Yugoslav past, and memories of violence by both sides of the conflict in regions and sites that have attempted to either erase or brush aside memory of war altogether (i.e. in touristic areas). The term memoryscape in this regard

is used to not only highlight the spatial character of sites of memory but also to center the “multiplicity of different forms of remembering” (Basu 2013). In other words, spaces once used for or affected by violence during war transform into memoryscapes, where legacies of that violence continue to shape both the physical state and nature of remembrance.

For example, in recent years the Croatian government and the national tourism board have made significant efforts to expand tourism spatially and develop alternative types of tourism in more rural regions, including those that coincidentally have been more directly scarred by the 1990s war. These are areas marked by numerous monuments to Croatian soldiers (or “defenders”/*branitelji* as they are predominantly referred to) and Croat civilian victims. Nevertheless, sites of contested memory also remain, particularly related to the Serb civilian casualties suffered in the course of the violent conflict, as well as memory sites that are hidden from the gaze of tourists. In addition to monuments and memorials, slow transformations of violence (see Fridman and Pavlaković 2023) are revealed in landscapes that remain abandoned and neglected or even weaponized—evidenced by the multiple remaining mine-suspected areas in regions and communities underprivileged by Croatia’s economic goals (since 1996, more than 200 people have been killed by landmines in Croatia; Tesija 2023). Preserved sites of combat and war destruction (e.g. memorial parks, open-air museums, and damaged dwellings and structures) also accompany abandoned, neglected, and even destroyed monuments (see Lončar and Pavić 2020).

In this article, we ask what the relationship is between manifestations of memory—such as monuments, museums, and commemorative street art—tourism development, and environmental transformation in areas that experienced the traumas of armed conflict and violence. This question is addressed through the framework of “slow memory” (Wüstenberg 2023), which adds a critical temporal dimension of the long *durée* and overlapping, if not clashing, temporalities to otherwise static analyses of memorial spaces in post-conflict regions like Croatia and the former Yugoslavia more generally. Slow memory here thus refers to an understanding of memory in which additional emphasis is placed on the question of time’s impact on remembrance, raising questions of whether enough time has passed for there to be a meaningful shift in commemorative practices in locations where tourist and environmental concerns must also be negotiated simultaneously. Here, we evaluate manifestations of memory across four Croatian regions—Lika, Dalmatia, Istria, and Slavonia—and their impact on the physical and mnemonic landscapes of those areas, especially looking at how they can signify and reveal environmental changes. The use of the slow memory framework

applied here to case studies of post-conflict natural environments allows us to explore how and why some Croatian environments were relatively quickly transformed from warsapes into memoryscapes (including the Plitvice Lakes National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site) while others have remained neglected or even been destroyed. We thus advance the concept of slow remembrance in coupling it with an analysis of the transformation of conflict in understudied, mostly rural regions.

This process of collective forgetting of seemingly unsavory elements of the Croatian past particularly in spaces formerly populated by Croatian Serbs, but also in areas populated by majority Croats that are undergoing touristic transformation, is part and parcel of what McConnell (2019) calls “memory abuse,” a process through which cultural memory and historical narratives are manipulated beyond a certain threshold whereby some form of violence—whether social or physical—is made possible. We thus argue that the slow memory paradigm is essential in assessing how time and environment mediate Croatia’s contested national narrative. On the one hand, “event-based” memory in Croatia seeks to glorify or frame a dominant narrative through the memorialization of past events used to portray the narrative as one that has been completed through victimhood and ultimate victory. However, this type of memorialization runs the risk of hiding and erasing both ongoing processes (like landmines and abandonment continuing the slow violence of environmental warfare), as well as counter memories that do not fit the dominant narrative. While most nation-building process include dominant narratives, Croatia’s case is complicated by the introduction of the tourist gaze, with Croatia’s economy heavily dependent on the tourism sector. A turn towards slow memory would bring counter-narratives and memories, and slower, less visible processes (like the environmental consequences of war) into the production of memory as presented to local populations and tourists.

Observing how physical and emotional landscapes are (re)shaped by contemporary political and economic pressures, namely nationalism and tourism, thus invokes a discussion of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) in spaces affected by ethnic conflict, which now suffer from depopulation and under-investment, among other things. This in turn widens our understanding of ongoing processes—both fast and slow—of post-conflict economic and environmental transformation of formerly contested spaces in the former Yugoslavia more generally, itself a productive region of memory.

2 Slow Memory and Slow Methodologies

Before diving deeper into the recent transformations of Croatia's mnemonic landscapes, it is important to comment on the novel methods that the concept of "slow memory" encourages. We undertook our research across a seven-year period, with our projects overlapping to some degree in aim, location, and method, and were supported by similar networks of memory scholars in the region, namely in Rijeka, Belgrade, and Zagreb. Our methods included participant observation in commemorative events, thick description, and photo analysis. In this article, we revisited our work with Wüstenberg's (2023) framework for slow memory in mind with three approaches: first, by studying slow things and processes, such as slow violence (Nixon 2011); second, by remembering things slowly and centering divergent memories—ethnically driven narratives, suppressed memories of socialist Yugoslav unity, and memories of death and destruction in the backdrop of "Croatia Full of Life"; and third, by working slowly through slow and repeated observations, here in various field visits between 2017 and 2024.

The most important sources of data for this research were to be found among the innumerable monuments and relics of the past scattered around Croatia. The monuments recorded were publicly accessible, that is, no payment was necessary to visit the sites except in the case of museums, were often found in central public areas or along major roads in and between towns and villages, and were generally visible to passers-by. There were certainly many exceptions to these guidelines, especially in the case of monuments constructed or memorial plaques installed during the socialist Yugoslav era (1943–1991). Many of these monuments commemorated battles outside major urban areas, but within localized contexts, particularly in smaller villages in Dalmatia and Slavonia, the criteria of a central location and high visibility were generally met. While the number of monuments recorded here does not exhaust the entire reservoir of monuments that may exist in the country—especially given the fluid nature of memory and the construction and destruction of monuments over time (see Pavlaković 2022)—the purpose of both our periods of fieldwork was not to achieve quantitative representativeness but to enable a qualitative assessment of major themes that emerge in the memory landscape of post-war Croatia. Here, the element of witnessing and tracing environmental transformation in Wüstenberg's (2023) description of slow memory comes into play.

Museums, too, featured heavily in our work, providing insight on local variations of the Croatian narrative, with each site presenting local interpretations of, among other periods, the Austro-Hungarian administration of

Croatia, the end of Ottoman occupation, the two Yugoslavias (1918–1941 and 1943–1991) that existed in Croatia and in which Croatia existed, and, most importantly, the Croatian War of Independence (*Domovinski rat*—“Homeland War”). In many instances, the narratives presented overlapped, particularly when reference was made to the 1990s. Museums function in similar ways as smaller physical monumental structures (columns, statues, and plaques) but also feature dynamic social elements (curating temporary exhibitions, rotating staff, ongoing negotiations for funding, determining and communicating core values) that a study solely focusing on monuments would preclude (Fyfe 2011, 32). Their inclusion in this research is an acknowledgment of the more immediately performative role of museums in the process of memorialization. Museums can speak to Jan and Aleida Assmann’s definitions of both cultural and collective memory (see Assmann 1999, 2000), as they can reflect the content of either one defined in-group as a primary audience (Croats, Catholics, archaeologists, geologists) or more generally to shared instances of memory that transcend group boundaries (experiences like the Holocaust, living in Yugoslavia, surviving post-communism, immigrating and emigrating). Most importantly, what is highlighted, what is obscured, and what is left out are highly political decisions that speak to ongoing tensions in mnemonic debates, and museums—past, present, and future—provide yet another insight into these discussions.

The wealth of memorial sites and museums across the country do not go unnoticed by even the most casual visitor to Croatia. As the Croatian tourist market continues to develop thirty years after the end of active conflict, so, too, does the meaning these memorial spaces occupy within the framework of Croatian national identity. McConnell (2020) argues that much of this identity is built on negation—Croatia is not Yugoslav, is not Balkan, is not a homeland for Serbs, and so on—rather than positive affirmation of uniquely Croatian characteristics, and this is reflected in Croatia’s recent tourism campaign “Croatia Full of Life” (see Fernández 2017); the campaign includes generic images of beaches, lush landscapes, and fertile agricultural land but does little to market anything that can solely be identified as Croatian. Nevertheless, the Croatian National Tourism Board has long emphasized consumption of the environment, promising potential tourists that “from shores in the South Dalmatian islands... through swamps filled with wildlife... Croatia’s natural beauty never ends” (CNTB 2024). One of the major challenges, however, in developing tourism in especially rural areas, where contested memories become entangled with physical legacies of armed conflict, is that there is a major potential for tourism to make such memoryscapes invisible. As Lauren Rivera has noted in a study of various towns along the

Adriatic, the development of tourism in Croatia has led to memories of war being deliberately hidden from the gaze of tourists in order to help bolster the country's self-branded "Full of Life" image (Rivera 2008, 630). The slogan used by the Tourist Board itself peripheralizes knowledge and memories of the fact that rural areas in Croatia remain the most heavily mined in the entire European Union and that several villages, industries, and former agricultural lands—affected both by the presence of these landmines and the ethnic cleansing of rural Serb communities—remain virtually empty of permanent human populations since the end of the war (see Lončar and Pavić 2020).

This contrasts with the prevailing ambitions of "dark tourism" (see Stone 2006; Lennon 2017), where the primary focus lies on violent pasts and wartorn landscapes. In Croatia, destinations like Vukovar (Slivková and Bucher 2017) and Knin draw in throngs of domestic tourists each year, some on mandatory school trips, others as survivors of conflict and family members of the fallen Croatian defenders. The new Museum of the Homeland War, described below, is a clear example of this more recent trend in tourism that has developed in Croatia and elsewhere—in the context of the former Yugoslavia, this is most present in the uptick in war-related museums in Sarajevo—as it centers itself on an event-based approach to four years of violence, while blending out other bits of historical context that a more holistic, slower approach to commemoration would include. This sort of "warfare tourism," as Šuligoj (2017) frames it, thus presents additional opportunities in transforming war memory into tourism potential. It is then of consequence that we examine the relationship not only between tourism and memory but also between landscape and power in determining the appearance and longevity of Croatia's physical environments. Longer periods of research are required to answer deeper questions of power dynamics, management, and political agency, some of which have been touched on in McConnell's (2020) work on the making of Croatian national identity through the "public face of memory." Instead, we focus here on the potential correlation between unwanted memories, underdeveloped regions, and lingering legacies of armed conflict. We ask whether slow memory can offer potential alternatives to collective amnesia, overtourism, and slow violence and open up space for a radical multiperspectivity on what indeed makes up Croatian identity.

3 Constructing a Croatian Narrative of Nationhood, Fast and Slow

Croatian identity in many ways is predicated on the existence of some form of a Croatian political entity for the greater part of the past 1,100 years.

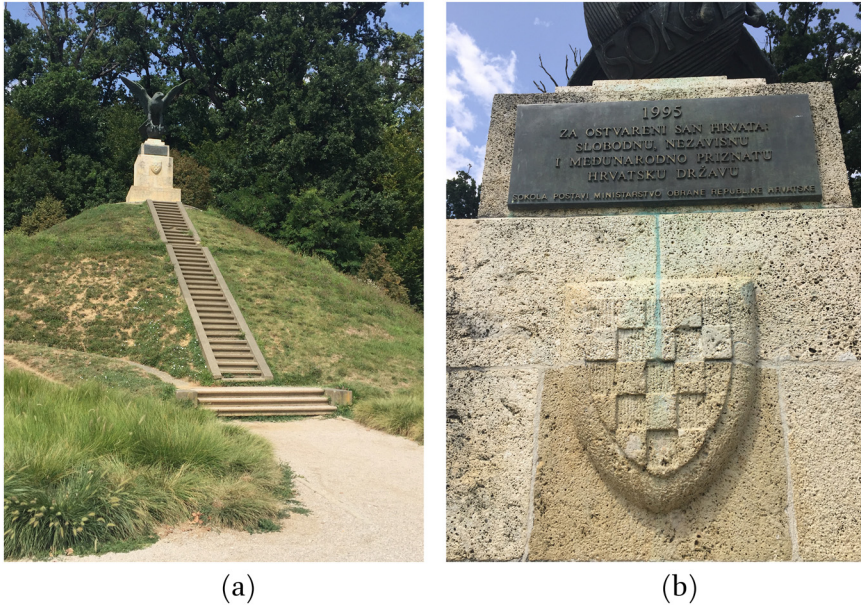


FIGURE 1 *Sokolska mogila*, Maksimir Park, Zagreb. Left: The mound of 156 soil samples from across Croatia, atop which stands the *Hrvatski sokol* (Croatian falcon). Right: Detail of the 1995 addition to the *Sokolska mogila* and the *šahovnica*, both images taken 21 August 2017.

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Croatian nationalism as it can be observed today has its origins as a nineteenth-century elite literary and political project, with the origins of Croatian identity tied concretely to the existence of the medieval kingdom of Tomislav I and not in a more mythologized imagination of the past, as in the case of pre-imperial German identity (see Le Gloannec 1994; Vick 2003). The creation of the first Croatian state is remembered in various monuments around the country, the most notable to be found in the *Sokolska mogila*/“falcon’s mound” near the entrance to Maksimir Park in Zagreb (Figure 1). The *Sokolska mogila* was dedicated in 1925 by the *Hrvatski sokoloski savez*/“Croatian Falcon Association” and refurbished in 1995 by the *Braća hrvatskog zmaja*/“Brethren of the Croatian Dragon,” a historical organization responsible for installing many monuments across Zagreb and elsewhere in Croatia. The monument features a large sculpture of a falcon on a base with four plaques recalling the years 925, 1925 (as a celebration of millennial heritage) and 1995 CE, with the most recently installed plaque noting the “realization of the dream of the Croats: the free, independent and internationally recognized Croatian state,” thereby linking the success of the 1990s war with the

foundation of the first Croatian kingdom one millennium earlier. This newest plaque was provided along with reconstruction funds by the Croatian Ministry of Defense. The entire structure sits atop a mound of earth composed of soil samples from 155 historical locations across Croatia relevant to the state's history, and at its dedication, the monument was originally surrounded by ten linden trees to mark each century of the existence of some form of a Croatian state. An additional lump of soil, blessed by Pope John Paul II in 1994, was added to the mound before its rededication the following year (Javna Ustanova Maksimir 2024).

Similar monuments have been built in the aftermath of the Croatian War of Independence as a reaffirmation of the restoration of Croatian independence and of the millennial identity, but none so clearly bind the 1991–1995 war with the first kingdom as the *Sokolska mogila*. The first 900 of the 1,000 years of “Croatian” history are compressed in memorial form, with statues of the early kings installed at various points in the recent past. These include prominent sculptures of King Tomislav I in the main square of Ogulin in Gorski kotar, installed in 1925 and restored in 1990, and another facing Zagreb’s main train station, dedicated in 1947 with a Croatian coat of arms added upon independence in 1991. Other monuments to Tomislav and further Croatian kings, as well as obelisks to Croatia’s millennial history, were installed across the country in 1925 (Jareb 2017).

Already we see the importance of a long *durée*, thus a “slow,” view of Croatian national identity and the narratives of the past that underpin the perceived permanence of Croatian statehood. In transforming leisure grounds like Maksimir into memorial sites that crush temporal boundaries by linking a millennium of history into three distinct years and further into one physical marker of Croatian cultural memory, it becomes apparent that there is no simple temporality to “slow memory.” While the process of memorialization itself has evolved since Tomislav’s coronation, the event-based, periodic approach to the past has produced some jarring memorial sites. This temporal collapse is also witnessed in spaces that more immediately suffered from the violence of the 1990s war, namely in Vukovar, besieged by the Yugoslav armed forces and Serb paramilitaries in late 1991. A massacre of 262 wounded soldiers and civilians ensued after Serb forces captured the Vukovar Hospital, and the Baroque town on the Danube, facing the border with Serbia, was nearly flattened. In October 1998, a memorial cross was installed facing across the river toward Serbia upstream and a sliver of Croatian territory directly downstream. Its inscription, “*Žrtvama za slobodnu Hrvatsku*”/“To the victims for a free Croatia,” is accompanied by text in the Glagolitic script developed by Saint Cyril in the ninth century CE, which states, “*Navik on živi ki zgine pošteno*”/“He who dies honorably lives forever,” a quote attributed to the



FIGURE 2 *Navig on živi ki zginе pošteno*. Top left: Monument to Eugen Kvaternik, nineteenth-century revolutionary, Rakovica, 18 March 2018. Top right: Monument to fallen Croatian Axis collaborators of the Second World War, Lasinja, 29 August 2019. Bottom left: Memorial cross at the Church of the Croatian Martyrs, Udbina, 29 August 2019. Bottom right: Memorial cross “to the victims for a free Croatia,” Vukovar, 2 July 2017.
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seventeenth-century noble Petar Zrinski—another major temporal crush. Other monuments across Croatia, predominantly in the three regions addressed in this article, also feature the use of Glagolitic script and Zrinski's admonition (Figure 2).

These monuments, installed in locations marked by violence, serve to solidify a Croatian claim to physical territory, especially in Vukovar, which has had a significant ethnic Serb population before and after the war. They also identify Croatia as a Catholic nation, steeped in a long history of independence in which Yugoslavia and pan-Slavic "brotherhood and unity" were merely an aberration. The removal of Serbs from Croatia's physical and further from its mnemonic landscapes is another key component of recent acts of identity creation in the state that occurs almost exclusively out of the line of sight of the millions of tourists who flock to Croatia's beaches and islands every year. Even the persistence of Ustaša symbols through the last eight decades represents a form of slow memorialization, as the organizers of major commemorative events and the builders of these controversial monuments have yet to shed themselves of their attachment to the narrative of Croatian independence, no matter the cost. This reinforces a nationalist understanding of the "victims of communism" narrative that has been carried by the families of fascist soldiers murdered in acts of retribution by the Yugoslav government after the end of World War II, further strengthened by recent European initiatives to remember (primarily Central and Eastern European) victims of communist regimes (see McConnell 2021). In many instances, the reappropriation of fascist symbols and slogans by Croat paramilitaries actively defending Croatia during the War of Independence, most notably by the Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatski obrambene snage*, HOS) during the siege of Vukovar, serves as justification for this "tolerance of otherwise unconstitutional practices," as it was framed by the Croatian government's 2018 "Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes" (HINA 2018). These reframings of the violent past to justify current political ambitions and secure ethnicized identities are required, as Subotić (2016) argues, for Croatian "ontological security," an affirmation of state- and nationhood in the face of "state insecurities" posed by the presence of ethnic minorities in shared sites of violence. Slow forms of remembrance, it appears, are just as readily politicized as fast ones.

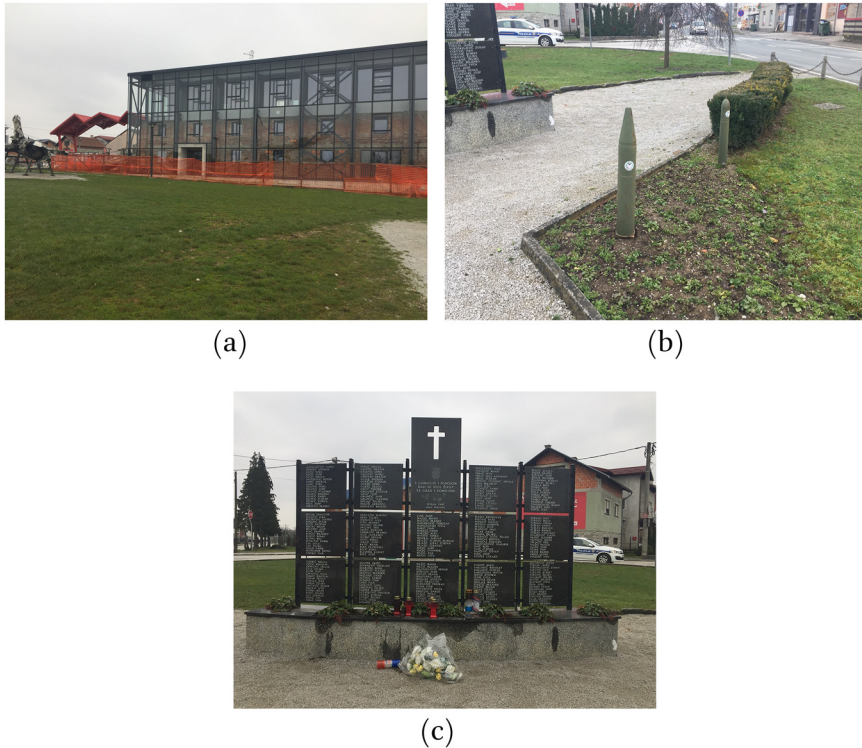


FIGURE 3 The Museum of the Homeland War and monument to Croatian defenders: Turanj (Karlovac). Top left: Museum of the Homeland War under construction, Turanj (Karlovac), 18 March 2018. Top right: Missile shells as monuments and boundary markers, Turanj (Karlovac), 18 March 2018. Bottom: Monument to 239 fallen defenders from the City of Karlovac, Turanj (Karlovac), 18 March 2018. COURTESY OF TAYLOR MCCONNELL

4 Selective Remembrance of the Croatian War of Independence

To gain a better understanding of the dominant and hegemonic narrative and the construction of collective memory in Croatia, we visited the Museum of the Homeland War in Turanj, on the outskirts of Karlovac, both before and after its opening in July 2019 (see Figure 3). This particular museum is significant in that it demonstrates the dominant narrative of the war and victory during the Croatian War of Independence for the fledgling Croatian state led by Franjo Tuđman, whose Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) continues to hold a major grip on power in Croatian politics and society. The museum is also symbolically significant since the battle for

the town of Karlovac and its surroundings represents a major victory for the Croatian forces against the breakaway Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) in the strategically important Kordun region.

The museum is housed in a former barracks dubbed “Hotel California” by Croatian soldiers during the war and is close to the site where some of the first skirmishes between Croatian police and rebel militias occurred. Upon visiting the museum, it becomes immediately clear that the Croatian victory in the War of Independence is presented in a way that contradicts slow memory and its focus on the long *durée*: it is heavily event- and site-based, with counter-narratives and divergent memories made invisible. Misinformation is not one of the characteristics of the museum, however, and the factual information provided corresponds to well-known political events. However, the narrative avoids some of the more complicated and perhaps contradicting factors, such as how Croatian and Serbian neighbors co-existed in the region before the war, and it is evident that problems related to slow violence, environmental impacts, and counter-memories are left out through this type of presentation, which in many ways represents the top-down and official approach to cultural memory of the war in Croatia. Since this conflict was simultaneously a civil war and an international war, the narratives that surround it are extremely complex, and these complexities are left out in favor of presenting a more comfortable, one-sided narrative of victimization and heroism.

Despite the somewhat teleological story told in the museum, it is an impressive exhibition that seeks to portray the tense atmosphere of the war years, provides selective primary sources, and seeks to inform audiences and visitors of the catastrophic human toll of the war and the difficulties that have shaped modern post-socialist Croatia’s independence. While the museum does succeed in informing guests about the political and military history of the war in the region, there is almost no mention of environmental costs of the conflict (though damage to cultural heritage is very briefly mentioned), and in some ways, the museum itself contributes to the militarization of the environment by displaying large preserved machines of war, including tanks and fighter jets arranged on the museum property.

Even certain architectural components are reminiscent of the war. The roof over the entryway is shaped like a lightning bolt, recalling Operation Storm, the final major push to eradicate RSK forces from Lika, Dalmatia, Kordun, and Banija in August 1995. Across the street is a black-and-white monument with fourteen panels of names of fallen defenders from Karlovac, the bollards separating the grass from the walking path built from empty missile shells. The museum opened on 5 July 2019 with a dedication by then-Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, who called the space “our symbol of

victory,” remarking that Karlovac served as a strategic location in the Croatian War of Independence, as “Croatia did not break there, rather Turanj became a symbol of victory for Croatia as a whole” (Direktno 2019). The opening ceremony and orchestra concert were attended by many defender groups and family members. The political relationship between the museum and the HDZ-led government is also evident in the funding of its construction; of a budget of 26.6 million kuna (€3.44 million), 8 million kuna (approximately €1.03 million) were granted by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, with the goal of turning the memorial complex into a major tourist attraction in the coming years (*ibid.*).

Images taken during the museum’s dedication show a dimly lit interior with a wall of faces of defenders alongside their names, birth and death dates, a common feature of victim-centered memorial spaces, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the 9/11 Museum, or Yad Vashem (see Radonić 2017), and in Croatia the Ovčara Memorial Center near Vukovar. This museum, like many of the monuments dedicated to fallen *branitelji*, co-opts the aesthetics of victim-centered memorial spaces to position defenders as the ultimate victims of the Croatian War of Independence, continuing a wider pattern of neglecting the memory of civilian victims of conflict—no matter their ethnicity—and actively occupying memorial space that otherwise would be afforded to (at the very least Croat) victims. This pattern can also be seen in bookstores with titles boasting the triumphs of the defenders and Croatia’s victory in the War of Independence, with very few texts showing victims’ experiences of the conflict. Images of destroyed property, if anything, are more prevalent than images of civilians who perished in the war, widening the visual perspective of war destruction.

We suggest that the reasons environmental consequences of the war have been left out are in part because 1) they have not been studied in enough detail, 2) environmental consequences can be extremely slow moving and generational (i.e. slow violence) and ongoing, and 3) they do not quite nicely fit into one-sided narratives of victory, since military actions from multiple sides of conflict can cause negative environmental impacts. Finally, 4) environmental topics require precisely the type of methodology that slow memory proposes, and a long *durée* perspective is required that moves beyond events, looks at broader and gradual processes, and pays attention to intangible outcomes of the wars.

TABLE 1 Frequency of descriptors in Yugoslav and Croatian war monuments

Yugoslav term	Frequency	Croatian term	Frequency
<i>pali(m)</i> / “fallen”	26 in 148 monuments	<i>pali(m)</i> / “fallen”	2 in 151 monuments
<i>dali svoje živote</i> / “gave their lives”	11 in 148 monuments	<i>umrli</i> / “died”	7 in 151 monuments
<i>žrtve fašističkog terora</i> / “victims of fascist terror”	13 in 148 monuments	<i>(veliko)srpska agresija</i> / “(Greater) Serbian aggression”	18 in 151 monuments
<i>poginuli</i> / “killed”	17 in 148 monuments	<i>poginuli</i> / “killed”	31 in 151 monuments
<i>hrabro</i> / “brave”	23 in 148 monuments	<i>hrabro</i> / “brave”	7 in 151 monuments

Note: Total numbers relate only to war-specific monuments (for Yugoslavia, the Second World War; for Croatia, the Croatian War of Independence).

5 The Slow Erasure of Yugoslavia

The military-first approach to Croatian cultural memory becomes apparent when we broaden the scope of our research to the thousands of monuments to the Croatian War of Independence that are scattered across the country but are predominantly concentrated in areas where physical violence occurred. In many instances, members of the rump Yugoslav army and the Serb paramilitaries are referred to solely as “Serb terrorists” and victims as subjects of “Greater Serbian aggression.” This framing, however, is not a novel approach to the past in Croatia. Rather, narrative templates for framing the war in the fledgling Croatian state borrowed heavily from Yugoslav narratives of the Second World War, known domestically as the People’s Liberation Struggle (*narodnooslobodilačka borba*, NOB). In his survey of 614 monuments across all regions of Croatia, McConnell (2020, 147–8) found heavy overlaps between the language and stylistics used to commemorate those who died in the Second World War and those who died in the Croatian War of Independence. A comparative table (Table 1) contrasts two sets of approximately 150 monuments each from the periods of socialist Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia; the main takeaway is the shift in agency ascribed to those who died

during the respective conflicts. In the Second World War, “brave” Partisan fighters more readily “gave their lives” for the liberation of Yugoslavia, while in the 1991–1995 war, “Croatian defenders” were more frequently “killed” by Serbs, shifting the agency away, somewhat unwittingly, to the perceived enemy.

This, nevertheless, has not stopped the neglect or outright destruction of Yugoslav memorial spaces in Croatia during and since the War of Independence. Whereas the town of Vukovar and the museum in Turanj encourage tourism based on memory that is congruent with official narratives, the preservation of dissonant memories and commemorative cultures in places like Ličko Petrovo Selo, a town located near a major crossing into Bosnia and Herzegovina near Bihać, is not encouraged since it does hold mainstream political capital, nor does it reflect the Croatian National Tourism Board’s “Full of Life” paradigm. In contrast, while the Full of Life campaign emphasizes the consumption of natural beauty, there seems to be little room for the commemoration of environmental destruction. It is ironic that the memory of environmental destruction would be left out of celebrations of sustainability, since such memory, and the landscapes themselves, are useful resources for promoting sustainability by demonstrating the environmental consequences of warfare in such fragile landscapes and their surrounding communities.

Most memory sites in Ličko Petrovo Selo date from the Second World War and the socialist Yugoslav period, both of which remain highly controversial at the national level. The controversy surrounding memory of this specific past, however, has often been associated by scholars with Croatia’s post-socialist nation-building process, and the neglect and destruction of Yugoslav monuments on Croatian soil serve as evidence of this political controversy (or, perhaps, identity crisis). However, by using slow methodologies that pay attention to slow violence, we can see that the abandonment and neglect of Yugoslav memory sites coincide with complex human–nature transformations caused by war. The abandonment of land and memoryscapes serves as a reminder that the violence of the Croatian War of Independence has continued to shape physical environments in ways that Croatia’s tourism development has tried to either bypass or erase. For example, the Croatian Tourism Board’s more recent taglines “Safe Stay in Croatia” and “Full of Life” are quite clearly contradicted by the 1990s violence-induced abandonment and neglect of places like Ličko Petrovo Selo. But by ignoring these environmental transformations by narrowing them down to Croatia’s political tensions regarding socialist Yugoslavia, we run the risk of missing an important opportunity to learn how war violence has much longer-lasting

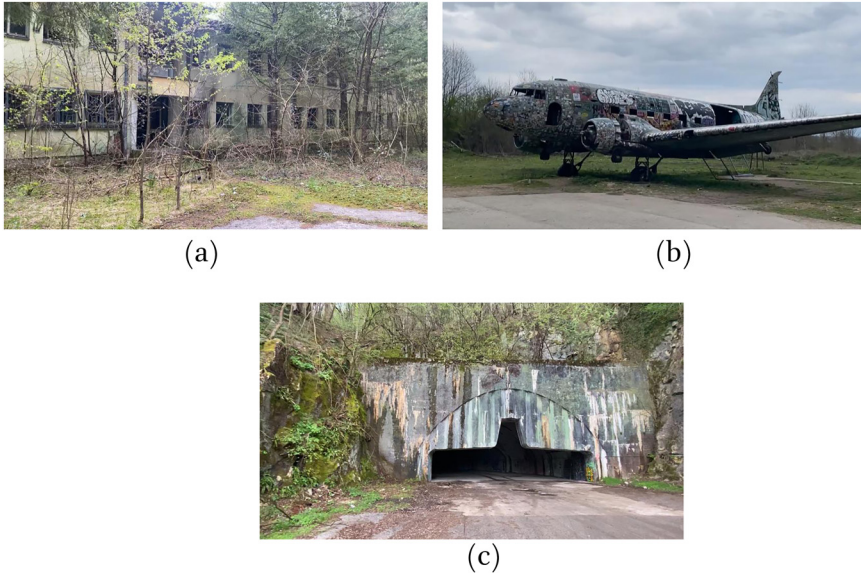


FIGURE 4 Remnants of the Željava Air Base. Top: Abandoned barracks at the Željava Air Base, April 2023. Middle: Graffiti and decaying skeleton of Douglas C-47 at the entrance to the air base, April 2023. Bottom: entrance to the underground complex/hangars at Željava, April 2023. COURTESY OF JOSEF DJORDJEVSKI

impacts on especially rural communities and their environments on both a local and global level.

Outside Ličko Petrovo Selo lie the remains of an abandoned Yugoslav People's Army barracks, neglected and decaying with no real attempts at renovation or new construction, as well as the former Željava Air Base (Figure 4) cut into the small hills separating Croatia from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, the occasional visitor might stop off to drive through the tunnels or even race, dispose of their trash, or take selfies. There are no plaques or displayed sources of information for interested tourists. Beyond their use during the socialist period, the barracks and air base were heavily involved in the Croatian War of Independence, with RSK forces first using them before later destroying many of the facilities to prevent their use by the Croatian Army. The neglected remains of these sites of violence remain harmful to both residents and visitors in their current state of decay, with unknown amounts of chemical pollution, including asbestos, and overgrowth of vegetation that increases the risk of poisonous and invasive species, as well as fires.



FIGURE 5 Memorial to “victims of fascist terror” and “fighters in the People’s Liberation Struggle,” Ličko Petrovo Selo.
COURTESY OF JOSEF DJORDJEVSKI

The village of Ličko Petrovo Selo itself has had a very violent and traumatic past. At the town’s entrance, as in other locales across the country, stands a large monument listing the names of hundreds of victims of “fascist terror” killed during the Second World War by Ustaša (Croatian fascist) forces. The monument is installed on the wall of a former, now fully abandoned, schoolhouse (Figure 5). According to a local guide, the population of the village, still predominantly Serbs, and their Croat neighbors in Vaganac, the next town about four kilometers down the road, will never be able to reconcile over this history. The guide noted that while some villagers from Vaganac participated in the Ustaša murder of Serbs in Ličko Petrovo Selo in the Second World War,¹ the RSK forces in the 1990s did little to foster reconciliation by burning down Vaganac’s Catholic church and trying to ethnically cleanse the village. These divisions of identity solidified by acts and memories of violence is a central theme in Bergholz’s 2016 *Violence as a Generative Force*; the cultural memories of genocidal acts create such a massive barrier between affected communities that it can no longer be overcome by mere gestures and rhetoric.

Most of the town’s population either fled during or left after the Croatian War of Independence and never returned, leaving much of the environment

1 These murders were part of a wider genocide against Serbs perpetrated by the Ustaša in the name of the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War.

unused, abandoned, and unregulated, while a lack of funding for projects like the preservation of the Yugoslav-era historical sites and traditional Orthodox Serb heritage of the village threaten the area's economic and cultural survival. Ličko Petrovo Selo is not alone in this fate; in 2011, Croatia had more than 73,000 abandoned dwellings, which presents Croatia's leadership with a perennially challenging task that is only exacerbated by the persistent tensions in dissonant memories of the 1990s war (Lončar and Pavić 2020, 203). Depopulation and environmental neglect are common concerns throughout Lika, including in regions populated mainly by ethnic Croats.

The town itself is situated near the Plitvice Lakes National Park, one of Croatia's most popular tourist destinations, yet it has not experienced much development stemming from Plitvice tourism beyond a new hotel and a few emerging tourist accommodations. Much of the efforts of the local community to preserve local cultural heritage has either suffered major setbacks due to a lack of state support or has not materialized; the aforementioned guide's "ethno-house," meant to draw in visitors, is experiencing structural decay. While proponents of the ethno-tourism model maintain that it can help stimulate local economies by preserving local traditions and cultures (Pažek et al. 2020), such venues can also face problems associated with mass tourism: commodification, overcrowding, over-dependency, loss of authenticity, inequality, and pollution. In Dalmatia, Croatia's tourist hotspot, the prioritization of rebuilding infrastructure after the Croatian War of Independence fell in some instances on ethnic boundaries, as the case of Islam Latinski and Islam Grčki, two villages near Zadar, highlights.

The two villages named "Islam"—Latinski referring to the "Latin" religious tradition of Catholicism and Grčki ("Greek") referring to Orthodox Christianity—lie on a rural stretch of road near former wartime frontlines. Driving from Benkovac near the Dalmatian coast toward Zadar and the island of Pag, one passes through Smilčić and Donji Kašić before an abrupt change (or lack) of asphalt welcomes you to Islam Grčki. Prior to the Croatian War of Independence, Islam Grčki's population was predominantly Serb; the village was destroyed in Operation Maslenica in January 1993 and has hardly been rebuilt, despite its proximity to the sea. Collapsed houses and churches lie on either side of the road, overgrown with vegetation. Less than two kilometers down the road, the pavement suddenly improves as one crosses municipal boundaries into Islam Latinski, a predominantly Croat village closer to the Maslenica Bridge and the Adriatic Road leading to Zadar. Most houses appear to have been recently reconstructed and repainted, with little to no signs of wartime damage, some advertising rooms for tourists heading toward the Adriatic. With the rare exception of the stone house of Yugoslav writer Vladan Desnica, the

Kula Jankovića, partially restored as a cultural heritage site and academic conference location, little has been done in Islam Grčki to match the pace of reconstruction further down the road. Keeping in mind the history of the two settlements, the fact that the Croatian state selectively rebuilt all but one of a string of villages along a nine-kilometer stretch of road does indicate a reluctance of the state to invest in areas with a Serb-majority population, as in Ličko Petrovo Selo. Towns in eastern Slavonia with similar pasts, though hundreds of kilometers away, also have seen only slow developmental progress since the end of the war, with Serbian Orthodox churches such as the main church in Vukovar being reconstructed only from the late 2000s.

All these issues—whether through outright acts of violence or more passive but intentional forms of neglect—contribute to the ongoing process of othering the Serbs in Croatia, a shift in the mnemonic landscape, and the marking of war memory by neglect and destruction, a shift in the physical environment. The decision to exclude Serbs from public spaces and commemorations forces them into a marginal position that leaves little room for the voices of civilian victims to be heard. Again, these narratives counter the prevailing vision of the Croatian state as one fought for through the sacrifice of the defenders and the martyrdom of ethnic Croat civilians. This discussion brings into question the ways of managing conflicting victimhood narratives to dissuade nationalist interpretations of violence while ensuring justice for war victims and their families through the individualization of guilt and simultaneously seeking environmental and social justice for all affected parties. While abandonment, depopulation, and environmental neglect are common throughout de-industrializing and de-agrarianizing societies, in places like Lika and the Dalmatian hinterlands where slow violence from the war continues to interact with neglected heritage and suppressed memories, the link between the memory of the war and environmental management is more apparent, as the way that memory is performed can and does have dramatic environmental and social consequences.

6 Multicultural Memories on the Croatian Periphery

Our final excursion into the various landscapes of memory and environment in Croatia focuses again on the multicultural borderlands along the Serbian and Hungarian frontiers. The Osijek-Baranja region of eastern Croatia was also heavily impacted by the Croatian War of Independence and is similarly dotted with monuments to Croatian defenders, both in the regional metropole of Osijek and in the countryside, with several monuments to Yugoslav

Partisans as well, though these tend to be in areas of either mixed Serb–Croat or majority Serb populations (see Pavlaković and Pauković 2019). Outside Osijek lies the Kopački Rit Nature Park, one of the last and largest wetlands in Europe and an integral part of the Mur–Drava–Danube river system, recently labeled the “Amazon of Europe.” Due to its strategic position between the Croatian and Serbian borders, during the Croatian War of Independence Kopački Rit was heavily militarized with thousands of landmines placed in and around the park. As of 2015, the project *Natura 2000*, co-funded by the European Union, had resulted in the removal of thousands of mines from the area, and by 2020, up to 90% of the area had been reportedly de-mined.

Much like Plitvice, Kopački Rit and its surrounding villages seek to develop rural, eco, and nature tourism, with a newly renovated information center housed at the Tikveš Austro-Hungarian manor in the heart of the park. While the park’s main focus now lies on education and nature tourism, there is no public commemoration of the heavy mining and militarization of the park during the war or of the ongoing and painstaking efforts to rid the area of mines. This process of collective forgetting is problematic, since it appears that developing ecotourism has the potential of displacing knowledge that can be gained by the public about the different environmental impacts of warfare and militarization. Again, since dominant memory practices tend to focus on events, a slow memory approach could help memorialize the long process of militarization and de-militarization of the environment near Kopački Rit.

While Kopački Rit is much less internationally renowned than Plitvice, there is a fledgling tourist industry that targets tourists who will come for ecotourism, bicycle tourism, wine tourism, culinary tourism, and bird watching, among other activities. The nearby village of Karanac is becoming increasingly well known for its development of a unique brand of ethno-tourism. Karanac is a self-ascribed “ethno-village” that offers preserved traditional architecture, farm stays, traditional cuisine and wine tasting, and gift shops with local arts and crafts. With a mixed population of Serbs, Croats, and Hungarians, the town takes a novel approach toward preserving its heritage by focusing on the common traditions of each ethnic group, and there are both Catholic and Orthodox religious sites in the town. While the town’s approach is novel and shows evidence of inter-ethnic reconciliation, there is still a severe lack of development and investment, and the town is part of the Kneževi Vinogradi municipality, which is listed as a First Category Area of Special State Concern. While there are decaying structures and persistent problems with depopulation, there are few spaces in the town dedicated to commemorating the war, though there is a plaque listing the names of victims



FIGURE 6 Battle of Batina memorial complex. Antun Augustinčić's "Victory" statue, dedicated in 1976.

COURTESY OF JOSEF DJORDJEVSKI

of the war in front of the Catholic church, and several such commemorative plaques can be found in surrounding villages.

Less than thirty kilometers away from Karanac lies the Second World War memorial complex in Batina (Figure 6), commemorating the joint Soviet–Yugoslav victory in the first major battle to liberate eastern Croatia from Axis powers in 1945. At the very northeastern edge of Croatia, near the Serbian and Hungarian borders, the impressive monument stands high above the Danube River on the outskirts of the village, where there is a growing wine production and tourism economy geared toward rural tourism. The demographic makeup of Batina (and the Draž municipality) in 1991 was majority Hungarian, followed by Croats and then Serbs and others. Today, Croats comprise the

majority of the population although a significant Hungarian population remains. This is an interesting factor since the Batina monument celebrates Soviet and communist Yugoslav forces during the Second World War, both of which are controversial among the Croatian population. Although other Second World War monuments commemorating the Yugoslav victory throughout Croatia have experienced vandalism, defacement, and removal, due to Serbian and Russian funds the monument is well kept, and the surrounding area is pursuing wine tourism to varying degrees of success.

However, the entire region is still considered by the government to be a First Category Area of Special State Concern, and several buildings, homes, and former factories and production facilities remain abandoned with war damages and pollution (especially in the form of debris). In general, throughout the Baranja region, municipalities are trying to develop rural tourism, ethno-tourism, and other alternative forms of tourism, while the long-lasting legacies of the war (slow violence) in these areas are not given significant public attention or commemoration, with the heavy mining, depopulation, and landscape destruction from the war continuing to present major roadblocks to development.

In major contrast to the fate of communities in rural Baranja and Slavonia stands the Istrian peninsula, a significant tourist destination that shares with those regions a multicultural frontier (the peninsula is shared between Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia), a history of empire, and blended demographic makeup. Istrian identity, like Croatian, has long been resistant to more dominant groups, such as the Venetians and the Habsburgs, that formerly controlled the region, and the period of Yugoslav rule and the creation of the modern Croatian state have proven little different. Despite the flight of the large Italian-speaking population in the aftermath of the Second World War in the face of violent reprisals from Yugoslav authorities, Istria remains a multilingual region today, and many town signs are printed in Croatian and Italian, with locals sometimes interchanging the names in conversation.

The regional identity that has developed in Istria over the past century is a result of the constant movement of people and empires, ultimately one defining itself through its opposition to a "centralizing national core" (Ashbrook 2011, 872). Istrian identity is marked by its "strong sense of multiculturalism, hybridity, emotional attachment to the territory, and shared, interethnic cooperation" (*ibid.*), in a sense presenting itself as a neat microcosm of the Yugoslav ideal without the violence of the past. This multiculturalism, especially when extended to Serbs in Croatia, was the very same attacked by Tuđman and the HDZ in its early years, therefore casting Istria as the antithesis to Croatian nationalist conservatism. By rejecting such exclusivist

nationalism that re-emerged in the 1960s and came to the fore in the 1990s—and perhaps in part due to its rather small Serb population, which mitigated targeted acts of violence during the Croatian War of Independence—Istrian social and political actors sought to preserve the remains of a multi-ethnic state without resorting to violence against the central state of which it was nonetheless an integral part. Ashbrook notes, however, that “Istrian regionalism is just another of the myriad dividing lines distinguishing one group from another” (2011, 887), so while this uniqueness appears inclusive, it belies another boundary between the in-group and the “Other.” While tensions remain between regionalists who see Istria as a part of Croatia and autonomists and nationalists seeking either full autonomy (Istrian) or full integration (Croat), as well as the pervasive urban/rural divide found elsewhere in Croatia, the way Istria presents itself and its identity through the public face of memory challenges the creation of a singular, “Croatian” cultural memory.

Yugoslav monuments in Istria, above all, have weathered the past thirty years with little damage, certainly unlike that seen in the memorials described above in Dalmatia, Slavonia, and Lika that have been repeatedly vandalized or destroyed, and some even have been rebuilt or renovated in the past decade. This is in great part attributable to the nature of the conflicts in the 1940s and the 1990s; in World War II, Yugoslav Partisans in Istria fought for the liberation of the region from Italian fascism, while in other parts of the country, they fought against the Independent State of Croatia and domestic fascism. Istria, meanwhile, was hardly touched by the Croatian War of Independence, instead becoming a refuge for others fleeing the violence to the south and east. Those who would have opposed Yugoslav, and later Croatian, rule of Istria, namely the majority of the autochthonous Istrian population that supported Italian occupation, had fled to Italy after the end of the Second World War. There is thus no perceived need for Croatian nationalists to “retaliate” against Yugoslav (or for that matter, Italian) memory, as the memory of peace appears to have prevailed in Istria (see also Valentina Otmačić’s contribution to this issue). More so than in other regions, Istrian monuments to the Yugoslav past (many in Italian and Croatian) have been freshly adorned with flowers and wreaths, and the plaques appear to be recently polished, as evinced by their clear legibility; Tito’s name has also been preserved in urban areas, unlike his gradual erasure in Zagreb and elsewhere (Figure 7).

Tourism itself is even commemorated in the hilltop village of Motovun, known for the quality of its truffles and as the birthplace of Formula 1 driver Mario Andretti, with a memorial plaque dedicated to one charitable Granny Ljubica, who hosted travelers stranded during a festival (Figure 8).



FIGURE 7 Yugoslav monuments in Istria: Pula, Umag, Vižindana, Plovanija. Top left: Memorial plaque in Italian and Croatian dedicated to the victims of Italian militarism of 1920, Pula, 3 May 2019. Top right: Bilingual street signs at Josip Broz Tito Quay, Umag, 4 May 2019. Bottom left: Freshly lain wreath at monument to “fallen fighters and victims of fascist terror,” Vižindana, 4 May 2019. Bottom right: Monument to Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Fascism, located at a major traffic intersection near the Croatia–Slovenia border, Plovanija, 4 May 2019. COURTESY OF TAYLOR MCCONNELL



FIGURE 8 Granny Ljubica's house, Motovun. "Secret history of the Festival" plaque marking the house of Granny Ljubica, the generous host of artists and visitors to Motovun, 4 May 2019.
COURTESY OF TAYLOR MCCONNELL

The patterns of memorialization found in Istria suggest greater power of counter-narratives to resist mainstream interpretations of the past found elsewhere in Croatia. The recent wave of "retudjmanization"—among others through the installation of busts of wartime president Franjo Tuđman and the renaming of public spaces, including the Zagreb airport, in his honor—however, does appear to limit the potential spread of this sort of Yugoslav nostalgia that has been preserved in Istria, as does the recent formation of a new government with the support of the far-right Homeland Movement (*Domo-vinski pokret*). Though Istria remains a bastion of Yugoslav memory, the upkeep of monuments from the mid-twentieth century is not enough to fundamentally challenge the framework of cultural memory and the concurrent shifts in the physical landscape that have emerged elsewhere in Croatia since 1991, 1995, or even 2013. Nevertheless, it represents one of a handful of powerful counter-narratives that have developed as a form of resistance to the nationalist discourse of the HDZ and the *branitelji*, who still exercise the most power over memory and its institutions. In doing so, Istria gives a glimmer of hope to memory activists and political actors who strive to re-center memory beyond ethnicity and victimhood (Fridman and Pavlaković 2023, 5), as is most often the case in Croatia and further in the post-Yugoslav space.

7 Conclusion

These politics of forgetting, omission, and “reinvention of tradition”—if not an outright abuse of memory for the sake of nationalist antagonism and social division—have at times been exaggerated by scholars and are often limited to discussions of the Adriatic coastal region. But despite the potential for exaggeration, in rural areas still suffering from the impacts of slow violence, dissonant heritage and memories continue to conflict with dominant and hegemonic discourses of collective memory. In these places, tourism has the potential to lead to development and the preservation of certain heritages, but tourism also has the potential of suppressing and displacing memories of the war altogether, and lessons that could be learned about how war affects communities and their environments may be forced out of the public’s sight and away from the tourist’s gaze. It is because of this specter of forgetting and collective amnesia that slow methodologies are essential. By focusing on slow violence, or ways in which the 1990s war has led to longer-lasting social and material impacts, scholars, local populations, and observers can learn how warsapes represent more than just places where armed violence occurred. Warsapes might also be places that continue in peacetime to threaten the safety of residents and visitors, present lingering economic challenges to survivors of violence and newer generations who did not directly experience war, and provide both physical and psychological barriers to ethno-national, religious plurality and economic development. Our work thus demonstrates through the examples of ethno-villages, monuments, and museums in the aftermath of the Croatian War of Independence that there is a direct connection between practices of commemoration of violent pasts, tourism development, and environmental and social transformation, at the very least in Croatia since 1995. These are simultaneously shaped by prevailing memory politics and domestic economic pressures, i.e. growth through tourism, in ways that unfold both slowly—nature’s reclaiming of former warsapes—and rapidly—the erection of a new memorial space.

However, since many of these elements of slow violence and slow memory do not play out in ways that are immediately visible or ascertainable through rapid touristification or hegemonic political narratives, it is necessary for researchers to help play a part in remembering things slowly and working slowly. We have tried to do this by undergoing transformations as scholars ourselves, taking the time to visit and observe places that have received far less scholarly attention, examining sites of memory in the framework of their broader environments and historical legacies, and have worked slowly by taking unorthodox approaches like compiling maps, photographs, and videos

that allow for deeper reflection, not only about the subject but also about our own experiences. We have also embraced the fact that our observations and conclusions remain incomplete. Traditional methodologies of historical research, especially archival research, can still be useful for establishing context but might not be enough to provide a full picture, since many of the processes we discuss have gone unrecorded or been ignored.

More work needs to be done. It is still unclear if there is a causal link between memory and the enduring legacies of war in terms of environmental transformations, but much remains to be said about putting critical memory and heritage studies into conversation with studies of environmental management, tourism, and conflict. Comparative work linking the legacy of long *durée* violence, such as that inflicted upon the indigenous populations of the Americas and the lands they inhabit(ed) (see Fegadel 2023; Dye and Keel 2011), to more rapid bursts of violence as seen in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, might offer greater insight into the bond between environment, tourism, and remembrance. One thing that can be said for certain is that in areas of state concern with significant lingering war damages, there are clear cases of dissonant heritages and memories that are either suppressed, marginalized, or made invisible. The tensions between what Croatian leaders want tourists (or any passers-by) to see, mainstream narratives, and the state of local memoryscapes and landscapes also allow significant room to apply compatible slow memory methodologies. With this in mind, the idea that memory of conflict and environmental legacies of physical violence have become entangled and interconnected shows that slow memory has the potential to offer alternatives to slow violence, environmental neglect, tourism overdependence, and collective amnesia.

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