

Croatia – Exhibiting Memory and History at the “Shores of Europe”

By Ljiljana Radonic

Abstract

Even though the self-critical dealing with the past has not been an official criteria for joining the European union, the founding of the *Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research* and the Holocaust-conference in Stockholm at the beginning of 2000 seem to have generated informal standards of confronting and exhibiting the Holocaust during the process called “Europeanization of the Holocaust”. This is indicated by the fact that the *Holocaust Memorial Center* in Budapest opened almost empty only weeks before Hungary joined the European Union although the permanent exhibition had not been ready yet. The Croatian case, especially the new exhibition that opened at the KZ-memorial Jasenovac in 2006, will serve in order to examine how the “Europeanization of the Holocaust” impacts on a candidate state. The memorial museum resembles Holocaust Memorial Museums in Washington, Budapest etc., but, although it is *in situ*, at the site of the former KZ, the focus clearly lies on individual victim stories and their belongings, while the perpetrators and the daily “routine” at the KZ are hardly mentioned. Another problem influenced by the international trend to focus on (Jewish) individuals and moral lessons rather than on the historical circumstances is that the focus on the Shoa blanks the fact that Serbs had been the foremost largest victim group. The third field, where the influence of “European standards” on the Croatian politics of the past will be examined, is the equalization of “red and black totalitarianism” at the annual commemorations in Jasenovac. While this was already done during the revisions era of President Franjo Tuđman during the 1990, today it perfectly matches EU-politics, as the introduction of the 23rd of August, the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin-pact, as a Memorial day for both victims of Nazism and Stalinism shows.

Keywords: Politics of the Past – “Europeanization of the Holocaust” – Croatia – Jasenovac – “Negative Memory”

Introduction

Starting from the premise that post-communist World War II memorial museums show significant similarities, this paper will consider recent trends in the Europeanization of Memory since 1989. These include the universalization and Europeanization of the Holocaust as a negative founding myth in post-1945 Europe, as well as the Holocaust's difficult place in the new post-communist national narratives of Eastern Europe. The focus here will be on Croatia. In particular, I will review a post-communist memorial museum—the ultra-modern exhibition at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum which opened in 2006. In so doing, I consider whether certain European memory standards have been established, and if there is a centre and/or periphery to this development. To what extent does the Croatian attempt to confront the Second World War past appear as an answer to the Europeanization of Memory? How and to what extent are remembrance policies Europeanized? How does this development play out in Croatian public discourse? Finally, what have been the consequences of focusing on individual victims and victimization in European memorial culture and museums?

New Holocaust Memorial Museums

When we look at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest and the Jasenovac Memorial Museum some 100 km southwest of Zagreb, the similarities are striking: both exhibitions are in a darkened room; and the victims' names are written in white letters on the black background. In the case of Jasenovac, those names can be found not only on the walls, but also hovering on boards above the visitor. The focus of the exhibitions lies on the personal belongings of individual victims, exhibited in glass showcases.



Holocaust Memorial Center, Budapest © <http://www.hdke.hu/>



Jasenovac Memorial Museum, Croatia © Ljiljana Radonic

Thus, the same focus on individual victims, their stories and belongings can be observed in both museums. Since the two memorial museums show so many similarities and both opened within two years (2004 and 2006) of each other, it is obvious that there seem to be some kind of standards for new European Holocaust memorial museums. The Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest even opened a few weeks before Hungary joined the EU in 2004, although the permanent exhibition was not yet ready; because of this an almost empty building was opened, the only exhibition being the “Auschwitz-album,” which showed photographs taken by a German SS soldier during the arrival of Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz. The collaboration of Hungarian society, especially in carrying out the deportation by Hungarian policemen, thus did not play a role here (Fritz 2008).

Furthermore, the fact that the homepage of the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest was in English until a few months ago and that a button had to be clicked in order to access the Hungarian version, shows that the museum is targeting a completely different audience than the House of Terror at the centre of Budapest (Ungvary 2006: 211), where copied black and white single sheets of paper in most of the rooms were the only pieces of information to be provided in English. It is also unimaginable for the Jasenovac Memorial Museum not to have a bilingual exhibition and an extensive catalogue, while the Holocaust Memorial Center in Oslo, for example, provides no written information in English at all, targeting a solely domestic audience.

This article argues that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington is *the* role model behind the aesthetics of these museums, while the political need for post-communist countries to provide such memorial museums results from unofficial memory standards that are being established in the course of the Europeanization of Memory.

Universalization and Europeanization of the Holocaust

After the end of the Cold War, the memory-boom in Western countries spotlighted the Holocaust as the negative icon of our era. Before the 1990s, it was only individual events that led to transnational debates about the Holocaust, like the Eichmann-trial in 1961 or the broadcast of the US-serial “Holocaust” in 1978/79. In the meantime, the national discussions have followed their own rhythm, which has been determined by the role of each country in World War II as well as the current political situation (Eckel/Moisel 2008: 13). However, in contrast to earlier decades in Western countries, the extermination of the European Jewry has come to the fore of the view on World War II since the 1980s. This development has been accompanied by a change in focus: instead of the figure of the hero or martyr, which was used particularly in the portrayal of the resistance against the Third Reich, the individual victim has now moved into the focus of remembrance (Rouso 2004: 374). Furthermore, the Holocaust has become a “negative icon” (Diner 2007), a universal imperative to respect human rights in general, a “container” for the memory of the various victims, as Levy and Sznajder put it (Levy/Sznajder 2005).

Moreover, in Europe this universalization of the Holocaust includes another dimension: the “rupture in civilization” (Diner 1988) has increasingly become a negative European founding myth. The unified Europe after 1945 is understood as a collective sharing a common destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) that has learned a lesson from the Holocaust and developed shared structures in order to avoid a recurrence of such a catastrophe. Since the EU is searching for a new European identity that goes beyond an economic and monetary union, this founding myth is supposed to create such an identity (Judt 2005). This is one of the reasons why the *Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research* (ITF)—founded in Sweden as a network of politicians and experts in 1998—aroused so much interest and today already includes 27 mostly European countries (Kroh 2008a).

Furthermore, at the beginning of the new millennium, on 27 January 2000, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, an international Holocaust conference took place in Stockholm, which was attended by prime ministers and presidents for the first time, and also by renowned experts and contemporary witnesses from 46 states (Kroh 2008b: 111). One of the results of the declaration passed was the recommendation that all countries should implement 27 January or a similar na-

tional date as Holocaust Memorial Day. As of 2010, 34 of the 56 OSCE member states had followed this recommendation. While 22 member states chose 27 January, 12 decided to commemorate another nationally important day. Nevertheless, the formal status and the concrete code of practice differ strongly: in Great Britain “Holocaust Memorial Day” was introduced as an official national Memorial Day in 2000. On this day, the massacres in Rwanda, Armenia, Bosnia or Kosovo are remembered as well as the situation of the disabled or homosexuals. In other countries like France or Sweden, the day has a less political significance, with the focus lying on pedagogical activities. The Europeanization of the memory of Auschwitz is connected to a Europeanization of topics, protagonists and rituals only in a very limited way (Schmid 2009). Nevertheless, the suggestion to join the Holocaust Task Force and implement a Holocaust Memorial Day were the first steps towards some kind of “European standards,” which were not officially applied during the eastern enlargement of the EU, but did play a role unofficially, as shown by the example above of the Holocaust Memorial Center opening almost empty in 2004.

This attempt to retrospectively imbue the Holocaust with some kind of sense, the moral legitimation of the EU as a better Europe emerging from the Holocaust, is problematic in more than one way. The complex events are removed from their historic context in order to create a shared identity. This demands that we abstract from the concrete victims and perpetrators as well as from the specific role of Germany and Austria, important allies in the EU, as Levy and Sznajder (2004: 669) write: “The Holocaust is no longer about the Jews being exterminated by the Germans. Rather, it is about human beings and the most extreme violation of their human rights.” Levy and Sznajder welcome this focus on the individual victim. Yet this tends to result in an obscuring of the different contexts in which “a human being” died and thus promotes the problematic tendency to place everyone killed in World War II on the same level as equally innocent victims, which they address as a slight problem only in relation to the German victims of bombing and expulsion (Dunnage 2010). This universalization dehistoricizes the events of World War II in order to make them applicable as a moral lesson (Knigge 2008: 151): since “we Europeans” have learned from the Holocaust so successfully, it seems necessary to understand victims of today’s conflicts, “the Muslims,” the “Bosnians” or “the Kosovars,” as the “new Jews” (Miller 2010). Understanding Germany as *the* role model for confronting its past successfully thus allows it to use the motto “Nie wieder Auschwitz” for current political aims: formulations like “the ramp of Srebrenica” or preventing a new Auschwitz in Kosovo were used in Germany in order to legitimate the NATO-war in Kosovo in 1999 although there was no UN-mandate for this and the reasonability of the bombing is questioned today.

Parallel to this Europeanization of the Holocaust, in eastern European countries history has been renarrated after 1989, often with the discovery a “golden era”

before communist rule (Cornelißen 2006: 48). The historical narrative of the heroic anti-fascist struggle was delegitimized together with the communist regimes, placing the trauma of the communist crimes in the core of memory, often evoking symbols familiar from the Shoa like rail tracks and wagons. This “divided memory” (Troebst 2006: 36) in "East" and "West" makes representatives of post-communist states demand that the communist crimes must be condemned “to the same extent” as the Holocaust.

As a reaction to these conflicting memories, the EU-parliament recommended the introduction of a new memorial day in summer 2009: on 23 August, the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin-pact of 1939, the victims of both National Socialism and Stalinism should be commemorated. Thus, not only has the memory of the victims of Stalinism been added to the European canon, but furthermore, the victims of both regimes have also been explicitly placed on the same level. In this sense, the new Memorial Day is not an addition to 27 January, but its antithesis. The respectful memory of the victims of communist crimes is in this way again bound together with political issues: while the Europeanization of the Holocaust leads to the question of involvement of one's own country in the Nazi crimes, the new Memorial Day does not feed such a negative memory. One's “own people” is again understood as an innocent victim of oppression from outside (through Hitler and Stalin), while the participation in the communist regime is denied and externalized.

Case study: Croatia

In order to examine in detail the extent to which Croatia's way of dealing with the Second World War appears as an answer to the Europeanization of memory, a case study of Croatia will be conducted in the second part of my article. Since Croatia is the only remaining eastern European county that will join the EU in the near future, it is particularly interesting to analyze how remembrance policies are made European. While there is already some literature on the 1990s, the development of recent decades is examined through an analysis of commemoration speeches and newspaper articles on the Jasenovac Memorial (Radonic 2010).

The 1990s – Isolation, not Europeanization

After the country gained its independence in 1990, just like other post-communist states Croatia referred to the pre-communist period as a golden era. The Nazi puppet “Independent State of Croatia” (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska—NDH) was seen as a “milestone” on the way the Croatia's independence. The Ustascha-regime had come to power with the asset stripping of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and had already begun operating death camps in the summer of the same year. The largest of these was Jasenovac, a labour and death camp complex,

where almost 100,000 people were killed—around half of them Serbs, as well as Jews, Roma and Croatian political detainees (Mataušić 2003; Goldstein 2001).

The break-up of Yugoslavia coincided with a break with both the anti-fascist narrative and its narrow dogma concerning World War II. Instead of a democratic framework for historiography, each nation developed its own victim-narration according to its national myths. Thus, Croatia was not at all adapting to the Europeanization of memory in this phase. President Franjo Tuđman instead wanted to reconcile Ustascha and Partisans: according to him, they had both fought for the same goal during World War II, albeit in different ways—the Croatian cause (Čulić 1999: 105). In connection with this idea, the Jasenovac memorial area played a great symbolic role: referring to the Spanish General Francisco Franco's example, Tuđman suggested bringing the bones of the Ustascha and of soldiers of the NDH ("Domobrani") killed by the partisans near Bleiburg in May 1945 to a "national memorial" in Jasenovac (Ivančić 2000: 132). This was the first approach to exhibiting victim stories in Jasenovac after Croatia's independence, but Tuđman had to drop these plans following international criticism (*Feral Tribune*, 4/1/1996; 10/3/1997). That his idea could not be established despite Croatia's political isolation in the late 1990s, could be understood as evidence of the fact that Croatia was too close to the centre of the Europeanization of the Holocaust for such a revisionist plan.

Croatian Remembrance Policies go European

After Tuđman's death at the end of 1999, a coalition under the leadership of the social democrats won the elections. During the process of democratization, especially the cutting back of the competences of the president and the introduction of efficient checks and balances, the manner in which the past was dealt with in Croatia also changed. In 2003, the former Tuđman-party, the HDZ, again won the elections. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, who resigned in 2009, was known as a Europe-oriented statesman who broke with the revisionist ideas of his predecessor. At the 2005 commemoration at the KZ Jasenovac Memorial, he emphasized that the "anti-fascist victory over fascism and National Socialism was the victory of those values woven into modern Europe and modern Croatia" (*Vjesnik*, 25/4/2005), but added that the Homeland War (1991-1995) was also fought against a type of fascism. During a 2005 visit to Yad Vashem, he similarly argued that during the 1990s war the Croats were also victims of the same kind of evil as Nazism and Fascism, and that no one knew better than the Croats did what it meant to be a victim of aggression and crime. The Holocaust History Museum further inspired Sanader to think about a Museum of the Homeland War, as he told journalists after his visit (*Vjesnik*, 29/6/2005). What makes the episode so telling is that these statements were not followed by any protests. This shift away from historical revisionism, which minimizes the victims of the Ustascha state in the Tuđman-era, to a new view that recognizes the Holocaust but presents Croats

as victims of Fascism, this time of Serbian Fascism, can be understood as an adaptation to the Europeanization of Memory and at the same time as something that demonstrates the problematic dimension of this European development.

Furthermore, during the annual commemorations in Jasenovac, Sanader and his colleagues repeatedly condemned “both totalitarianisms,” the “red and the black” like a kind of mantra, not reflecting that it had been the partisans who had liberated Jasenovac in 1945. (*Novi list*, 26/4/1999; *Vjesnik*, 17/3/2004; *Vjesnik*, 28/11/2006; *Novi list*, 21/4/2008) This formulation obviously corresponds to European standards perfectly, as the aforementioned introduction of the 23 August as a Memorial Day for both victims of Nazism and Stalinism shows. Totalitarianism is even mentioned in a short Sanader quotation in the *Ten year anniversary book* of the ITF: “Democracy’s victory over totalitarianism is the victory of the values embedded in modern Europe and modern Croatia” (Task Force 2009: 32).

The New Jasenovac-Exhibition — A Result of the “Europeanization of the Holocaust”

The most striking example of the Europeanization of the Holocaust, however, is the new exhibition at the state-funded Jasenovac Memorial Museum, which opened at the end of 2006 after prolonged debate. The main progress of the new exhibition seems to be the acknowledgment of the fact that mass murder and the Shoa did happen in Croatia. Nevertheless, the second exhibition panel after the entrance room shows Hitler and Pavelić, informing us that during Pavelić’s first visit in June 1941, Hitler gave him full support for the policy of genocide against the Serbian population. Thus, on the one hand it is stressed that the extermination of the Croatian Jews must be seen in the broader context of the Holocaust, which is obviously true, but on the other hand, it also seems very important to stress that the mass murder of Serbs must be seen in this context, too. Yet the fact that alongside the Nazis the Ustascha (and the Romanians in Transnistria; Rozett and Spector 2000) were a rare example of a regime that had operated death camps on their own is not mentioned. In addition, while anti-Semitic Ustascha posters are shown and the exhibition tries to counter anti-Semitic arguments, there is no such approach when it comes to hatred of Serbs or Roma. It is this emphasis on the Holocaust, principally in the aesthetics of the museum (testimonies, belongings of the victims), - which corresponds to international standards of commemorating and exhibiting the Holocaust - that allows the visitor to identify with the victim.

The director, Nataša Jovičić, claimed that “we want to be part of the modern European education and museum system and follow the framework we get from the institutions dealing with these topics“ (*Vjesnik*, 24/7/2004). European standards are mentioned explicitly, with Jovičić stating that the new exhibition is designed to “meet the standards of the Council of Europe and the EU” (*Vjesnik*, 18/8/2004). Jovičić defended the exhibition by saying that it had been conceptualized together with international experts because she wanted it to be “international-

ly recognizable and in the context of international standards” (*Vjesnik*, 14/2/2004). Yet these experts only came from institutions concerned with the Holocaust, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Anne-Frank-House or Yad Vashem. Presuming that these experts were aware of the particular situation in Jasenovac, where mostly Serbs had been killed, one can suppose that the problem lies somewhere else: the Croatian curators did not model themselves on memorial museums at the sites of former concentration camps in Germany or the *Generalgouvernement* – which try to show the complex character and daily routine of concentration camps – but on other institutions. “Like at the Anne Frank House,” Jovičić wants to “tell a tragic life story with the help of a few objects”. (*Vjesnik*, 24/5/2004) Of course, it is understandable that the current focus on individual victim stories is dominant at the Anne-Frank-House. But in Jasenovac a hypermodern exhibition also uses new media in order to spotlight only single victim stories, as described in an article in the state-owned daily *Vjesnik*: “Even more thoroughly than the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the Anne Frank House in the Netherlands the director of the Jasenovac Memorial, the art historian Nataša Jovičić, decided to devote the whole new museum exhibition (in preparation) to the victims“. (*Vjesnik*, 7/3/2004) Referring directly to the “illustration of the executioner and the victim in world museology,” she planned not to show anonymous dead bodies and weapons of killing as was done before, but to make Jasenovac a “site of life” and of an affirmative message. She joins together the legitimate critic of the shock-aesthetic on the one hand and the attempt to make sense of the events by “sending a message of light to the site of crime” on the other hand. (*Vjesnik*, 7/3/2004)

However, critics also faulted the new exhibition concept for not showing who the perpetrators were, which nation had the biggest losses and how people were killed in Jasenovac—the “manufacture of death,” as it is called by some scholars. (*Novi list*, 24/1/2006; 29/1/2006) After a long debate, some brute killing instruments, knives and mallets, were added to the exhibition as well as mentions of the nationality and age of the victims in order to show that not only political prisoners were killed there, as it was often claimed during the 1990s.

Since the director understands the memorial as a “modern and dynamic human rights centre” (*Vjesnik*, 27/2/2004), the educational centre furthermore presents the Holocaust primarily as a moral lesson, reproducing the dominant dehistoricized understanding of it in a way it could be done anywhere else outside the camp area. The exhibition also does not integrate or address the historical site of the concentration camp around it in any way; an educational path has been planned for several years but has still not been implemented. The only illustration of the barracks, which are symbolized by hills, dates back to the sixties when the famous architect Bogdan Bogdanović designed the memorial area and built the flower-monument. Jovičić has stressed numerous times that international experts welcomed the exhibition’s concept, (*Vjesnik*, 24/5/2004), which an interview with the director and a

scientific advisor of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Diana Saltzman and Arthur Berger, seems to confirm. (*Novi list*, 2/12/2006) One can thus either reason that most problems of the primal concept of the exhibition have been solved or that the universalization of the holocaust aims only at a symbolic acknowledgment of the Shoa in order to open future perspectives of a global human rights discourse.

However, what Reinhart Kosellek stressed for Germany is also true for Croatia: both cannot merely commemorate the victims, but must also, or even principally, remember the perpetrators (Kosellek 2002). In the Croatian case, there cannot be an exhibition (supported by international experts and meeting international aesthetic standards) that concentrates on the (Jewish) victims in a country and a region where the engagement with one's own crimes, the so called "negative memory" (see Knigge/Frei 2002), has not yet come very far.

Memory as a "Draught-horse Towards Europe"?

Unlike the 1990s, when voices from abroad were mostly seen as coming from anti-Croatian circles, in the last decade in the discussions of the new exhibition concept as well as of the annual commemorations in Jasenovac, reactionary opinions have been seen as an obstacle to striving towards Europe. The identification of the Jasenovac victims by name is seen as a step on the way to "the Europe that all of our thinking people strive towards." (*Novi list*, 3/5/2005)

On the other hand, a prominent columnist of the leftist daily *Novi list* hints at an instrumental understanding of approaching the past. On the occasion of premier Sanader's visit to Jasenovac in 2005, Branko Mijić wrote: "If this rhetoric had emerged earlier and been perpetuated longer, our image in the world would have been much more positive. This would also have eased our entry into the European community." (*Novi list*, 25/4/05) Two months later, on the occasion of Sanaders visit to Israel Mijić added:

After years of mistrust and suspicion (...) it is certainly a big issue to make a relatively small, but fearsomely (*strašno*) influential county like Israel take sides with us. An enemy less and a partner more is a big success, especially since our future depends on the mercy of the powerful in more than one way. (*Novi list*, 29/6/2005)

This instrumental argumentation with an anti-Semitic tendency towards conspiracy theory shows that memory standards need not to be internalized in order to appear European.

One critic of this nationalist discourse furthermore explicitly called for the ruling party to stop using the memory of the Jasenovac victims as a "draught horse towards Europe," as this would lead to neither closer ties to Europe, respect for the victims of genocide, or to the truth. (*Novi list*, 15/5/2005)

Conclusion: The Ambivalent Europeanization of Memory

Returning to the pictures of the memorial museums in Budapest and Jasenovac, we can now say the following: (1) There obviously exist some kind of European memory standards, since those two museums are constructed according to the same principals. (2) The standards for establishing such museums are definitely developed further to the west, the US being the aesthetic role model and Germany the centre of the Europeanization of the Holocaust. Thus while Hungary and Croatia are not the centre of this Europeanization, neither do they constitute the periphery, since in contrast to countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Western Ukraine, state-funded memorial museums do exist there. In short, it is not membership in the EU that determines the distance from the centre. (3) It is problematic that the two museums are so similar: Jasenovac is not or is at least not supposed to be a Holocaust Memorial Museum since Serbs were the main victim group there. It should thus be regarded as a consequence of the universalization of the Holocaust that such a dehistoricized memorial concentrating on the individual victims (while alluding primarily to symbols from Shoa memory) is possible at the site of a concentration camp in general, and at this concentration camp in particular - in its four-year history, one of the rare examples of a death camp in Europe not operated by the Third Reich and one in which Serbs were the largest victim group.

However, assessing the effects of the Europeanization of the Holocaust as ambivalent also means seeing its positive effects, especially in the post-communist states. Once Hungary had the Holocaust Memorial Center – even though its permanent exhibition opened only years later – it still facilitated educational programs and opposed the revisionist narrative offered at the House of Terror in the centre of Budapest, where Nazi collaborators and communists are treated equally. In order to meet these unofficial European standards, Croatia also opened an exhibition in which the majority of victims' names hover on glass boards above the heads of visitors. The country also joined the ITF in 2005, which is more than other former Yugoslav successor-states have achieved.

In order to facilitate its integration into the European (memory) community, Croatia had to confront its past more critically than its neighbouring states because of both its role in World War II and the revisionist Tuđman-era. Still, the universalization and Europeanization of the Holocaust enable new victim-narratives that are compatible with these European standards. Finally, therefore, if the often-invoked “international community” stopped recycling images from World War II and instead condemned each of the crimes for what they were, this would certainly help to bring about a confrontation with the recent past of the wars in the 1990s. If such a confrontation does not take place, the impulse to identify the victims of various crimes with the Jews, however horrible these crimes were, will always retain the bitter aftertaste of what has become known as *Schuld*

und *Erinnerungsabwehr* (Adorno 2010) —a pathological defence of guilt and memory.

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