

# **Impressions as a history student from Germany: (Holocaust) remembrance in Serbia**

**by**

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*“How did you find out about the concentration camp Topovske Šupe?”*

*“I looked it up since it was right in front of my window and I wondered what it was.”*

When I arrived in Serbia for a semester abroad in October last year, I didn't come unprepared. Neither was it my first visit of the country, nor was it my first encounter with the field of dealing with the past in Serbia: My bachelor's thesis had been centred around the question of Serbia's memory politics and mnemonic practices in the framework of the country's journey to EU-accession and the policies of conditionality it entailed. Back then, my focus was on the remembrance of the wars of the nineties but I realized quite early on that the memory of the nineties was deeply entangled with the memory of the Second World War – it is not a coincidence that the atrocities committed by the others and the suffering of the own nation during the war played a prominent role in the (re)formulation of national identity during and after the break-up of Yugoslavia. One of my findings was that the politics of conditionality applied by the EU and the US hadn't led to a political internalisation of the necessity to constructively deal with the past as a precondition for and basis to a tolerant and engaged (civil) society – but that, if anything it had further increased the polarisation between veterans of the wars and civil society organisations concerned with remembering civilian (especially non-Serbian) victims of the wars.

Thus, when arriving in Serbia this time, my expectations of the state's approach of dealing with the past weren't particularly high – accordingly, my focus was a different one this time: I wanted to get insights into the work of non-governmental organisations dealing with memory work and history education. Furthermore, I wanted to talk to friends and people I meet about their education and knowledge about different historical events. What do they know about the Second World War, the Holocaust, the 90s? What did they learn at school, what are they told at home?

When I told my friends about my internship at the CPI and the project on Topovske Šupe, only one of them knew about the concentration camp and its history. She had looked it up because she was basically living across the street from the old buildings and had wondered what their story was. Everyone else was genuinely surprised by

the fact that there had been as many as three concentration camps during the time of Nazi occupation. One friend told me he only knew about the camp at Staro Sajmište – he had read about it in the news when there was a debate about whether or not it was okay to have a kindergarten and a restaurant on the historical site of the camp (a statement that made me realize how easy it was to place such knowledge in the reach of the broader public). Another friend told me she didn't learn anything about the Holocaust in school, but she said jokingly that at least she was able to vividly picture the interior of each and every room of the Karađorđević's castle. I am well aware that these conversations with people are far from being representative samples, but they do show a tendency to deal only with the seemingly undisputed and heroic parts of history – an assumption that could most probably be proved by a quick look into contemporary history textbooks.

If the remembrance of the Holocaust is neglected like this, what does this mean for the actual sites of suffering in Serbia? My first visit of the historical site of the camp Sajmište down at Sava river was quite an unsettling experience. The moment I entered the site, I could immediately understand what Jelena Subotić, professor at Georgia State University and author of the book *„Yellow Star, Red Star. Holocaust Remembrance After Communism“* wrote about Sajmište, calling it „a grotesque site of non-memory“<sup>1</sup>. There is not a single sign pointing out the way to the historical site of the camp from the main road nor is there really any entrance gate or fence marking the historical dimensions of the camp. Entering the area felt like entering any semi-neglected space in this city – the road is covered in potholes, parked cars indicate that people use the site for free parking and the clotheslines stretched between the houses hint at people squatting the buildings. The restaurant “So i Biber” and the abandoned-looking kindergarten housed in some of the former national pavilions of the historical exhibition grounds reinforce the distressing notion that what is taking place here is not only the neglect but the deliberate non-remembrance of the suffering of thousands of victims. This feeling is only partially eased by the information that the Serbian state has only recently adopted a law containing the maintenance of the historical site of the camp and the erection of a memorial and museum on the spot – a law that will hopefully unfold its symbolic meaning until the government's plans are put into place in the future.

My spirits are rising a bit when I walk out of the circle of buildings and enter the open space at the side of the Sava river. The sight of the black memorial sculpture makes it seem like there is at least one anchor point in this site of non-memory: A sturdy pillar rising against the backdrop of the city, as if it was promising that even if everything around it will be forgotten, one focal point of memory will remain. But then I think about the memorial to the victims of the wars of the 90s right on the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/18/how-holocaust-memory-was-hijacked-in-post-communist-states/> (last accessed: 26.02.2020)

other side of the river, down at the old main station – a memorial that took twelve years to be built because veterans and civil society representatives couldn't agree on the form and the message it contained<sup>2</sup>: It was recently removed overnight because of construction works and nobody knows if they will ever reinstall it.

Visiting the museum of the former concentration camp Banjica is a different experience. The first thing that catches my eye before even going there is that apparently those responsible for the website's content deem it necessary to emphasise that it was "about 24,000 prisoners, mostly Serbs, but also members of other ethnic groups" that passed through the camp.<sup>3</sup> While it is historically correct that Banjica was the Belgrade camp mostly used to intern political prisoners, it also functioned as a concentration camp for male Jews and Roma when they considered Topovske Šupe to be overcrowded. According to the guard working at the museum the exhibition dates to the mid-eighties and has been preserved since then. The adherence to the Yugoslav narrative partly explains the heavy focus on Serbian (political) victims and the fact that there is no specific mentioning of the Holocaust or the Porajmos. However, although the description on the website claims it was "amended to include recent research"<sup>4</sup> in 2001, there were no major changes made to the exhibition. Apart from the obvious shortcomings in the narrative, the exhibition is really in need of renewal: several images used lack subtitles, which is especially problematic when images of shootings and corpses lack any form of contextualisation. Jelena Subotić calls this kind of Holocaust remembrance which focuses on victims of the own nation by leaving out special mentioning of minority groups' suffering „memory appropriation“<sup>5</sup>. Memory of the Holocaust is used „to memorialise a different kind of suffering, such as suffering under communism, or suffering from ethnic violence perpetrated by other groups“. Subotić attests this way of dealing with the Holocaust to all Eastern European countries – however, when looking at her findings on the post-socialist space, one cannot help but wonder whether the approach countries without a socialist past have found has led to a more wholesome coming to terms with the past.

This leads me to a topic that naturally comes up when I look at how other countries deal with their past: that of the 'German way' of dealing with the Nazi era. Are we Germans really "World Champions in dealing with the past"<sup>6</sup>? And if we did find a good model of transforming the gruesome deeds of our ancestors into the basis of an open, polyphonic and tolerant society – will it really keep its promise of ensuring

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<sup>2</sup> See: DAVID, Lea, Mediating International and Domestic Demands. Mnemonic Battles Surrounding the Monument to the Fallen of the Wars of the 1990s in Belgrade, in: Nationalities Papers 42:4, p. 655 – 673.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mgb.org.rs/posetite/muzej-banjickog-logoran> (last accessed 26.02.2020)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mgb.org.rs/en/visit/museum-of-banjica-concentration-camp> (last accessed 02.03.2020)

<sup>5</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/18/how-holocaust-memory-was-hijacked-in-post-communist-states/> (last accessed 26.02.2020)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/weltmeister-in-vergangenheitsbewaeltigung.1005.de.html?dram:article\\_id=159484](https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/weltmeister-in-vergangenheitsbewaeltigung.1005.de.html?dram:article_id=159484) (last accessed: 28.02.2020)

that something like this will never happen again? Why then, if the sentiment of collective national guilt really became universally accepted, did people elect an extreme right-wing politician to parliament that referred to the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin saying that the Germans were “the only people in the world that have planted a monument of shame in the heart of their capital”. Why did they give their votes to another right-wing politician who compared the Nazi era to nothing but a “bird shit” in the “glorious history of the German nation”?

Words were followed by deeds and Germany was hit by several right-wing terror attacks and shootings in the last months: A conservative politician was shot after he had expressed sympathy with Merkel’s response to the refugee crisis, a right wing terrorist shot two people in his failed attempt to commit mass murder against Jews in a packed synagogue in Halle on Yom Kippur and nine people with migrant backgrounds were killed in bars in Hanau just two weeks ago. Did these horrifying attacks happen despite the German approach to deal with the Holocaust or perhaps because we failed to realise the consensus for this approach wasn’t all that universal? These are serious questions that need to be addressed in the coming months and years – not only in Germany but in all countries that have a history of collaboration in the Holocaust, both in the West and the East.

Back to Belgrade, back to forgotten sites of non-memory, back to having to fear that a shopping mall will be built on the spot of a former concentration camp. A multi-layered comparison would be necessary to find similarities and differences in the different ways of dealing with the past – however, one thing cannot be disputed: the way we deal with our national past, the amount of knowledge we have about past suffering of minorities and other marginalised groups in our country has serious implications for the way our society deals with these groups today.

Having laid out my impressions of and reflections on Holocaust remembrance and education in Serbia – or rather, the lack of it, it becomes clear that the work of grassroot and or non-governmental organisations like the CPI is incredibly valuable and its effect of placing knowledge before the broader public in a low-threshold way shouldn’t be underestimated, even more so in the absence of any state-sponsored programmes. A good example for this kind of work is their exhibition about the Holocaust in Serbia that is currently touring high schools all over Serbia and that is using, among others, cartoons to present historical sources. Activities like this indeed present a very refreshing exception to the officially subsidised narrative and a promising counteract to the omission of the subject in curricula and textbooks.

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/was-ist-los-in-erfurt-the-east-german-past-and-the-democratic-crisis-of-the-present/> (last accessed: 26.02.2020)