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The Serbian Orthodox Church's Involvement in Carrying the Memory of the Holocaust

Abstract. The Holocaust has become a globally recognized reference for suffering and has often been appropriated as a framework for (re-)understanding collective identities. This article examines the agenda of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in relation to the memory of the Holocaust in post-Milošević Serbia. It focuses on the Jasenovac Committee of the SOC and the role of its head, Bishop Jovan (Čulibrk), in the memorialization of Staro Sajmište, a distinguished place of the Holocaust in occupied Serbia. Based on primary sources encompassing Orthodox media, official statements, and interviews with mnemonic agents in the region, the author argues that the SOC has established itself as an acknowledged actor in the remembrance of the Holocaust in Serbia and beyond. Such a position allows it to point out Serbian martyrdom as part of the Holocaust imaginary, reinforce Serbian victimhood-oriented collective identity, and capitalize on the symbolic advantages of ultimate victimhood for its own regenerative ends.

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Introduction

The memory of the Holocaust has transformed significantly since the end of the Second World War. After being sidelined for almost two decades by the victorious narrative, the Holocaust surfaced to gain a place in world moral consciousness and was eventually established as a universal metaphor of suffering, and an ultimate benchmark of victimhood. The intense utilization of the Holocaust trope and commemoration practices in public agendas since the 1990s—mainly in the USA and Europe—has shown how the active engagement in the memory community of the Holocaust has been recognized as

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a touchstone of moral maturity.¹ Tony Judt has argued that in the framework of the European Union's (EU) proclaimed human rights-oriented values, Holocaust recognition and commemoration has become a convenient entry ticket to the EU.² The 'duty to remember' (*devoir de mémoire*) Holocaust victims led to the multiplication of memorial sites, historical museums, and public spaces of mourning devoted to this paradigmatic collective trauma. However, especially but not exclusively in the postcommunist countries, this rather transnational tendency intermingled—sometimes clashed—with local demands for the recognition of victimhood of groups beyond the Jews.³

The fall of communist regimes and multinational federations in 1989/91 brought about a need to redefine collective identities and adjust the national past to new political ends. This happened in the wider context of shifting national histories from stressing positive and ennobling *époques*—the glorious and victorious past—to themes of victimhood, heroic sacrifice, and final redemption.⁴ The already established performative designs of the Jewish Holocaust remembrance were often embraced as an exemplary practice for domestic needs, and its powerful and universally appealing symbolism provided the framework and rhetoric in which one's own victimhood could be articulated. National suffering thus developed into a key factor in the construction processes of collective identity, as well as a purposeful policy on the international level since the world's sympathy lies with those who are acknowledged as victims. Additionally, belonging to the memory community of victims raises the moral status of the group in question and grants a certain level of immunity to criticism and the legitimation of the group's claims and actions.⁵

¹ Aleida Assmann, *The Holocaust – A Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community*, in: Aleida Assmann/Sebastian Conrad, eds, *Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, London 2010, 97–117, 97–98. For more about political and international relations reasons for the re-emergence of the Holocaust trope, especially among the American Jewry, cf. Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry. Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, Brooklyn/NY 2000, 11–38; Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology*, Oxford 2003, 27–84.

² Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, New York/NY 2005, 803–804.

³ Florence Vatan/Marc Silberman, Introduction. *After the Violence: Memory*, in: Marc Silberman/Florence Vatan, eds, *Memory and Post-War Memorials. Confronting the Violence of the Past*, New York/NY 2013, 10; Pieter Lagrou, *Europe as a Place for Common Memories? Some Thoughts on Victimhood, Identity and Emancipation from the Past*, in: Muriel Blaive/Christian Gerbel/Thomas Lindenberger, eds, *Clashes in European Memory. The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust*, Innsbruck 2011, 281–288.

⁴ David MacDonald, *Globalizing the Holocaust. A Jewish 'Useable Past' in Serbian Nationalism*, *Portal. Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005), 1–31, 1.

⁵ Assmann, *The Holocaust – A Global Memory?*, 98; Lagrou, *Europe as a Place for Common Memories?*, 282; Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, 3; Todor Kuljić, *Post-Yugoslav Memory Culture*, Saarbrücken 2018, 95.

In the case of Serbia, the emergence of a victimhood imaginary was related to the crisis and eventual collapse of Yugoslav socialism, which deconstructed the firm system of values and created a high level of societal and psychological insecurity. In this context, the search for collective memory as a precondition of collective belonging became an urgent issue on the public agendas of Serbian political representatives, intellectual elites, and, not least, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Serbian Orthodoxy, as a historical collective form of Christianity merging religious and ethnic principles, represented a rich reservoir of collective memory and an ideal source of identity markers. Additionally, as a messianic religious tradition, Orthodoxy has a traditional focus on the remembrance of sacrifice and hope for resurrection.⁶ The SOC, therefore, established itself as one of the crucial actors involved in the continuous reconstitution and redefinition of Serbian national identity, informed by the specific chain of martyrial memory whose continuity transcends history.⁷ In this process, the SOC also found a way to break with the marginalization that had resulted from socialist Yugoslavia's religious policies, emerge from the limited zone of pastoral service, and approach the wide and highly secularized Serbian public sphere. The image of victimhood, crisis, and negativity thus served the SOC to its own ends of survival and regeneration.⁸

In the chain of memory perpetuated by the SOC, the original Battle of Kosovo (1389) followed by the Ottoman conquest of Serbian lands and the so-called new Kosovo, which refers to the genocide against Serbs committed by the Croatian fascist movement Ustasha during the Second World War, turned into decisive historical events that have served as a metaphorical microcosm of Serbian eternal victimhood.⁹ In the SOC's narrative, 'Kosovo' has been conceptualized as inseparable from the notion of biblical sacrifice and mythical martyrdom leading to the resurrection of those serving God in the Heavenly Kingdom. When referring to the suffering of ethnic (Orthodox) Serbs, the agents of the church have often instrumentalized the metaphoric nature of the Holocaust as an archetype of victimhood. Serbs and Jews

⁶ Radovan Bigović, *How to Cope with Memories? Mission of the Church in the Balkans*, *Bogoslovni Vestnik* 71, no. 1 (2011), 19–38, <http://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/File/BV/BV-71-1-Bigovic.pdf>. All internet references were accessed on 20 December 2019.

⁷ Cf., albeit with a focus on the Roman Catholic Church, Slavica Jakelić, *Collectivistic Religions. Religion, Choice, and Identity in Late Modernity*, Farnham 2010.

⁸ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor 1994, 15.

⁹ On the Kosovo myth, its transformation and use as the Serbian past, see Ivan Čolović, *Smrt na Kosovu polju. Istorija kosovskog mita*, Belgrade 2016. In my usage of the term 'genocide', I lean on the United Nations' legal definition of the term as stated in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, cf. Office of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG), *Analysis Framework*, n.p., n.d., 1, http://www.un.org/ar/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/osapg_analysis_framework.pdf.

became 'brothers in suffering', metaphysically bonded by 'similar experiences of sacrifice'. This tendency was only intensified by the armed conflicts of the 1990s, in which claims for abstract as well as real victimhood were the most powerful discursive tool in national politics and a purposeful policy at the international level. Being aware of a growing global appeal for the memorialization of the Holocaust and the universal resonance of Holocaust symbolism and vocabulary, the SOC appropriated these symbols and tropes to shift the attention of the international public to Serbian victims of the past, as well as contemporary atrocities that took place in the region. The strategy also served to relativize crimes committed in the name of Serbian nationalism in the context of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia.

While the role of the SOC in supporting a collective sense of victimhood, referring to the Holocaust as a comparative experience of transcendent suffering on the eve and during the breakup of Yugoslavia, has been relatively well documented,¹⁰ the SOC's engagement in this respect during the post-Milošević era has remained on the margins of scholarly interest.¹¹ This study contributes to the current state of knowledge on memorialization practices in the region and the instrumentalization of the Holocaust memory in general by offering a deep analysis of the SOC's ambivalent agenda, influenced by new trends in memory politics at the domestic and international levels. In the following, I firstly provide an overview of the general framework of the memorialization of the Holocaust after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, as well as the symbolic and institutional role of the SOC therein. I then examine

¹⁰ See, for example, Laslo Sekelj, Antisemitism and Jewish Identity in Serbia after the 1991 Collapse of the Yugoslav State, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Vidal Sassoon International Centre for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism 12 (1997), <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=1436>; Paul Benjamin Gordiejew, Playing with Jews in the Fields of Nations. Symbolic Contests in Former Yugoslavia, *Social Identities* 12, no. 3 (2006), 377-400; MacDonald, Globalizing the Holocaust; John-Paul Himka / Joanna Beata Michlic, eds, Bringing the Dark Past to Light. The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe, Lincoln/NE 2013, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ddr8vf.

¹¹ The work of the Jasenovac Committee of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the SOC was partially elaborated on by Jovan Byford and Lea David. Cf. Jovan Byford, When I Say 'the Holocaust', I Mean 'Jasenovac', *East European Jewish Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2007), 51-74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501670701197946>; Jovan Byford, Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization. Holocaust Memory in Serbia since the Late 1980s, in: Himka / Michlic, eds, Bringing the Dark Past to Light, 516-548; Lea David, Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory. The Serbian Case, in: Srđan M. Jovanović / Veran Stančetić, eds, History and Politics in the Western Balkans. Changes at the Turn of the Millennium, Belgrade 2013, 63-87; Lea David, Holocaust and Genocide Memorialisation Policies in the Western Balkans and Israel/Palestine, *Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1 (2017), 51-66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1265045>. The SOC does not acknowledge Byford's and David's work, considering them to be 'biased and malicious'. Personal conversation with Bishop Jovan Ćulibrk, Pakrac, 24 April 2019.

the activities of the Jasenovac Committee and the involvement of Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk) in the planned memorialization of the Staro Sajmište site in Belgrade. Staro Sajmište is a former national socialist concentration camp in the centre of Belgrade, in which almost half of the Serbian Jewry was killed and which has been neglected as a site of memory, while being marginalized in Serbian popular discourse as well.¹² I lean on primary sources that encompass official statements of the SOC, media outlets (both Orthodox and secular), as well as interviews I conducted in 2019 with protagonists of Holocaust research and education in Serbia who have been engaged in the debates on the memorialization of Staro Sajmište.

I focus on the following research questions: How does the SOC's ethnocentric preoccupation with victimhood interlace with the memory of the Jewish Holocaust? How has this interconnection been articulated by the Jasenovac Committee? How was it displayed in discussions about the future memorial complex at Staro Sajmište? What does the SOC's ambiguous engagement in the memorialization of the Holocaust reveal about its interaction with other actors of the public sphere, and about its strategies?

The Memory of the Holocaust in the Post-Milošević Era in Serbia

The SOC was a suitable and helpful actor in the national mobilization of the late 1980s and 1990s. However, its impact on Serbian public discourse was restrained by the authoritarian nature of Slobodan Milošević's regime. Only after the end of that regime, in October 2000, did the importance of religion in Serbian society increase significantly, thus strengthening the position of the SOC in an economic, political, and cultural sense. In public polls, the SOC has regularly been pointed out as the most trustworthy institution in Serbia, and such a status has been reflected by political elites' behaviour towards the church as well. The SOC could finally articulate its symbolic and normative function in a fully fledged manner. It was under the liberal and pro-European Serbian government of Zoran Djindjić that the SOC—as a traditional institution and promoter of ethnoreligious identification—was legally enabled to participate in providing an ideological framework and a value system for Serbia's state institutions, such as the armed forces and public schools. In 2001, religious education was introduced into the public schooling system as an

¹² Approximately 17,800 Jews lived in the territory of Serbia occupied by the Germans. Of these, 14,800 were killed during the occupation of 1941–44. In the Staro Sajmište concentration camp, more than 6,000 Jews were annihilated. Cf. Miško Stanišić, *Logor na Sajmištu, Ester*, website produced under the frames of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) programme 'Words into Action to Address Antisemitism', Belgrade 2016, <https://ester.rs/logor-sajmiste/>.

optional subject. At the same time, Orthodox services were gradually implemented in the armed forces.¹³ An ambivalent and often schizophrenic mixture of emphasizing 'traditional values' rooted in an ethnoreligious background represented by the church and conservative political circles on the one hand, and an officially pro-European liberal orientation of Serbian governments on the other, has become a characteristic pattern of political and cultural life in Serbia.¹⁴ Such a dichotomy between two value systems also prevails in relation to the memory of the Holocaust in Serbia and the role of the SOC in its (re-)interpretation.

In the post-Milošević period, the SOC has continued to cultivate its public image as the crucial interpreter of Serbian national history and keeper of Serbian collective memory, anchoring it in the martyrial imaginary from positions of economic, legal, and symbolic power that have become stronger in comparison to preceding times. The SOC has become an autonomous and active agent in creating the politics of memory, relating it to Serbian victimhood. As such, the SOC has been widely tolerated and often even accepted across the political and societal spectrum, while establishing an advantageous stage for its representation, promotion, legitimization, and relevance.

The analogy of Jewish and Serbian metaphysical victimhood has been preserved as a key reference point in the chain of memory advocated by Orthodox ecclesiastic figures. Arguably, in the 2000s, the SOC institutionalized its activities in this respect by establishing a special body within the church devoted to the memory of suffering in Yugoslavia during the Second World War—the Jasenovac Committee headed by the Bishop of Pakrac-Slavonia, Jovan Ćulibrk. Largely due to Bishop Jovan, the Committee's agenda included educational, research, and commemorative practices related to the memorialization of the Holocaust on the regional level. In this sphere, the SOC encountered various domestic as well as international actors and interest groups who belonged among the recognized carriers of the memory of the Holocaust. At the local level, the most determined in this field have been the Jewish com-

¹³ Milan Vukomanović, 'The Serbian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in the Aftermath of October 5, 2000,' *Politics and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2008), 237–269, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048308000199>.

¹⁴ The values of the European Union are specified in the Treaty of Lisbon, Article 1: 'The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.' Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/HR/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12007L/TXT>. Cf. Sabrina P. Ramet, 'Serbia's Corrupt Path to the Rule of Law. An Introduction,' in: Ola Listhaug/Sabrina P. Ramet/Dragana Dulić, eds, *Civic and Uncivic Values. Serbia in the Post-Milošević Era*, Budapest 2011, 3–19, 3.

munity of Serbia, public organizations such as Terraforming, the Centre for Holocaust Research and Education (CHRE), state institutions like the Museum of Genocide Victims, as well as individual scholars like Milovan Pisarri and Olga Manojlović Pintar.¹⁵ At the international level, the Holocaust Remembrance programme has been pushed to the fore by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) as well as by Jewish organizations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) in Los Angeles and the World Holocaust Remembrance Center Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.¹⁶

The memory of the Holocaust has progressively assumed an important place in Serbian policy making, as part of the country's efforts to decrease the international isolation that resulted from the wars of the 1990s, and as part of its commitment towards European integration.¹⁷ Although 'the EU memory framework', referring to 'the collection policies, resolutions and decisions by the European Commission and the European parliament that reflect and guide collective moral and political attitudes towards the past [...] is usually not part of the EU conditionality for acceding countries', the EU disseminates its practices to candidate and potential candidate countries.¹⁸ Additionally, by complying with EU memory entrepreneurship, the national political elites of such countries expressed their belonging to the moral identity of Europe. Such tendencies became particularly noticeable in the pre-accession period, when remembrance of the Holocaust began to occupy a significant place on their public agenda.

¹⁵ These two scholars have been active agents in the memorialization of the Holocaust in Serbia, (co-)organizing tours, public discussions, exhibitions, and similar endeavours. Besides publishing extensively, for example on the Roma genocide in Yugoslavia, in 2014 Milovan Pisarri was one of the founders of the CHRE. In 2018, he then founded the Centre for Public History, a civic association that promotes historical narratives in the service of the public and of critical thinking, by means of research, mapping, public guided tours, training, symposia, exhibitions, and digital media. Olga Manojlović Pintar is a researcher at the Institute for Recent History in Belgrade, and has worked primarily on memory politics and the archaeology of memory in Yugoslavia. Cf. Milovan Pisari, *Stradanje Roma u Srbiji za vreme Holokausta*, Belgrade 2014, http://www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/Stradanje_Roma_u_Srbiji_za_vreme_Holokausta.pdf; Olga Manojlović Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja, spomenici i identiteti u Srbiji 1918-1989*, Belgrade 2014. See also the websites of the CHRE, <http://cieh-chre.org/en/>; and of the Centre for Public History, <http://www.cpi.rs/en/>.

¹⁶ Lea David, *Lost in Transaction in Serbia and Croatia. Memory Content as a Trade Currency*, in: Mischa Gabowitsch, ed., *Replicating Atonement. Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities*, London 2017, 73-97, 80-81.

¹⁷ David, *Holocaust and Genocide Memorialisation Policies*, 55-56.

¹⁸ Ana Milošević/Heleen Touquet, *Unintended Consequences. The EU Memory Framework and the Politics of Memory in Serbia and Croatia*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), 382-393, 383, 385, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1489614>.

The United Nations (UN) has been a further transnational actor pursuing human rights regimes, including those related to the memory of the Holocaust as the ultimate violence. In 2005, the UN General Assembly adopted an international Memorial Day to be observed on 27 January, the day of the liberation of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. On this day, every UN member state has been obliged to commemorate the Holocaust at the state level, regardless of their own role in this context.¹⁹ However, it is the Berlin-based IHRA that has most rigorously imposed the normative standards of Holocaust remembrance on its members, committing them to the shared principles of the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust.²⁰ Serbia has been a member of the IHRA since 2011. Expectations for pursuing the transnational memory of the Holocaust and manifesting a greater sensitivity to its distinctiveness and universal importance in order to prevent human rights violations were especially high, due to the fragile postconflict setting in the region and the widely accepted 'Western' perception of Serbia as the crucial perpetrator in the wars of dissolution in former Yugoslavia. Local demands for the acknowledgement of 'righteous victims', however, frequently troubled the implementation of externally imposed 'recommendations' on how to remember the Holocaust. As Aleida Assmann has observed, the 'standardization' of education and memorialization practices related to the Holocaust is far from unproblematic, as it can lead to decontextualization and abstraction. Additionally, imposing a unified model of remembering from the outside can provoke fake compliance, or even counter-reaction.²¹

In this multivocal constellation of demands, interests, and pressures, various agents claimed different, often contradictory strategies to tackle the memorialization policies in relation to victimhood in general and the Holocaust in particular. Furthermore, these strategies were not static and consistent, but transformed, depending mostly on internal political developments. In Serbia, these were marked by the new dynamics of democratization in the years after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, and the subsequent rise of authoritarian tendencies, with Aleksandar Vučić—the leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS) and current president of Serbia—gradually assuming and eventually personifying political power.²² Over time, the heterogeneous approaches to Holocaust remembrance have been influenced by various and altering inputs from external actors, either via positions

¹⁹ David, *Holocaust and Genocide Memorialisation*, 56.

²⁰ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, *Stockholm Declaration. A Commitment Shared by All Member Countries*, Stockholm, January 2000, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/stockholm-declaration>.

²¹ Assmann, *The Holocaust – A Global Memory?*, 101, 112–114.

²² Cf. Nebojša Vladislavljević, *Uspon i pad demokratije posle petog oktobra*, Belgrade 2019.

of political power or through financial aid. I argue that the SOC—due especially to the symbolic capital embodied by Bishop Jovan, who has grown to be a central figure within the SOC dealing with the genocide against Serbs and the Jewish Holocaust—put itself in a strategically advantageous position in this multivocal field of interest in the memorialization of the Holocaust. He proved to be a skilful mediator between national and international demands. As a result, the SOC succeeded in following the normative standards of Holocaust remembrance, employing its forms, externalities, and rhetoric, while finding ways to pursue its original agenda of highlighting Serbian victimhood. Through the latter concern, the metaphysical bond between the Serbian nation and its church is made manifest.²³

The Jasenovac Committee of the SOC

In order to establish its specific position as a mediator in the above-mentioned sense, the SOC has developed a wide range of services in the fields of education, research, documentation, and commemoration related to the memory of atrocities committed against Serbs—the so-called Serbian New Martyrs—and their ‘brothers in suffering’, which refers primarily to the Jews during the Second World War. Most of these activities were put under the management of the Jasenovac Committee formed by the Holy Synod of the SOC in 2003 and chaired by Bishop Jovan.²⁴ The priority of this special institution of the SOC has been to preserve ‘the memory of the Great Martyred Jasenovac, the new Serbian Kosovo, and taking care of the Remembrance of the Newly Martyred [...] who died for Christ and the Serbian name [...] and the locations where they perished’.²⁵ In 2015, the Holy Council of the SOC officially broadened the focus of the Committee to all places of Serbian suffering—although these places often include other victims as well—in former Yugoslavia associated with the Second World War.²⁶

²³ Lea David, *Impression Management of a Contested Past. Serbia’s Evolving National Calendar*, *Memory Studies* 7, no. 4 (2014), 472–483, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698014537670>.

²⁴ Episkop Jovan. *Životopis Episkopa pakračko-slavonskog g. Jovana (Čulibrka)*, Eparhija pakračko-slavonska Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve, n.d., <http://eparhija-slavonska.com/hr/eparhija/episkop-jovan/>.

²⁵ Saopštenje za javnost Odbora za Jasenovac, website of the SOC, 19 July 2005, <http://www.spc.rs/old/Vesti-2005/07/19-7-05-c.html#jas>.

²⁶ Based on the report from the meeting of the Committee held in December 2018, it seems that the Committee does not limit its activities to the Second World War, but deals or at least officially supports initiatives that also focus on other historical periods, such as Serbian suffering under the Ottomans, Austro-Hungarians, Yugoslav communists, and finally atrocities against Serbs in the 1990s. Cf. Stefan Radojković, *Sednica Odbora za Jasenovac u Manastiru Jasenovac*, *Pravoslavlje* 1245 (February 2019), 30–31.

Bishop Jovan supported the decision to enlarge the Committee's field of interest, arguing that all sites of suffering need to be liturgically remembered, and adding that only by remembering them in this way could one avoid victims provoking hatred against the perpetrator.²⁷ He further explained why the liturgical remembrance of martyrdom is one of the crucial agendas of the Church:

'Martyrs have a special place among saints since the Church found in them what it was praying for, the Kingdom of Heaven. The first churches were built on graves of martyrs, their bones have been embedded in altars. Martyrdom and Remembrance—that is the way of our existence.'²⁸

Since it is essential for all Christian churches to achieve a catharsis of painful memories through liturgical ceremonies, commemorating the Serbian genocide victims of the Ustasha-led Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH)—who indisputably merit a prominent place in public memory, including that of a liturgical kind—should not be perceived as an unexpected priority of the SOC.²⁹ This disposition of liturgical capacity, however, limits commemorations to Orthodox believers, while neglecting victims of different religions and non-believers.

The Committee therefore also became involved in initiatives that transcended the liturgical plain of remembrance. These encompass training of the Committee's collaborators in Yad Vashem and participation in international conferences on Holocaust education in 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010, as well as regular seminars for Orthodox theology professors and teachers of Orthodox religious education in Serbian public schools on how to teach students about Jasenovac and the Holocaust.³⁰ The Committee sought to promote the topic of Jasenovac in realms such as the media, museums, and research, while also launching an educative and informative website, although this has not been updated since 2013.³¹ Finally, the Committee has offered consultations for scholars at domestic and international institutions who work on sites of suffering in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.³²

²⁷ Drago Pilsel, Jovan Ćulibrk: O Stepincu ne sa stajališta komunističke optužnice, Eparhija pakračko-slavonska Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve, 28 February 2016, <http://eparhija-slavonska.com/vijesti/jovan-culibrk-o-stepincu-ne-sa-stajalista-komunisticke-optuznice/>.

²⁸ Jovan Ćulibrk, Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva i Jasenovac, Projekat Rastko, 2002, https://www.rastko.rs/rastko-bl/istorija/jasenovac/jculibrk-spc-jasenovac_1.html.

²⁹ Byford, When I Say 'the Holocaust', I Mean 'Jasenovac', 61.

³⁰ Episkop Jovan.

³¹ Cf. the website at <http://www.jasenovac-info.com>. The Committee has been active on Facebook, however, cf. the page 'Jasenovac-Info. Odbor za Jasenovac SAS SPC', <https://www.facebook.com/JasenovacSPC/>. Bishop Jovan affirmed that the Committee planned to renew the website. Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

³² Episkop Jovan.

By looking closely at the Committee's agenda, one can argue that despite its authentic focus on Jasenovac and Serbian martyrdom in the NDH, the Committee has to be understood as an institution committed to the commemorative, educational, and research activities related to the victims of genocidal policies during the Second World War in general. This dimension of the Committee's work is legitimized primarily because of Bishop Jovan's educational background, especially his postgraduate studies in Jewish culture at the Yad Vashem Memorial Institute and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Recognized by the SOC as the expert within the church on the Second World War and the Jewish Holocaust in Yugoslavia, his personal and financial ties in Israel have played both a symbolic and a pragmatic role, which in turn has enabled the SOC to claim and pursue the mentioned initiatives of remembrance that went beyond the liturgical ones.³³

Accordingly, the Committee has been officially following the pan-European development of historical consciousness, highlighting primarily the legacy of the Holocaust. In 2005, it supported the Stockholm Declaration of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), which in 2013 was renamed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), designated to help create a common memory reinforcing the values of European civil society and protection of minority rights.³⁴ The Committee supposedly advised the Ministries of Education and Information of Serbia and the Republika Srpska of Bosnia-Herzegovina to join the declaration since it 'provides plenty of possibilities for the tragedy of the Second World War to be properly and accurately introduced and transmitted to future generations'.³⁵ The SOC's special organ put considerable effort into addressing the calls for creating a supranational memory community of the Holocaust among Serbs. In the words of Bishop Jovan, it appealed for Serbia to finally participate in 'international streams of memorialization of atrocities committed during the Second World War'.³⁶

The documents published on the website of the Jasenovac Committee and its official statements available on the SOC's website have, however, remained dominated by Serbian ethnocentrism, repeatedly emphasizing the comparable martyrdoms of Serbs and Jews. Although the Roma genocide was mentioned in most documents, an obvious hierarchy among the victims as 'broth-

³³ Cf. Jovan Ćulibrk, *Historiography of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia*, Belgrade 2014.

³⁴ Assmann, *The Holocaust - A Global Memory?*, 102-103.

³⁵ Saopštenje za javnost Odbora za Jasenovac, 19 July 2005. As mentioned, Serbia became a permanent member of the IHRA in 2011, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina has the status of observer country.

³⁶ Interview with Bishop Jovan Ćulibrk led by Ana Tomašević, *Sedmica, RTS-Radio Beograd 1*, 27 January 2019, <http://www.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/23/radio-beograd-1/3398633/sedmica.html>.

ers in suffering' was maintained. Bishop Jovan, for example, wrote that, 'while there is a strong sentiment towards the co-suffering of Gypsies, the bond with the Jews became a metaphysical one'.³⁷ When referring to the Jewish Holocaust in Yugoslavia, the Jasenovac camp has continuously been at the centre of attention, even when discussing other sites of suffering. In almost all of his presentations and interviews, Bishop Jovan highlights that 'every [Serbian] story of the Holocaust begins in Jasenovac'.³⁸ Additionally, he claims that Jasenovac was the worst of all camps and extermination sites in the Second World War, stressing the brutality of the Ustasha, who turned Jasenovac into 'hell on earth', even in comparison to the national socialist 'death industry'.³⁹ In this way, the Committee postulates the uniqueness of Ustasha genocidal policy, primarily targeting Serbs as the most numerous victims, rather than the ideological unprecedentedness and scale of the Holocaust.

Importantly, the Committee has not explicitly expressed its position on the Serbian quisling regime of National Salvation led by Milan Nedić, the local collaborators and bystanders, or their direct or indirect role in the destruction of Serbian Jewry and persecution of antifascists.⁴⁰ Bishop Jovan does not challenge the quisling nature of Milan Nedić's government of National Salvation, since it is a historical fact. Nevertheless, he refrains from acknowledging the extent to which Nedić acted voluntarily, that is, if he was a 'marionette' of the Nazis, or not, and what his political power amounted to, claiming that all these nuances were yet to be revealed by historians, a statement that, given the extensive literature on the subject, can only be understood if read in the context of Serbia's efforts at rehabilitating those who in Tito's Yugoslavia had been treated as traitors.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Committee did not officially react to initiatives to rehabilitate Milan Nedić, starting in 2015 as part of the men-

³⁷ Jovan Ćulibrk, *The Remembrance of the Common Suffering as the Path to the Future*, website of the Jasenovac Committee, n.d., <http://www.jasenovac-info.com/clanci/?lang=en&s=a1>.

³⁸ Tomašević, *Sedmica*.

³⁹ Ćulibrk, *The Remembrance of the Common Suffering*; Tomašević, *Sedmica*; Jovan Ćulibrk, *Jewish Medical Workers. From Participants in the Yugoslav Resistance to Historiographers of the Holocaust*, paper given at the second international conference on the 'Medicine in the Holocaust and Beyond', Western Galilee College, Akko, 7-11 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34rfVqZNYM>.

⁴⁰ On collaboration in Serbia, cf. Olivera Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina. Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941-1944*, Belgrade 2006.

⁴¹ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk; cf. Darko Zlojutro, *Čeka nas nova seoba Srba!*, *Alo.rs*, 5 June 2018, <http://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/ceka-nas-nova-seoba-srba/162970/vest>. Cf. Jelena Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia. Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution*, Abingdon 2019; Milan Ristović, *The German Occupation Regimes in Southeastern Europe as a Research Problem in Yugoslav and Serbian Historiography*, *Südosteuropa. Journal of Politics and Society* 65, no. 2 (2017), thematic issue 'The Second World War in Historiography and Public Debate', 221-238, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2017-0016>.

tioned broader tendency to revise the history of the Second World War. The latter was translated into legislative terms with changes in the Law on Veterans, War Invalids, and Members of their Families adopted in 2004, which gave the same rights to members of the Yugoslav army and the Chetnik movement as to Tito's partisans. This was followed by the Rehabilitation Acts of 2006 and 2011, which introduced the possibility of legal rehabilitation in court for those sentenced, executed, or deprived of any rights or property for political or ideological reasons.⁴² Except for sharing two posts on Facebook in 2017 and 2018 that discussed the arguments of historians who testified against Nedić's rehabilitation, the Committee as well as Bishop Jovan remained silent.⁴³

Finally, neither the Committee nor Bishop Jovan has ever addressed the issue of antisemitism within the SOC, symbolically embodied by the prominent Serbian theologian Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956). Velimirović's works and public performances feature evident patterns of Christian anti-Judaism and secular antisemitism. Moreover, in the 1930s, he was associated with the clerical fascist movement *Zbor* and its leader Dimitrije Ljotić, a close collaborator with the German occupiers during the Second World War. For example, in his work *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window (from the Camp in Dachau)*, Velimirović wrote: 'All modern European ideas were invented by Jews who crucified Christ: democracy, strikes, socialism, atheism, tolerance of all religions, pacifism, revolution, communism. They all come from Jews, or rather their father, the Devil.'⁴⁴ His political orientation and stance towards the Jewish population and Judaism in general, however, did not prevent Velimirović from comparing the symbolism of Jewish misfortune to the historical sufferings of the Serbian nation. In a book written in 1941/42, but first published only in 1984, *The Serbian Nation as a Theodule*, Velimirović wrote that 'the Serbian nation has always been the authentic Theodule, that is the servant of God. Hence, in human history, it has been scourged by destiny much more than any other nation except the Jewish one.'⁴⁵

⁴² Jelena Đureinović, 'To Each Their Own. Politics of Memory, Narratives about Victims of Communism and Perspectives on Bleiburg in Contemporary Serbia', *Politička Misao* 55 (2018), 89–110, 96, <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.55.2.05>.

⁴³ Cf. the Facebook page 'Jasenovac-Info: Odbor za Jasenovac SAS SPC', <https://www.facebook.com/JasenovacSPC/>.

⁴⁴ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Reči srpskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor (iz logora Dahau)*, Belgrade 2000, 194. Cf. Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism. Post-Communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović*, Budapest 2008; Jovan Byford, 'Distinguishing 'Anti-Judaism' from 'Antisemitism'. Recent Championing of Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović', *Religion, State and Society* 34, no. 1 (2006), 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490500459867>.

⁴⁵ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Nacionalizam Svetog Save, Srbski narod kao Teodul*, Belgrade 2002, 28.

In socialist Yugoslavia, Velimirović's thoughts were marginalized, only to become popular in the 1980s, firstly within the ranks of the SOC and consequently in broader Serbian society as well. In particular, young bishops who were referred to as *justinovci*—followers of Velimirović's disciple, the important Orthodox theologian Justin Popović—engaged in the rehabilitation and popularization of Velimirović. Bishop Jovan contributed to these efforts as well. In 2001, he initiated and edited the album 'Songs above East and West' (*Pesme iznad istoka i zapada*), featuring songs recorded by Serbian rock bands based on the poems of Velimirović.⁴⁶ The SOC has refused to confront Velimirović's controversial ideas and public engagements, deciding rather to ignore or deny them. No attempt was made to explain the problematic passages of his complex work in the wider context of the intellectual horizons and political environment of his contemporaries. Instead, Velimirović was canonized in 2003. This act officially completed the decade-long effort of the SOC to present him as one of the greatest ecclesiastic figures in Serbian history.

Similarly, while the Jasenovac Committee also avoided critically addressing the highly contentious aspects of Velimirović's work, it has nevertheless frequently referred to his words—which encourage Serbs to remember and celebrate the Martyrs of Jasenovac, but never to seek revenge—as guidelines for its activities.⁴⁷ The Committee indirectly joined the harsh verbal attacks on Serbian scholar Predrag Ilić and his book *The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Mystery of Dachau*⁴⁸—challenging the dominant church narrative of Bishop Nikolaj and his imprisonment in Dachau—by publishing a negative reaction to Ilić's work on its website. The review was written by retired bishop Atanasije Jevtić in a conspicuous and highly emotional style.⁴⁹ During an interview, Bishop Jovan also condemned the book *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism. Post-Communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović* by Jovan Byford, whom he accused of defamation of Saint Nikolaj's character, and concluded that many Serbian as well as foreign researchers and journalists merely parrot and intentionally decontextualize excerpts from Velimirović's book *Words*

⁴⁶ Episkop Jovan.

⁴⁷ Radojković, Sednica Odbora za Jasenovac u Manastiru Jasenovac, 30. Velimirović's words that are referred to come from his text 'The Oldest Inquisition' written in 1954 and published in the book Atanasije Jevtić, Velikomučenički Jasenovac poslije Jasenovca, Belgrade, Valjevo 1995, 336-337.

⁴⁸ Predrag Ilić, *Srpska pravoslavna crkva i tajna Dahaua*, Belgrade 2006.

⁴⁹ Atanasije Jevtić, Beše li konclager DAHAU u Evropi – 'milosrdni anđeo', website of the Jasenovac Committee, n.d., http://www.jasenovac-info.com/biblioteka/Vladika-Atanasije-o-Ilicevoj-knjizi_1.html. For a summary of the reactions to Ilić's book, cf. Zagorka Uskoković, *Hajka na Predraga Ilića zbog njegove knjige 'Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva i Tajna Dahaua'*, 8 February 2014, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/205702164/Hajka-na-Predraga-Ili%C4%87a-zbog-njegove-knjige-Srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-i-tajna-Dahaua>.

to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window, which, he claimed, should not be employed at all without an expert commentary given by the SOC.⁵⁰

Despite these problematic features and the overall ambivalence of the Committee's framing of the Holocaust, regularly pointed out by scholars such as Jovan Byford and Lea David,⁵¹ its research and educational function have been widely accepted and acknowledged both verbally and financially by political elites in Serbia and the Republika Srpska of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of the events organized by the Committee in this respect have officially been funded and promoted by Serbia's Ministry of Culture and Information as well as other public institutions.⁵² The details of financial flows between state actors and the Committee have, however, been inaccessible to the public. It is thus impossible to draw a more general picture of the Committee's economic activities.

The Committee also established close cooperation with the most important state-sponsored research and educational institution on the topic in the post-Yugoslav space, the Museum of Genocide Victims in Belgrade. The Museum was founded in 1992 to 'keep constant memory on the victims of the genocide over Serbian people [...] and may be engaged in collecting, processing and using information about the genocide of Jews, Roma and members of other peoples and ethnic minorities'.⁵³ During the 1990s—within the context of the memory war between Serbia and Croatia over the interpretation of the Second World War in Yugoslavia—the Museum emphasized almost exclusively Serbian victimization in the NDH. Under the directorship of Milan Bulajić (in function from 1992 to 2003), the Museum continued to claim Serbian victimhood, even at the cost of historical inaccuracies, and insisted on the similarity of Serbian and Jewish experiences in that period. Despite the Museum's various transformations since 2003, and gradual distancing from its previous unprofessional ethnocentric practices, there has been little reflection on the institution's problematic beginnings.⁵⁴ The link between the Jasenovac Committee and the Museum has been reinforced as the two organizations became personally interconnected. In 2014, Bishop Jovan was named chairman of the Museum's board, while Stefan Radojković, the secretary of

⁵⁰ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

⁵¹ Byford, *When I Say 'the Holocaust', I Mean 'Jasenovac'*; David, *Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory*.

⁵² For more information on known finances provided by Serbian political structures to the Jasenovac Committee, see David, *Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory*, 74-75.

⁵³ *Zakon o osnivanju Muzeja žrtava genocida*, as quoted in Aleksandar Ignjatović/Olga Manojlović Pintar, *National Museums in Serbia. A Story of Intertwined Identities*, in: Peter Aronsson/Gabriella Elgenius, eds, *Building National Museums in Europe, 1750-2010*, Linköping 2011, 779-815, 803.

⁵⁴ Byford, *When I Say 'the Holocaust', I Mean 'Jasenovac'*, 56-61; Ignjatović/Pintar, *National Museums in Serbia*, 803-804.

the Jasenovac Committee, assumed the position of research associate at the Museum. The Museum's current director, Veljko Djurić Mišina, regularly participates in events organized by the Committee.⁵⁵ The two institutions, supported by the Republika Srpska of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, also curate the 'biggest project of Serbian historiography'—an encyclopaedia of the genocide of Serbs, Jews, and Roma.⁵⁶

Besides gaining recognition from domestic political elites and collaborating with national institutions, the Committee also managed to forge cooperation with pivotal international organizations, such as Yad Vashem and the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, known for keeping the Holocaust memory alive and promoting Holocaust education in Israel, the USA, and beyond. The Committee has also been successful in attracting international attention to its projects. In 2005, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) acknowledged the Committee's activities as examples of good practice for commemorating the Holocaust.⁵⁷ As is obvious, the overall positive assessment of the Committee and the recognition by organizations such as the OSCE and Yad Vashem of Bishop Jovan's personal engagement in carrying the memory of the Holocaust in the region have mostly been based on rather superficial screenings of the Committee's practices. This insufficient insight into the Committee's ambivalent agenda was partially due to an inadequate understanding of the local context by the external actors. Additionally, what is at play here is the mentioned general deficiency of standardization and decontextualization of transnational memory politics. This approach has, on the one hand, been limiting the memory of the Holocaust to an abstract set of forms, while on the other enabling an extensive accumulation of relatable content. The introduction of such a 'set of forms' into political discourse and its performative practices may raise the moral profile of a country, while at the same time providing a handy umbrella to cover quite different local agendas—which emphasize or marginalize other parts of collective memory.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Sednica Odbora za Jasenovac Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora Srpske Pravoslavne crkve, Jasenovac, 27 December 2018, Muzej žrtava genocida, <http://arhiva.muzejgenocida.rs/index.php/85-novosti/534-седница-одбора-за-јасеновац-светог-архијерејског-сабора-српске-православне-цркве-јасеновац-27-децембар-2018-године>.

⁵⁶ Veljko Zelković, Veljko Đurić Mišina, direktor Muzeja Žrtava Genocida u Beogradu: 'U Hrvatskoj pokušavaju da "uljepšaju" NDH', *Glas Srpske*, 27 September 2018, https://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Veljko-Djuric-Misina-direktor-Muzeja-zrtava-genocida-u-Beogradu-U-Hrvatskoj-pokusavaju-da-uljepsaju-NDH/lat/270421.html; Simposion 'Novomučenici: poliperspektiva IV', Mitropolija zagrebačko-ljubljanska, http://mitropolija-zagrebacka.org/simposion_novomucenici_poliperspektiva_4/.

⁵⁷ David, Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory, 71.

⁵⁸ Assmann, The Holocaust – A Global Memory?

Although not cooperating directly with the Jasenovac Committee, various non-state organizations dealing with Holocaust memory and education in Serbia, including the CHRE and Terraforming, recognize Bishop Jovan as a skilful and experienced authority in the field.⁵⁹ Furthermore, some figures from Serbian urban intellectual circles also appreciate Bishop Jovan and his role in the memorialization of the Holocaust, and consider him detached from both the Jasenovac Committee and the SOC.⁶⁰ The positive image of Bishop Jovan—rather surprising considering his ethnocentrism and manifestations of radical Serbian nationalism in the context of the Yugoslav wars—among liberal intellectuals has to be seen as a result of their pragmatic reasoning, and the perception of him as a resourceful mediator.⁶¹ Unlike the SOC, which has a broad societal appeal, the above-mentioned individual and collective mnemonic agents operate in a decentralized and economically vulnerable arena, confined mostly to the liberal urban milieu. Similarly, local Jewish communities are well aware of Bishop Jovan's original agenda, the promotion of Serbian victimhood, as well as his problematic stance on Nikolaj Velimirović and the antisemitism within the SOC in general. Yet they too had to accept his influential position, given that it was acknowledged by the Serbian political elites and transnational organizations like Yad Vashem and the IHRA (Bishop Jovan is a member of the Serbian delegation to the latter).⁶²

The SOC's ambiguous discursive approach to Holocaust remembrance—enforced primarily by the Jasenovac Committee and Bishop Jovan—became especially problematic in relation to research and education on Jewish victims from occupied Serbia, their commemorations, and the cultivation of associated sites of memory. This gained relevance in connection to sites of ultimate Jewish suffering, the concentration camps at Staro Sajmište and Topovske Šupe, which have so far been largely disregarded by Serbian political elites and marginalized in the Serbian public sphere, despite the fact that they have traditionally occupied a central place in the memory of the local Jewish community, and have gradually attracted the interest of a wide array of actors—

⁵⁹ E-mail correspondence with Nikola Radić Lucati, one of the founders of the CHRE, 10 April 2019; and Miško Stanišić, director of Terraforming, 17 April 2019.

⁶⁰ Skype interview with Milena Dragičević Šešić, professor of Cultural Policy and Cultural Management at the University of Arts in Belgrade and a member of the Commission for Staro Sajmište, 11 April 2019.

⁶¹ Bishop Jovan (back then Hierodeacon) was one of the editors of and contributors to a 1996 book that primarily aimed at justifying the Serbian side in the conflict in Yugoslavia from a theological-philosophical perspective. Besides representatives of the SOC, one of the authors was Radovan Karadžić, political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), cf. Radoš M. Mladenović/Jovan Čulibrk, eds, *The Lamb of God and the Beast from the Abyss. Philosophy of War*, Cetinje 1996, <https://www.rastko.rs/filosofija/jagnje/summaries.html>.

⁶² David, *Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory*, 80–81.

internal and external as well as governmental and non-governmental—involved in the memorialization of the Holocaust in the region.

The question of how to deal with these neglected sites, and in which way to pursue their memorialization, has been one of the most disputed points in the politics of memory related to the Holocaust in Serbia. It exposed the limits and frequently conflictual character of the various political agendas. Namely, unlike the sites of suffering outside the borders of occupied Serbia, such as Jasenovac, in the cases of Staro Sajmište and Topovske Šupe, the distinction between rather abstract categories of genocide victims and perpetrators as juxtaposed ethnic groups has obviously been blurred. Here the indirect but active participation of local collaborators, as well as the structural presence and involvement of the Serbian quisling administration in the extermination of the Serbian Jewry, cannot easily be avoided discursively. Neither can the systematic persecution of antifascists, who were mostly ethnic Serbs.

The Commission for Staro Sajmište

The concentration camps Topovske Šupe and Staro Sajmište, both situated in the centre of Belgrade, initially served the German occupiers for 'solving the Jewish question' in Serbia. To this aim, around six thousand Jewish men and more than one thousand Roma were imprisoned in the camp Topovske Šupe (sometimes called the 'Jewish camp Belgrade') and executed by Wehrmacht soldiers during the autumn of 1941.⁶³ Similarly, the former fairground Sajmište, opened in 1937 as a symbol of Yugoslav modernity, was transformed into the 'Jewish Camp Zemun' (*Judenlager Semlin*) in December 1941. Until May 1942, more than six thousand Jewish women, children, and elderly were systematically annihilated in a special gas van (*dušegupka*). After the proclamation of Serbia as 'Jew free' (*judenfrei*), Sajmište served as a concentration camp (*Anhaltelager Semlin*) mainly for political prisoners, most of them Serbs. Almost one third of the 32,000 prisoners died from hunger, illnesses, or torture by the guards; others were sent to forced labour camps in Germany and Norway.⁶⁴ Both Belgrade camps were managed by Nazi officials. However, police forces of the Serbian quisling government and local fascists were actively involved in registering and capturing Serbian Jews, thus providing the Nazi administration with logistics for the implementation of the Holocaust in Serbia.⁶⁵

⁶³ Rena Rädle/Milovan Pisarri, eds, *Mesta stradanja i antifašističke borbe u Beogradu 1941-44. Priručnik za čitanje grada*, Belgrade 2013, 160-161.

⁶⁴ Jovan Byford, *Staro Sajmište. Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja*, Belgrade 2011, 31-53; Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na beogradskom Sajmištu*, Belgrade 1992, 15.

⁶⁵ Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina*, 42.

After the end of the Second World War, these sites went through various transformations and served different purposes—Staro Sajmište was used as an accommodation facility for construction workers and socio-economically disadvantaged families, as art colonies, and as a space for commercial activity. Topovske Šupe served as a storage facility for the Yugoslav People's Army, only to become, after 1990, an abandoned ruin and a location for a planned shopping mall. None of these functions corresponded to the local, and in fact universal historical significance of these places. As sites of memory, they went from neglect in the socialist period to instrumentalization in the turmoil of competing nationalisms during the 1990s, and since then once again to neglect and marginalization.⁶⁶

In 2006, Topovske Šupe received its first, modest memorial plaque. It was unveiled on International Holocaust Remembrance Day (27 January), which Serbia, as a UN member state, was *de facto* obliged to commemorate. Further memorialization and transformation of the place has remained on the margins of public interest as well as political and expert circles, and has been discussed only in relation to the conceptual solutions put forth for Staro Sajmište. The future fate of the latter has drawn considerable attention in the last decade, as various actors, including scholars, the non-governmental sector, and individual politicians, started to articulate their initiatives and plans for its development. Nevertheless, there has been insufficient understanding between these actors on the form and central function of Sajmište as a site of memory, as well as on which aspects of its past should be embraced and emphasized. The proposals ranged from pointing out the urbanistic-architectural significance of prewar Sajmište, its role as the most important national socialist concentration camp in occupied Serbia, and its symbolic significance in the alternative cultural policies of socialist Yugoslavia, as represented by the art colonies established there during the 1950s. A proposal to combine the three aspects of Sajmište's history was introduced at the exhibition 'Old Belgrade Fairground 3+1' held in April 2006, which was also the first important event related to Sajmište's future memorialization. It was initiated mainly by Darko Tatić, professor at the Faculty of Drama Arts at Belgrade University, and son of Rajko Tatić, one of the three architects who designed the Sajmište in 1937.⁶⁷ Between 2007 and 2009, the media company B92 and the head of its Board of Managers, Veran Matić, initiated a campaign proposing a Museum of Tolerance, an

⁶⁶ Milena Dragičević Šešić/Liljana Rogač Mijatović, *Od sporne prošlosti do zanemarene sadašnjosti. Kulturna politika sećanja beogradskog Starog Sajmišta*, Centar za Kulturno Dekontaminaciju, Protiv Zaborava, Zidne Novine, n.d., <http://www.protivzaborava.com/wallpaper/od-sporne-proslosti-do-zanemarene-sadasnjosti-kulturna-politika-secanja-beogradskog-starog-sajmista/>.

⁶⁷ Darko Tatić, ed, *Beogradsko staro sajmište 3+1*, Belgrade 2008; cf. Byford, *Staro Sajmište*, 192-193.

establishment promoting human rights and multiethnic dialogue. At the level of the municipality, Željko Ožegović, mayor of New Belgrade and member of the Belgrade City Council, actively advocated for reconstruction and revitalization of Staro Sajmište, which would then serve as a memorial and educational centre. In 2013, the Belgrade Committee for Culture established the Commission for Staro Sajmište, confirmed by the mayor of Belgrade Dragan Djilas, and authorized to draft a programme for the site.⁶⁸ However, none of these initiatives was successful in practice, or even known to the broader public, thus revealing the lack of political will, as well as the indifference of Serbian citizens to the neglect of sites of the Holocaust and mass atrocities in the very centre of their capital.⁶⁹

Since these sites also played a marginal role in the SOC's narrative on the Second World War, Orthodox ecclesiastic figures did not pay much attention either. The SOC never released an official statement related to Topovske Šupe and Staro Sajmište, or the Holocaust in occupied Serbia in general. *Pravoslavlje*, the central periodical of the Serbian Patriarchate, has regularly contributed to the genocide debate, but focused mostly on Jasenovac and other places of suffering in the NDH.⁷⁰ The journal's contributors have frequently employed the Holocaust trope as a means to stress the bond between the Jewish and Serbian nations, associating it with their shared martyrial fate, which only strengthened their 'ever good' relations.⁷¹ Yet no article dealing specifically with Staro Sajmište or Topovske Šupe was published in *Pravoslavlje* between 2000 and 2016. In this sense, the future of these sites was not a focus of the Jasenovac Committee either. This changed, however, when the Committee officially broadened its activities beyond the NDH in 2016, and more importantly through the contributions of Bishop Jovan, who became the new chair-

⁶⁸ Members of this Commission, led by Milena Dragičević Šešić, were the historians Branka Prpa, Milan Koljanin, Milan Ristović, Olga Manojlović Pintar, and Jovan Byford, the art historians Irina Subotić and Nikola Šuica, architect Zoran Đukanović, conservator Aleksandra Fulgosi, economist Miodrag Vujošević, media expert Veran Matić, representative of the Jewish Community Ruben Fuchs, politician Željko Ožegović, and artist Rena Rädle.

⁶⁹ Dragičević Šešić/Rogač Mijatović, *Od sporne prošlosti do zanemarene sadašnjosti*; Rena Jeremić Rädle, *Remembrance in Transition. The Sajmište Concentration Camp in the Official Politics of Memory of Yugoslavia and Serbia*, Cultures of History Forum, 25 October 2015, DOI 10.25626/0045.

⁷⁰ *Pravoslavlje* has a circulation of only 6,000 copies. Still, being the journal of the Patriarchate, it reflects the issues relevant for the whole SOC. E-mail correspondence with the Subscription Service of the Informational-Publishing Institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 15 April 2019.

⁷¹ Karin Hofmeisterová, *The Picture of Jews in the Serbian Orthodox Church's Narrative of the Holocaust*, in: Dubravka Valić Nedeljković/Dinko Gruhonjić, eds, *Populizam, Izbeglička Kriza, Religija, Mediji*, Novi Sad 2017, 162-177, 170-173.

man of the Belgrade Commission for Staro Sajmište and one of the most visible public figures in relation to the site's development.

After the municipal elections in 2014, in which the Serbian Progressive Party acquired the majority of votes, the discussion on the memorialization of Staro Sajmište shifted again to Serbian ethnocentrism, and the idea of moving the Museum of Genocide Victims to Sajmište, which had been popular in the 1990s, was re-initiated. The Belgrade leadership declined the proposal drafted by the previous Commission, based mainly on the research and arguments of Jovan Byford.⁷² Subsequently, the Commission was restructured with Bishop Jovan as its head, who maintained that the first Commission had not delivered sufficient results and that its focus had been too narrow.⁷³ In practice, this meant the new Commission chaired by him was expected to emphasize Serbian victims and to embrace the victimhood theme in a broader manner. The members of the previous Commission were invited to continue their work within the new framework and under the new chairman. Only four of them—Milena Dragičević Šešić, Milan Koljanin, Veran Matić, and Nikola Šuica—did so. According to Dragičević Šešić, the rest decided to leave the Commission not because of the new head, Bishop Jovan, but rather the new political leadership at the municipal level.⁷⁴ While the city authorities were supposed to deal with the complicated property issues at the site, the Commission was given the task of preparing a new draft of the programme for the future memorial establishment.⁷⁵

Since then, there has not been a single official document issued by the Commission that is available to the public. Most of the information about the Commission's vision and progress on site has come from Bishop Jovan. In media interviews, he has repeatedly emphasized that the complex history of Staro Sajmište, including its ultimate role in the annihilation of the Serbian Jewry, has to be addressed by the forthcoming mnemonic institution itself, while also adding that Sajmište should not be detached from Jasenovac and other places of suffering in Yugoslavia.⁷⁶ In this way, Staro Sajmište could become a Serbian

⁷² Dragičević Šešić / Rogač Mijatović, *Od sporne prošlosti do zanemarene sadašnjosti*.

⁷³ Personal conversation with Čulibrk.

⁷⁴ Skype interview with Dragičević Šešić.

⁷⁵ Property issues concerning the artists' colony were already solved in February 2016, as the central tower was vacated, city manager Goran Vesić stated. Staro Sajmište više nikada neće biti isto. Rekonstruisanje nekadašnjeg logora počinje sledeće godine, *Telegraf*, 26 February 2016, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/2017608-staro-sajmiste-vise-nikada-nece-biti-isto-rekonstruisanje-nekadasnjeg-logora-pocinje-sledece-godine>. Nothing, however, has happened since then and a Roma family even settled in part of the tower in the meantime. I sent several requests for information on the city's activities in this respect but I have not received any response.

⁷⁶ Veljko Djurić Mišina, director of the Museum of Genocide Victims, agreed with Bishop Jovan in this respect and claimed that Staro Sajmište cannot be separated not only from

‘Yad Vashem’, the Israeli institution which has been seen by Bishop Jovan as an example to be followed.⁷⁷

Similar to Yad Vashem on a global level, the memorial site should develop into a leading regional organization for the education and preservation of the memory of genocide victims during the Second World War in Yugoslavia. As many critiques claim, the memorial complex at Staro Sajmište is now intended to serve primarily as a substitute for Jasenovac, which, being located in Croatia, cannot be controlled by Serbian institutions. Also, the exhibition at the Jasenovac memorial site has been criticized for distorting the past by sidelining Serbian suffering and decontextualizing the role of the Ustasha movement.⁷⁸ Besides the problematic nature of the exhibition, the municipal manager of Belgrade, Goran Vesić, claims that ‘the memorial site at Jasenovac is also too small to commemorate so many victims, and therefore, Staro Sajmište should become the central place for the memorialization of the victims of the Second World War’.⁷⁹

In an interview on the issue of Staro Sajmište released in January 2019, Bishop Jovan once again confirmed these aspirations: ‘There will be the museum of the Holocaust, the museum of Porajmos and everything, but mostly and primarily, it will be the Republic of Serbia’s memorial for the Second World War and the great suffering of the Serbian nation.’⁸⁰ He explained that the reasons for including the Museum of Serbian Suffering during the Second World War in Yugoslavia in the plans for the Sajmište memorial complex were pragmatic. He believes that without stressing the Serbian victims of genocide (in the NDH), the Sajmište memorial—particularly the Museum of the Holocaust—would remain deficient and marginal in public awareness. Additionally, Serbian society, which, according to Bishop Jovan, has been deprived of sufficient recognition of Serbian victims during the Second World War, could see

Jasenovac, but also Kozara and other places of Serbian suffering. Vladika Jovan (Ćulibrk) govorio za ‘Sedmicu’ o logoru Sajmište, *Radio Svetigora*, 8 February 2018, <https://svetigora.com/vladika-jovan-culibrk-govorio-za-sedmicu-o-logoru-sajmiste/>.

⁷⁷ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

⁷⁸ Ljiljana Radonić, Univerzalizacija holokausta na primjeru hrvatske politike prošlosti i spomen-područja Jasenovac, *Suvremene teme. Međunarodni časopis za društvene i humanističke znanosti* 3, no. 1 (2010), 53–62, 56–58; Ljiljana Radonić, Slovak and Croatian Invocation of Europe. The Museum of the Slovak National Uprising and the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 3 (2014), 489–507, 497–502.

⁷⁹ Goran Vesić tokom posete manastiru Jasenovac potvrdio: Izrađen Nacrt zakona o Starom Sajmištu, *Srbija Danas*, 23 September 2017, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/beograd/goran-vesic-potvrdio-izraden-nacrt-zakona-o-starom-sajmistu-2017-09-23>.

⁸⁰ Tomašević, Sedmica. The term ‘Porajmos’ or ‘Samudaripen’ refers to the genocide and persecution of the Roma and Sinti population during the Second World War. On the conceptual definitions of the Romani genocide, cf. Ilse About / Anna Abakunova, *The Genocide and Persecution of Roma and Sinti. Bibliography and Historiographical Review*, Berlin 2016.

a counteraction sparked, that is, instead of increasing knowledge about the Holocaust and developing sympathy with the victims, antisemitism could be provoked.⁸¹

In addition, Bishop Jovan argued that the planned memorial complex could play a major role in the memory politics of Serbia only when its function was specified by law. All previous initiatives had ignored the legislative aspect of Sajmište's memorialization, Bishop Jovan claimed, suggesting that he was the first to start a discussion on this.⁸² The preparation of the law was assigned to a working group within the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, which was supposedly cooperating with the Commission. This ministry is in charge of sites of memory, monuments, and memorials, which, as Milena Dragičević Šešić argues, has caused a lot of problems as it does not have the capacity for cultural policy. Instead, it should be the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education that are responsible for crafting Serbia's culture of memory.⁸³ However, the names of the members of the working group that prepared the draft of the law were never officially mentioned. Bishop Jovan stated that he did not remember all members. He revealed that he recommended Bogoljub Šijaković, professor of philosophy in the Orthodox Faculty of Belgrade University and former Minister of Religious Affairs (2000-2002 and 2008-2011), due to his extensive experience with legislative issues. Aleksandar Vulin, then Minister of Labour, was also actively engaged in the working group, and although his concrete contribution has remained undisclosed, his personal involvement, and his position within the governing bodies, points to the overall importance of this legislative concern at the time.⁸⁴

The first draft of the law on setting up an institution responsible for the Sajmište memorial complex was leaked to the public, or intentionally released, in February 2017, that is, before the Commission officially commented on it.⁸⁵ According to this draft, the memorial complex was to be named 'Memorial of Victims' (*Spomen-Žrtva*) and would 'fulfil the duty of eternally remembering the righteous and heroic victims of genocide, occupation and war crimes'.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

⁸² Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

⁸³ U središtu pažnje, *Radio Beograd 1*, 21 July 2015, <http://www.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/23/radio-beograd-1/1982463/u-sredistu-paznje.html>.

⁸⁴ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

⁸⁵ Haris Dajč, associate professor in the Faculty of Arts of Belgrade University and a member of Belgrade's Jewish Community as well as the Commission for Staro Sajmište, was apparently the one who spread the document. Personal conversation with Ćulibrk; personal conversation with Haris Dajč, Prague, 29 March 2019.

⁸⁶ Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja, Predlog Zakona o Ustanovi Spomen Žrtve, Belgrade 2017, Article 1.

The law conceptualized 'victims' following the Serbian libertarian tradition and victim ethics, that is, pointing out not only mythical Serbian victimhood, but also its moral superiority over the perpetrators. In the preamble of the proposed law, no direct link to Staro Sajmište was made, however. The Serbian government requested that parliament adopt the law on the institution of a Memorial of Victims while

'being proud of the Serbian libertarian tradition and Vidovdan's victim ethics and achievements that give meaning to our history [...], being aware that during the liberation and defensive wars, especially during the two World Wars symbolized by the Albanian Golgotha and Jasenovac, Serbs were among the greatest victims in recent history, and showing concern for the Serbian victims of genocide and the co-suffering of Jews in the Holocaust and the Roma in Porajmos'.⁸⁷

While those who sacrificed themselves for the Serbian name and faith in their struggle for the survival of mankind, that is, 'conscious victims' (*svesne žrtve*), were stressed in the law, there was less clarity about the approach to those who were annihilated because they belonged to a particular race or ethnicity, that is, 'civilian victims' (*civilne žrtve*).⁸⁸

The draft sparked negative reactions from the Serbian Jewish Community Association, scholars, various human rights NGOs, and even some members of the Commission. The most informed criticism came from Jovan Byford, who had been a member of the first Commission for Staro Sajmište and has authored various scholarly publications on Belgrade's concentration camps and the memory of the Holocaust in Serbia.⁸⁹ He pointed out how the text of the law contained several problematic and ideologically oriented interpretations of the site's history and of what it should represent. He thus suggested that there was a continuity with the controversial memory politics of the 1990s.⁹⁰ Byford was seconded by others, among them the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. The draft, these voices maintained, tended to misinterpret the tragic history of Sajmište, while relativizing the role of the Serbian

⁸⁷ Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja, Predlog Zakona o Ustanovi Spomen Žrtve, 2017, Preambula.

⁸⁸ I employ the terms 'conscious' and 'unconscious' victims here following the terminology broadly accepted in Serbia in this context. How to include all victims in this narrative of heroic sacrifice has been a long-standing problem in Serbian politics of memory, as my interlocutors confirmed. Skype interview with Dragičević Šešić; e-mail correspondence with Radić Lucati.

⁸⁹ Byford, Staro Sajmište; Byford, Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization; Byford, When I Say 'the Holocaust', I Mean 'Jasenovac'.

⁹⁰ Jovan Byford, Sporni Zakon o Starom Sajmištu, *Peščanik*, 2 November 2017, <https://pescanik.net/sporni-zakon-o-starom-sajmistu/>.

quisling regime in the Holocaust, which followed the revisionist tendencies of certain Serbian political circles.⁹¹

For example, the draft put forth a highly contestable definition of the genocide against Serbs. It was to have been committed, during the Second World War, by the NDH, Germany, as well as their allies and helpers—primarily Albanian collaborators in Kosovo and Metohija—on the territory of the occupied Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Such a framing is disputable for at least three reasons. Firstly, the Serbian population was systematically annihilated only by the Ustasha in the territory of the NDH. Secondly, the brutal repressions carried out by the German occupational forces against the Serbian civilian population were mostly retaliatory actions to the partisan resistance. Thirdly, atrocities committed by Albanian collaborators of the *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) targeted primarily partisan combatants. Neither the Nazis nor the Ballists developed an ideology by which a total destruction of the Serbian nation would be an objective.⁹²

Another problematic point in the draft was related to the statement that Staro Sajmište was located in the territory of the NDH, without any further explanation. Although the camp was indeed formally in the NDH, it was run by Nazi officials until the last months of the war, and was logistically supported by the government of Milan Nedić. The draft did not provide any more complete historical context, thus transmitting a biased perspective, as had been typical of the 1990s. Bishop Jovan did not publicly comment on this aspect of the law, but in no case supports a historical revisionism of this kind.⁹³ Stefan Radojković, the Secretary of the Committee for Jasenovac and a researcher at the Museum of Genocide Victims, reacted to the contested conceptualization of the Serbian quisling regime in an equivocal manner: 'The law exclusively refers to the establishment of this institution, and only a court can rehabilitate general Nedić.'⁹⁴

⁹¹ Branka Mihajlović, Uklanjanje Nedićevih tragova u zločinu holokausta, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 9 February 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/staro-sajmiste-beograd-zlocin-holokaust/28300497.html>; Srđan Milošević, Muke s Preambulom, *Peščanik*, 19 February 2017, <https://pescanik.net/muke-s-preambulom/>; The Revisionist Draft Law on the Staro Sajmište Concentration Camp to Be Withdrawn, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 7 February 2017, http://www.helsinki.org.rs/press_t65.html.

⁹² On Kosovo Albanian collaborators, cf. Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo. A Short History*, Basingstoke 2018, 289–313. Cf. also Ristović, *The German Occupation Regimes in South-eastern Europe*.

⁹³ Vladika Jovan Ćulibrk za Jutarnji: 'Komunistička optužnica ne može biti polazna točka razgovora o Stepincu', *Jutarnji Vijesti*, 27 February 2016, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/vladika-jovan-culibrk-za-jutarnji-komunisticka-optuznica-ne-moze-biti-polazna-tocka-razgovora-o-stepincu/26035/>.

⁹⁴ I. Nikoletić, Šta piše u nacrtu zakona, *Danas*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.danas.rs/beograd/sta-pise-u-nacrtu-zakona/>.

Other critiques of the draft focused on the alleged non-transparency in the composition process of the legislative text, and also revealed disagreements within the Commission. The above-mentioned Haris Dajč complained that the law was prepared by the working group alone, without the consent of the Commission and representatives of the Jewish communities from Belgrade and Zemun.⁹⁵ He also asserted that the Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC) demanded the museum of the Holocaust at Staro Sajmište be an independent legal entity, while the draft intended to create one legal institution consisting of various autonomous museums, including the museum of the Holocaust and Porajmos. This would ensure that the Jewish and Roma institutions would become part of the memorial complex rather than legally independent entities, and thus would not be able to seek funding or take part in official agreements on their own account.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the director of the umbrella institution, legally the successor of the Museum of Genocide Victims, would be appointed by the Serbian government.⁹⁷

Stefan Radojković confirmed that the draft relied on the Law on the Establishment of the Museum of Genocide Victims of 1992, and that the planned museums would be autonomous but not independent. However, he disagreed with Dajč's claims that the law bypassed the Jewish perspective and interests, believing that the draft to the contrary disproved concerns over the marginalization of Roma and Jewish victims. He further stated that representatives of the Jewish community, among them Ruben Fuchs, the head of the FJC, and head of the Roma community Dragoljub Acković, had presented their ideas about the level of autonomy of the museums of the Holocaust and Porajmos, and that these would be included in the final version of the law.⁹⁸

Bishop Jovan commented on the draft, arguing that it should not have been released without an authorized explanation. Nonetheless, he maintained that the text was complete, requiring only minor adjustments.⁹⁹ He also said that he expected the law would be ready to reach parliament in the autumn of 2017, after an uncomplicated public debate on the issue. Based on his public statements in this period, it seems that he tried to balance the various demands and was ready to compromise, as long as he could see progress on the matter. Accordingly, the Jasenovac Committee officially supported the plans for the memorialization of Staro Sajmište and concurred—without detailed commen-

⁹⁵ Haris Dajč, *Staro Sajmište u trouglu zaborava, nepoštovanja i birokratskih sporenja*, 11 March 2017, <http://jadovno.com/haris-dajc-za-newsweek-staro-sajmiste-u-trouglu-zaborava-nepostovanja-i-birokratskih-sporenja/>.

⁹⁶ E-mail correspondence with Radić Lucati.

⁹⁷ Nikoletić, *Šta piše u nacrtu zakona*.

⁹⁸ Nikoletić, *Šta piše u nacrtu zakona*.

⁹⁹ Mihajlović, *Uklanjanje Nedićevih tragova u zločinu holokausta*.

tary or stated objection—with the text of the draft.¹⁰⁰ In a personal interview, Bishop Jovan explained that the Committee did not consider the draft finalized and was expecting further changes. Nevertheless, his assessment was that the Committee as well as the whole SOC were satisfied with the first version of the criticized preamble of the draft, especially with its rhetorical locutions, which were similar to those employed by the Orthodox church. Bishop Jovan claimed that he was open to compromise, in order to secure a consensus with the Commission for Staro Sajmište. However, he firmly advocated for maintaining the term ‘genocide against Serbs’ during the Second World War. When specifically asked if he found it accurate to define Germans and other collaborators, that is beyond the Ustasha, as perpetrators who committed a genocide against Serbs in the whole territory of the occupied Kingdom of Yugoslavia, he argued that the Germans knew about the Ustasha’s genocidal practices against the Serbs, and did not intervene, which made them complicit. Additionally, he added, the policies of the Germans and their collaborators against the Serbs outside the NDH verged on genocide, another reason why he agreed with the definition.¹⁰¹

In September 2017, it was reported in the media that the Commission would move from the municipal to the governmental level. Bishop Jovan was quoted as saying that this decision would facilitate the Commission’s work as well as accelerate the final adoption of the law. Unofficially, Milena Dragičević Šešić, member of the Commission, claimed that after being elected president of Serbia in April 2017, Aleksandar Vučić intended to dissolve the Commission, and that it was only after Bishop Jovan’s intervention that he agreed to incorporate it into the state’s institutional structures, and elevate it to the national level. However, in the end, the Commission did not change its status from municipal to governmental, and the process did not progress, as Vučić—reconsidering his priorities—lost interest in the project.¹⁰² The draft of the law was not presented in parliament that autumn, as Bishop Jovan had hoped. Instead, a working group within the Ministry of Labour was supposedly given the task of continuing to work on the draft. However, not a single document is available on the ministry’s official website that says anything about the working group or the proceedings concerning the draft of the law.

¹⁰⁰ Saopštenje za javnost Odbora za Jasenovac, Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 6 December 2017, http://www.spc.rs/sr/saopshtenje_za_javnost_odbor_a_za_jasenovac.

¹⁰¹ Personal conversation with Čulibrk.

¹⁰² Zapisnik iz 31. sednice Komisije, 29 January 2018. Per e-mail by a private source, 22 April 2019.

The Commission received a new version of the draft from the Ministry of Labour for inspection and comment only at the end of June 2018.¹⁰³ In a meeting on 20 July, it reached a consensus to reject this version of the draft for failing to respect its previous suggestions. The members of the Commission agreed to send the Ministry of Labour seven objections. The most important were mentioned in media statements and were directed at the practical aspects of the draft. They refrained from criticizing the traditionalist pathos of the rhetoric and the formulations that distorted the past.¹⁰⁴ While in this version of the proposal the controversial preamble was indeed missing, part of the body text had been removed and no significant changes had been made to the most contested Article 3, entitled 'Commemoration and Memory'.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the Commission insisted that the law should be a 'Lex specialis', that is, a law governing a specific subject matter, just like the law on the construction project 'Belgrade Waterfront', on the banks of the Sava river right opposite the envisioned memorial site.¹⁰⁶ It also insisted that the institution have a special status similar to the eminent cultural institution Matica Srpska, that is that it was to be established directly by the government and not by the Ministry of Culture as envisioned in the draft. Topovske Šupe was to be defined as an integral part of the planned memorial complex, and the official title of the institution would include the name Staro Sajmište. Finally, the Commission demanded that international experts be included in the assessment of the law before it was adopted.¹⁰⁷

On 8 August 2018, the Commission obtained the latest version of the draft, containing some modifications in accordance with its suggestions. The official title of the envisioned institution had been changed to 'Victim Memorial at Sajmište'. Also, thanks to the Commission, Topovske Šupe was now treated as an integral part of the proposed memorial. Besides the three autonomous museums of the Holocaust, Porajmos, and Serbian suffering, the fourth institution would be devoted exclusively to the history of Staro Sajmište, thus replacing its inclusion in the previous very vague and unsystematically curated

¹⁰³ Skype interview with Dragičević Šešić.

¹⁰⁴ V. Crnjanski Spasojević, Memorijalu ime po Sajmištu, *Novosti*, 21 July 2018, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:739418-Memorijalu-ime-po-Sajmistu>; Adam Santovac, Primedbe na nacrt zakona o Starom sajmištu, čeka se jesen, *N1 Srbija*, 20 July 2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a405566/Primedbe-na-nacrt-zakona-o-Starom-sajmistu-ceka-se-jesen.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja, Nacrt zakona o Ustanovi Spomen Žrtve, Belgrade, May 2018. Per e-mail by a private source.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the website of 'Belgrade Waterfront', <https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/>.

¹⁰⁷ Crnjanski Spasojević, Memorijalu ime po Sajmištu; Santovac, Primedbe na nacrt zakona o Starom sajmištu, čeka se jesen.

Museum of Serbian Suffering.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, according to the director of Terraforming, Miško Stanišić, who had been a member of the Commission since the end of 2017, the suggestions had a positive impact on the draft. Just as in the previous year, Bishop Jovan repeated that once the Commission's objectives were considered, he did not see any reason for a further prolongation of the legislative process. According to him, the law was to be discussed in the Serbian parliament in the autumn of 2018. However, again, this did not happen.¹⁰⁹

The last session of the Commission for Staro Sajmište was held on 28 September 2018. Bishop Jovan maintained that it was not necessary to call further meetings as the work of the Commission was now successfully completed. Yet the Commission was not officially dissolved and members were informed neither about their further tasks nor the development of the Sajmište memorialization in general. Some members were not even sure which institution was responsible for finalizing the draft and, consequently, for implementing the law.¹¹⁰ Bishop Jovan observed that the process had slowed down for a while, but that he saw progress since the visit of the US delegation of the IHRA to Serbia in February 2019.¹¹¹ The future of Staro Sajmište was also discussed at the regular Holy Assembly of Bishops of the SOC held in May 2019 and attended by Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia, for the first time.¹¹² According to an article in the daily newspaper *Novosti*, Vučić expressed his concerns about the memorialization of the site, and assured the hierarchs that the draft would be completed and implemented, and the memorial built.¹¹³

In my interview with him, Bishop Jovan explained that upon the Holy Assembly an inter-ministry organ connecting the Ministry of Culture with the Ministry of Labour was created and assigned to present a renewed draft before parliament in the near future.¹¹⁴ However, the ministries did not officially confirm this information and remained silent about their activities. Eventually,

¹⁰⁸ Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja, Nacrt zakona o Ustanovi Spomen Žrtve na Sajmištu, Belgrade, August 2018. Per e-mail by a private source.

¹⁰⁹ Santovac, Primedbe na nacrt zakona o Starom sajmištu, čeka se jesen; V. Crnjanski Spasojević, Staro sajmište još čeka zakon, *Novosti*, 5 February 2019, 3, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:775507-Staro-sajmiste-jos-ceka-zakon>.

¹¹⁰ E-mail correspondence with Stanišić; Skype interview with Dragičević Šešić.

¹¹¹ Personal conversation with Čulibrk.

¹¹² Some analysts translated the unprecedented attendance of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, the political leader of Republic Srpska, at the Holy Assembly into an effort to politically control the church. Lana Avakumović, Zašto bi Vučić govorio na Saboru SPC?, *Talas.rs*, 13 May 2019, <https://talas.rs/2019/05/13/vucic-sabor-spc/>.

¹¹³ V. Crnjanski Spasojević, Zakon o memorijalnom centru. Zurof stiže zbog Sajmišta, *Novosti*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:802747-ZAKON-O-MEMORIJALNOM-CENTRU-Zurof-stize-zbog-Sajmista>.

¹¹⁴ Personal conversation with Čulibrk.

the draft—outlined by the new working group whose members were employees of both ministries and by Bishop Jovan—was presented in September 2019 to the involved mnemonic agents and interest groups, that is, primarily to the officials of the Jewish and Roma communities.¹¹⁵ It was followed by formally organized public discussions in Kragujevac, Subotica, and finally in Belgrade on 30 October. According to the draft, the institution, named ‘the Memorial Centre Staro Sajmište’, would become the most complex cultural establishment in Serbia, with museological, educative, archival, and research facilities. It was to administer and organize the commemorative practices related to the victims of the Jewish camp Zemun, the Zemun concentration camp, and the Jewish transitory camp Belgrade-Topovske Šupe. The memorial centre would have one appointed director, with a varying number of subsectors responsible for specific management tasks. Additionally, two programme councils—one responsible for the memorial of the Jewish camp Zemun and the other for the remembrance of the Zemun concentration camp—would act as advisors concerning the conceptual arrangements of the whole complex. The controversial preamble remained absent from the text. However, other shortcomings had been preserved, including the mentioned problematic definition of ‘genocide’ and the complete exclusion of local collaborators and the Nedić administration in the Holocaust in occupied Serbia in general, and their connection to the camps in particular.

The position of Bishop Jovan as the only non-state actor in the working group remained unclear. Officially, as the former head of the Commission, he was supposed to assure continuity with the previous legislative process. Neither Bishop Jovan nor his close associate Stefan Radojković, however, participated in the public discussions. Bishop Jovan has disappeared almost completely from the media landscape in his connection to the memorialization of Staro Sajmište. Furthermore, alongside the Staro Sajmište legislative procedure, the state authorities launched other projects dealing with Holocaust remembrance, and in none of them have Bishop Jovan and the Jasenovac Committee been directly engaged. According to Nikola Radić Lucati of the CHRE, the SOC’s special body was replaced as the preferred partner of Serbian politicians. Preference with regard to the instalment of remembrance of the Second

¹¹⁵ Ministarstvo kulture i informisanja, Radna tela, Odluka o obrazovanju radne grupe za izradu nacrtu zakona o memorijalnom centru ‘Staro Sajmište’, n.d., http://www.kultura.gov.rs/lat/radna_tela/odluka--o-obrazovanju-radne-grupe-za-izradu-nacrta-zakona-o-memorijalnom-centru-staro-sajmiste; Pozitivna ocena za tekst Nacrta Zakona o Memorijalnom Centru ‘Staro Sajmište’, JMU Radio-televizija Vojvodine, 19 September 2019, http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/positivna-ocena-za-tekst-nacrta-zakona-o-memorijalnom-centru-staro-sajmiste_1049682.html.

World War and the Holocaust is now given to new actors, represented by Israeli historian Gideon Greif and film director Emir Kusturica.¹¹⁶

Greif is director of the Shem Olam Institute based in the moshav Kfar Haroeh, north of Tel Aviv, and an expert on the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz. He has recently reoriented his research to Jasenovac. His newest book *Jasenovac. Auschwitz of the Balkans* is nevertheless considered highly problematic by well-established scholars in this field.¹¹⁷ Moreover, he was appointed head of the controversial commission for researching the crimes committed against Serbs in the Srebrenica area during the Bosnian war, a commission established by the political elites in the Republika Srpska of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and supported by politicians in Serbia.¹¹⁸

Emir Kusturica is a film director who gained international fame with his film *Underground*, issued in 1995. He is also an entrepreneur and has come to be known for his eccentric political opinions grounded predominantly in Serbian nationalism.¹¹⁹ Both Kusturica and Greif actively participated in the exhibition about Jasenovac held at the UN headquarters in New York in January 2018, which was promoted by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²⁰ The Jasenovac Committee was not involved in the preparation of this exhibition, something that Bishop Jovan later criticized as unprofessional. The Bishop claimed that he found the exhibition historically incorrect and tendentious. He also said that he and the Jasenovac Committee had put considerable pressure on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to stop supporting the exhibition and its display around the world.¹²¹ Nevertheless, in general, the Serbian

¹¹⁶ E-mail correspondence with Radić Lucati.

¹¹⁷ Gideon Greif, *Jasenovac. Auschwitz of the Balkans*, Belgrade 2018. For criticism of Greif's book, see Dragan Štavljanin, Ivo Goldstein: Istinu o Jasenovcu zna svatko tko želi, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ivo-goldstein-jasenovac-logor-/29198835.html>. Cf. Ivo Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, Zaprešić 2018.

¹¹⁸ Danijel Kovačević, Bosnian Serbs Appoint Israeli to Head Srebrenica Commission, *Balkan Insight*, 3 February 2019, <http://archive.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-serbs-appoint-israeli-to-head-srebrenica-commission-02-07-2019>.

¹¹⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of Kusturica's personality, films, artistry, and ideology, see Dina Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica*, London 2002. Kusturica's ideological turn towards Serbian Orthodox nationalism may be demonstrated through activities of the Andrić Institute which—initiated by Kusturica—was established by Republic Srpska and Serbia in 2013, <http://www.andricevinstitut.org/o-institutu/>.

¹²⁰ The Jasenovac exhibition held in 2018 was a culmination of preceding collaborations between Kusturica, Greif, and the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this respect. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 27 January 2017, International Holocaust Day and Exhibition "Jasenovac – the Right to Remembrance" [*sic*], 26 January 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/16132-27-january-2017-international-holocaust-day-and-exhibition-jasenovac-the-right-to-remembrance>.

¹²¹ Personal conversation with Ćulibrk.

political establishment has seemed to be satisfied with the ethnocentric framing of suffering in Yugoslavia during the Second World War as proposed and promoted by Greif and Kusturica. In April 2019, for example, Vladan Vukosavljević, the Serbian Minister of Culture, announced that the Ministry encouraged and planned to co-finance a feature film on Jasenovac directed by Kusturica based on a screenplay by Greif. This project, widely popularized in all media outlets, has become a public priority of the Ministry of Culture.¹²²

Recent developments do therefore suggest that the state authorities aspire to control Holocaust remembrance in Serbia. They have limited the capacity for autonomous action by various mnemonic agents, and narrowed the platforms of discussion. Such overwhelming dominance of authoritarian structures has made memory politics non-conceptual, non-transparent and therefore unpredictable. The processes of memorialization of Staro Sajmište illustrate such tendencies. Additionally, Staro Sajmište not only holds symbolic value, but covers a lucrative piece of territory in the centre of Belgrade. Its economic potential means the priorities of the ruling elites concerning its transformation may shift at any time. Serbian political authorities have in fact proved in the past that they are willing to bend the rules and laws for their own political and economic ends. The mentioned 'Belgrade Waterfront', a gigantic urbanist plan, came about under very suspicious circumstances, involving, for example, the razing to the ground of the previous Savamala district by 'unknown' masked men.¹²³ It is in this light that Nikola Radić Lucati points out that organizations dealing with education and research of the Holocaust in Serbia have started to miss Bishop Jovan, who—despite the controversies concerning his past and his all-too-pragmatic framing of the Holocaust memory, that allowed for an emphasis on the victimhood of the Serbian nation and its church, assigning a morally privileged role to both—had seemed to be an acceptable interlocutor when it came to the debate about the memorialization of Staro Sajmište.¹²⁴

¹²² Ministarstvo kulture i informisanja, Ministar Vukosavljević i Emir Kusturica o filmu o Jasenovcu, 10 April 2019, <http://www.kultura.gov.rs/lat/aktuelnosti/ministar-vukosavljevic-i-emir-kusturica-o-filmu-o-jasenovcu>. In December 2019, Kusturica announced that—for now—he had abandoned the idea to make the film about Jasenovac, but the Minister of Culture is nevertheless still positive about its realization. Kusturica odustao od filma o Jasenovcu, *SEECult*, 25 December 2019, <http://www.seecult.org/vest/kusturica-odustao-od-filma-o-jasenovcu>.

¹²³ Cf. Filip Rudić/Maja Živanović/Ivana Jeremić, Serbians Protest as Controversial Demolitions Remain Unexplained, *Balkan Insight*, 24 April 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/24/serbians-protest-as-controversial-demolitions-remain-unexplained/>.

¹²⁴ E-mail correspondence with Radić Lucati.

Conclusion

A marginalized institution in socialist Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church began to re-enter the public sphere during the wave of national mobilization in the 1980s. It portrayed itself primarily as the keeper of the martyrial chain of memory through which the Serbian collective identity was to be reconstructed. The imaginary of the Holocaust as a globally recognized benchmark of victimhood has been employed by the SOC to embrace eternal Serbian martyrdom. Similar to other Serbian national institutions, the analogy between Jewish and Serbian experiences of suffering dominated the SOC's narrative of the Second World War during the 1990s. The Holocaust was utilized as an interpretative framework onto which the genocide against the Serbs was projected.

After the end of the regime of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000, the SOC continued to represent itself as the principal interpreter of Serbian national history and bearer of collective identity. It did so from a comparatively stronger economic, legislative, and symbolic position, which was tolerated and even accepted by the Serbian elites. Transcending liturgical layers of remembrance, it institutionalized and broadened its services related to the remembrance of suffering during the Second World War and the Holocaust, in order to address a wider audience. The Jasenovac Committee headed by Bishop Jovan became the church's central body in this respect.

In the 2000s, the Jasenovac Committee operated independently of Serbian administrative structures, while being formally supported and partially funded by them. The Committee established itself as one of the most prominent mnemonic agents, steering the course of the memorialization of the Holocaust in the region through which Serbian victimhood, the SOC's authentic priority, was effectively articulated. Unlike other agendas of human rights regimes, such as the rights of the LGBT community, of women, of national and religious minorities—pluralism, in short—which have not yet been theologically embraced by Orthodox churches, the promotion of the transnational memory of the Holocaust proved to be a most convenient way to advocate for Serbian victimhood as well as the SOC's continuous relevance in all associated processes. The Committee, embodied by Bishop Jovan, skilfully and pragmatically used the discontinuities of transnational memory politics, and their gaps in form and content. It was these that enabled it to interrelate agendas, which have often served different or even ambivalent ends. In this way, the Committee managed to gain international acknowledgement, while still satisfying local claims for the enhanced recognition of Serbian victimhood. As it thus managed to relate to both foreign and domestic demands of Serbian policy making, the Committee and Bishop Jovan proved to be the preferred partner of the state in defining the priorities of Serbian memory politics.

Since 2012, Aleksandar Vučić has gradually assumed and personified power in Serbia, and has altered the articulation and implementation of political objectives, making them increasingly dependent on his personal interests. They have also become highly non-transparent. This in turn transformed informal state–church interactions, and the way in which the SOC has represented its positions. On one hand, the SOC’s ceremonial prestige and financial support have constantly increased, while on the other, Orthodox ecclesiastic figures have endured growing state control. This development hallmarks the memorialization of the Holocaust in Serbia in general and of Staro Sajmište in particular. Bishop Jovan was named head of the Commission for Staro Sajmište and became a very visible figure in this capacity. Simultaneously, his engagement was restrained by political inertia, and he was finally sidelined as a mnemonic leader once the symbolic capital of his position had been exploited.

The future of the memorial site of Staro Sajmište and the role of the SOC in the further process is unclear. State authorities and the SOC share a concern for emphasizing Serbian heroic victimhood, while skilfully attracting sympathy and recognition from external actors. However, since the current political establishment has continuously intensified its control over all aspects of public life, including the activities of the SOC, one can assume that the latter nominally remains one of the most important mnemonic agents in Serbia, but that its autonomy of action will continue to be significantly limited. Although these discontinuities in the power structure remain largely invisible due to their common agendas, such an asymmetric co-dependency in state-church relations may nevertheless result in a profound clash once the priorities of one of the actors alter.

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