

JOE DJORDJEVSKI

**FOSTERING MEMORY CULTURES
OF WAR DESTRUCTION IN
TOURISTIC REGIONS OF THE
FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

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Touristic Regions of the Former Yugoslavia**

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Fostering Memory Cultures of War Destruction in Touristic Regions of the Former Yugoslavia

Public memory of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession (1991–1999) remains a hot topic in the region, and at times it seems like there are spaces for public remembrance on almost every street corner. Whether focusing on soldiers, political leaders, or civilian victims, official narratives and cultures of memory in the region—from monuments and murals to memorials and commemorations—tend to be divisive, selective, and focus only on specific events and actors that conform to nationalist and exclusivist ways of viewing the past. From outright denial of genocide and celebration of war criminals to one-sided tales of heroism and victimhood, the state of public memory in the region tends to be a driver for ongoing tension.

It is my belief, however, that transforming the way wars are remembered can instead see public memory used as a

method for reaching consensus, and as a tool for education and reconciliation. I argue that this can be done by allowing more focus on remembering how the wars impacted the region's environments. My research has shown that environmental impacts from the wars were widespread, have demonstrated the ability to transcend ethnic divisions and national borders, and have long-lasting legacies that continue to impact societies and landscapes in the region today. But one of the major missed opportunities that I have identified, and the one I will address in this short analysis, is in dedicating space to memory of war's environmental impacts in tourist areas, which attract millions of annual visitors, but who are often left unaware of these legacies. In many tourist places, memory and knowledge about how the wars impacted the region's environments remain out of sight, hidden, and beyond the tourist gaze.

Spatial planners and tourist boards often overlook and outright ignore the history of war's environmental effects, threatening the region with intentional forgetting and collective amnesia. In this short analysis, I want to explain why I think it is essential that we not only focus on the cooperative potential of memorializing environmental war damages, but also, why it is necessary to create spaces for them in increasingly touristic areas where little room is given.

In rural areas across the region, there is a tendency for developers to look at tourism as a major driver for economic growth and reconstruction, including nature and adventure tourism, culinary tourism, and luxury tourism. For example, in Croatia's EU-funded Rural Development Plan for 2020, Ministry of Agriculture planners suggested that "the use of tourism to initiate the development of rural areas must ... be one of the key drivers of overall development" (Factsheet on Rural Development 2019:

28). However, these types of plans do not include ways to incorporate spaces for public memory, or how to manage existing memory sites that are under threat of neglect. In Croatia, memorials to what is locally called the Homeland War (1991-1995) are managed by the Ministry of Veteran Affairs, which has demonstrated little interest in how war impacted the country or region's environments. Meanwhile, the Croatian National Tourist Board projects an image of untouched, pristine, and safe landscapes for mostly foreign tourists. On the tourist board's website, for example, potential guests are told that in Croatia they will find:

Ten tourist regions, ten chapters of the Croatian story, which are not measured in spaciousness but in the beauty and diversity of nature, heritage, culture, and gastronomy. Each of the ten tourist regions of Croatia is bursting with interesting destinations, towns, beautiful nature, exquisite aromas, sounds, and experiences that create memories and yearn to be discovered. (Croatian National Tourist Board 2024)

While this demonstrates a clever strategy for attracting tourists, it leaves out an important part of the region's history, especially how the 1990s wars impacted rural communities and their landscapes.

Across the former Yugoslavia, official tourism boards seek to capitalize on relatively underdeveloped regions with taglines like "Wild Beauty" (Montenegro), "Green Heart of Europe" (Slovenia), and "Full of Life" (Croatia). However, many of the areas presented as being pristine to potential tourists were heavily impacted by the Wars of Yugoslav Succession, especially in Croatia and Bosnia. The legacies of war are often overlooked in rural areas and in fragile

environments, which are left in the awkward position of trying to live up to the standard created by tourism industries. The environmental damages caused by the war in Southeast Europe have also represented examples of unwanted heritage, especially in areas where tourism has become, or is becoming, a dominant economic force, and public memory and commemoration of them are in danger of being forgotten, hidden, or victims of collective amnesia.

From landmines to chemical pollution, abandonment, and physical scars in the landscapes, the impact of the wars in the former Yugoslavia continues to affect the environments and populations that depend on them three decades after their end, and will likely continue to do so into the foreseeable future. Despite the fact that the wars continue to impact populations regardless of ethnic and national boundaries, they are understudied and have very little space in current commemorative cultures. This is troubling, however, since we run the risk of forgetting the ways wars in general impact people far beyond the cessation of hostilities. These environmental impacts have occurred, and in some cases continue to occur, in and near major touristic areas like Plitvice Lakes National Park and Kopački Rit Nature Park in Croatia, and the Una National Park in Bosnia.

My research has shown that the wars in Croatia (1991-1995), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), and Kosovo (1998-1999), left a significant degree of environmental damages that have remained, for the most part, under-the-radar and unmentioned in both academic studies, international media, and in public memory. However, the silence surrounding the war's environmental impacts does not reflect the tragic and troubling ways the wars have impacted the region's landscapes and continue to affect its populations.

The wars overwhelmingly affected rural landscapes and

communities throughout the region, many of which remain abandoned today. According to one pair of experts, war damages affected an estimated 10,000 hectares, or almost 25,000 acres of land in Bosnia (Custović, Bukalo: 7). In addition to the burning of villages, war crimes, and human rights abuses occurred in mainly rural settings, and of the hundreds of thousands of people killed or millions of people displaced during the wars, rural inhabitants often bore the brunt, and many of those who were forced to leave never returned, leaving behind newly transformed landscapes of abandoned and overgrown land, houses, and other buildings, while landmines continue to present a problem in rural areas in both Croatia and Bosnia.

Between 1991 and 2020 landmines killed an estimated total of 523 people in Croatia. In Bosnia, landmines and UXOs killed more than 600 people, and thousands of victims have been injured in both countries since the *end* of the wars, including a large number of children, and the casualties only continue to mount. As recently as 2021, in Saborsko, part of the central Croatian Lika region near Plitvice Lakes National Park, a migrant was killed after stepping on a landmine while others near him were severely injured, showing that landmines placed during the wars in the 1990s continue to claim victims despite efforts to demine them. According to Bosnia's Mine Action Center two people were killed while collecting firewood and scrap materials in mine-marked areas of Lukavac and Doboј in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

And yet, in Plitvice Lakes National Park, which UNESCO placed on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger between 1992 and 1996 due to the war, there is no public memory of the war's impacts on the surrounding environment and its rural populations. The only memorial site in the park's vicinity is the monument to special policeman Josip Jović, considered to be the first ethnic

Croat killed during the conflict. But this memorial is mostly outside the gaze of tourists, and the narrative it provides is mostly concerned with the role of the Croatian armed forces in gaining independence for the country, with very little context about the longer-term and environmental impacts the war had on the surrounding region.

Plitvice serves as an important example of how tourist destinations created by images of supposedly unexplored nature can contribute to collective amnesia. But at the same time, the phenomenon of mass tourism in the UNESCO site could present a serious opportunity. In Plitvice Lakes National Park alone, around 1.7 tourists enter the park annually (Jurišić *et al.* 2023: 13). With so many visitors each year, creating spaces of memory could help foster knowledge and cooperation among both local and foreign populations regarding the ways war impacted the park's environment as well as its surrounding communities.

In order to find an example of a site that does incorporate the memory of war's environmental destruction into its tourist offer, I visited the Walk of Peace (Pot Miru) in Slovenia. The Walk of Peace is located along the Soča river valley, which is heavily visited by adventure and nature-seeking tourists. The Soča river valley was, however, also the setting of the Isonzo Front during the First World War, where more than 1 million soldiers died in a fight between Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces, while trenches and bunkers from the war still imprint the landscape.

I found this case to be both important and inspirational, since its goal is to inform visitors and guests coming to the site for touristic purposes about how the war not only affected the people involved in it but also the landscape and environment. For example, on the path to the Kozjak waterfall, a famous site for taking selfies and which costs 5 euros to enter, there are signs that point visitors towards

nearby trenches and bunkers from the war, while in Kobarid a visitor's center and museum inform tourists of the context of the war and its tremendous human and environmental cost. The Walk of Peace's official website, in my opinion, does a nice job clearly communicating to potential visitors how war and the environment have become intertwined in the area, and that the goal is to incorporate memory into the tourist site:

When you embark on the journey from the Alps to the Adriatic Sea, you will be immediately embraced by a feeling of peace which was not always palpable along the banks of the rivers of Soča and Piave on the territory of Slovenia and Italy. The flows of history and these two rivers are turbulent and unpredictable, which makes the war heritage that left a permanent mark on the people, the landscape, and the world impossible to ignore ... We strive to slow down the pace of time and invite visitors to relaxation or reflection. Places, once marked by the horrors of war, stand today as memorials and reminders, and with the Walk of Peace, they are spreading the message of peace, collaboration, and friendship among nations.

Therefore, the idea for the Walk of Peace is that by hiking and visiting these memory sites in a difficult but attractive landscape, visitors might be able to reach deeper reflections about peace, war, and the environment. Or, in other words, its goal is to re-direct the tourist gaze from consuming popular sites and to reflect on the surrounding memoriescapes.

While the site has been criticized by some observers for inauthenticity and even glorifying war, the few scholars

who have written about it seem to agree that it does live up to some of its goals, including promoting peace and demonstrating how war transforms human communities and environments. According to researcher Maria Cristina Paganoni, for example, a positive effect of the kind of language used in promoting the Walk of Peace “is its nonviolent tone, which refrains from assigning blame and avoids the war rhetoric of dying for one’s country ... Instead, mutual knowledge, collaboration, and free movement in the Schengen Area are promoted” (Paganoni 2023: 86).

Other parts of the former Yugoslavia have far fewer economic privileges and opportunities than the borderless Schengen and unified currency zone that Slovenia, Italy, and Austria have for the Walk of Peace, while national border crossings, different currencies, lingering ethnic divisions, and lack of infrastructure still characterize much of the former Yugoslavia today. Also, the Wars of Yugoslav Succession are still sources of political tension between former Yugoslav republics, whereas the First World War has been almost universally condemned as a senseless conflict, even earning the nickname “War to End All Wars.” In addition, it is unclear how effective the Walk of Peace’s message to potential visitors is, as a quick look at reviews for the Kozjak waterfall on Google demonstrates, with very few commenters even mentioning the nearby trenches and bunkers from the First World War, and most people seem to only give their opinions on the waterfall itself and the touristic facilities around it. Despite this, I do think that the Walk of Peace clearly shows that rather than ignoring, or even hiding them, tourist sites can be used to inform visitors about the long-term impacts wars have on regions’ environments.

While it is difficult and probably impossible to find records for all the environmental damages that occurred during the wars of Yugoslav Succession, it is clear that the

wars' effects on landscapes and environments still affect the people living in the region today, and they, therefore, deserve far more attention, including attention from scholars, international media, and local politicians. Despite the significant amount of environmental damage, of which I have only been able to provide a small glimpse, there are virtually no spaces for commemoration or public memory of them. Instead, spaces for public remembrance of the wars are often dedicated to sites or monuments that conform to each respective country's official narratives of victimhood and victory. Sites like the preserved destruction of the water tower in Croatia's Vukovar, or the Yugoslav Ministry of Defense complex in Belgrade, show important reminders of the physical destruction caused by war, but they are only limited to one nation's official policy of memorializing victimhood. Other physical damages, like the pollution of the rivers and soil from the wartime destruction of industrial complexes, are often left out of the picture because they do not easily reflect clear dimensions of aggressor-victim, are hard to trace, slow-moving and incremental, and do not conform to official tourism branding policies in the region, which often seek to portray sites to potential tourists as naturally pristine and, especially, safe (Croatia's most-recent tagline, for example, is "Safe Stay in Croatia").

In heavily touristed places like Plitvice Lakes National Park, Dubrovnik, Kopački Rit, Una National Park, and their surroundings, tourists are either spared from the memory of the wars altogether, or are provided with historical narratives that often circumvent acknowledgment of environmental damages caused by war. Rather than providing the opportunity for people to learn and remember how wars affect landscapes and the populations living in and with them, regardless of generational and ethno-national boundaries, the unprecedented environmental

damages from the Wars of Yugoslav Succession remain either forgotten, unknown, or invisible.

While I do not have the resources to create such a walk of peace for the war-damaged, touristifying regions of Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo, I have created the foundations for a virtual space where the environmental damages I mentioned above can be remembered, shared, and hopefully, learned from. I have done this by creating a virtual map, a website that includes an exhibition, two videos, and social media posts. It is admittedly a small step, but my hope is that it is a small step towards a significant change in the way communities remember wars. Starting with public engagement, characterized by sharing the space I have created in collaboration with the Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Study (RECAS) project "Towards a Culture of Shared Future in South East Europe," perhaps we can influence the official narratives and policies of public remembrance in the region, and help transform them from tools of division to tools of education and a shared future. Whether or not the powerholders listen, the environmental legacies of the wars in the former Yugoslavia will continue to affect people in the region despite age, and despite national affiliation here in this new era we now live, referred to more and more as the Anthropocene, where environmental transformations pay no attention to borders.

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