

Making Sense of Memory

Monuments and Landscape in Croatian Istria¹

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When the actual terror is over, how do you reconcile without trying to pay back? With the falling apart of Yugoslavia, past, suppressed injustices reemerged and were frequently used to connect the present with bitter memories. In the ethnically diverse region of Istria, however, it has been difficult for any group to claim its interpretation of history to be superior to others. Seeking to explain the Istrian case and within it the role of the *esuli*, the article juxtaposes the material discourse represented by monuments with the workings of memory and the dynamics which jostle sleeping, hidden, or private memory into public discourse. It is argued that in Istria, the absence of an ethnic “master narrative,” and the coexistence of many different groups sharing the territory has been useful for keeping nightmarish memory of ethnic violence at bay. Instead, place has come to matter more than history. Within landscapes and monuments, experiences of terror and narratives of martyrdom find a resting place, however uneasy.

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“Say a hawk came out of the blue and seized one of your chickens. What can you do? You can’t get it back. The hawk has flown away. You have no means of hunting it down, or killing it. All you can do is accept and go on with your life. But you don’t really forgive, you don’t really forget. You simply accept that there’s nothing you can do to change what has happened” (Jackson 2003:100).

Keeping Memory Alive

This story takes place in the region of Istria in Croatia. It is mainly devoted to the politics of memory and how particular kinds of sleepers – the victims from the Second World War – were used in an ongoing argument over the ethnic or political belonging to places and territories. Memory can be perceived as symbolic power, which can be used to support different discourses and claims striving for dominance and legitimacy (Müller 2002:25).² In this process the dead support memories: they are looked upon as part of the landscape, the soil that has received them. What was culture has now become nature.³

Memory is not really what people recollect, but how they manage to make sense of the past. Memory is “not a vessel of truth or a mirror of interests, but a process of constructing meaning” (Müller 2002:30). There must be a context that promotes a particular interpretation of past experiences that make them fit into the present. In this article I look at the “recycling of memories” (Bet-El 2002) or the “constant return of the same” (Ćolović 2002) in relation to the war during the 1990s in Croatia. Memories from the Second World War were not allowed to be history; instead they were used to explain present events. In Istria, however, the past slowly passed into history, leaving the present open to a multitude of interpretations and the hope for a future between warring factions. The monuments and lack of linkage between Istrian identity, sense of national belonging and the memory of past atrocities both shed light on Istria’s circumstances during the conflict in the 90s.

In the summer of 2001, I met a man from the city of Motovun in the center of Istria. He was born in 1947, the son of a mother who spoke a

Venetian-Italian dialect and a father who spoke Čakavian-Croatian. At home they switched between the two languages. His statements open up the complexity of Istrian existence:

“Trying to understand people in Istria will be very hard for you,” he said defiantly while looking at me, the stranger, “because you will only end up in confusion, and being a scientist, you want clear-cut answers.” “Very few people here in Motovun,” he said pointing to the huge flagstones covering the open square in front of the church, “could look at this square and say that my great grandfather laid those stones. The identity that you people look at is not a matter of who you are but where you are and how you manage on this poor land.” And he continued on with a parable, which in its condensed symbolic content had real, personal meaning. “When I was born, my mother went to the social services in Buzet to ask for aid for her poor household. The person at the desk did not give her any money, but found an old flag. I do not know if it was Italian or Yugoslav, but it was handed over to her. Mother washed it till all the colors went out and it became soft enough. Then she used it for my diapers and I did everything a child could do in it.”

Foundation of the State

Memory had a very peculiar importance for the shaping of the Yugoslav state, writes sociologist John Allcock (2000). The political legitimacy of Yugoslavia was founded on the experience of the “National Liberation Struggle,” which produced an identity in sharp contrast to the interethnic atrocities of the Second World War. The slogan “Brotherhood and Unity” united the peoples of the many ethnic groups comprising the pre-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia together with those who belonged to the short-lived Nazi puppet states in Serbia and Croatia. The victory over fascism won by fighting partisan was established as the founding memory, and was crucial in lending the state legitimacy – but appeasement meant throwing hatred into history’s deep-freeze (Bet-El 2002:208). This engendered lasting dilemmas that contributed to the break-up of Yugoslavia. One concerned time: memories could hardly be passed on to a

generation that did not share the experiences. “The ‘partisan generation’ could have no successors. In this respect, Yugoslavia epitomized Max Weber’s observations about the necessary crisis which attends succession to charismatic authority” (Allcock 2000:421).

Alternate memories had had to be actively suppressed and made illegal – although they were bound to surface sooner or later. People became aware of their memories as politically important, but also as not to be communicated openly, only in private “while fields were tilled or over a family meal” (Bet-El 2002: 208). They became part and parcel of people’s habitus, shaping their attitude toward life and everyday practice. Suppressed in public, memories forged connections to objects and places. The strong tradition of attending family graves was part of this process of keeping unspeakable memories alive.

Only after Tito’s death and the slow dissolving of the state, did the suppressed resurface. Personal memories bore the mark of true experience, and now people could come out and say, “I remember”, “I was there!” (Bet-El 2002: 209ff). The rarely uttered personal memory became public, and eventually – in distorted form – nationalized, as the true memory of the various oppressed ethnicities in the republic. Istria’s ethnic composition, however, is too complex for such a waking-up to nationalism.

Contested Territory

Istria is the peninsula that thrusts into the northern part of the Adriatic Sea. For hundreds of years it was part of the “imperial borderland” between the Danube Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire (Lampe 1989, Allcock 2000). Stable state-formation or ethnic homogeneity is structurally difficult in a borderland. The maritime power of Venice had dominated Istrian towns and marketplaces along the coast, exercising cultural influence since medieval times; Habsburg had ruled the inland areas. After World War Two, the Iron Curtain fell close to Trieste, there where Istria ends and Italy begins. Istria was under fascist Italy between the wars, and was now a borderland to the West.⁴

The beauty of the landscape is surely the

first thing that strikes the visitor today. In marketing it as the most successful tourist region in Croatia, the tourist board of Istria relies on concepts such as ecology, magic, exoticism, and the “exploration of your true self”. With its undulating hills, Istria resembles a less exploited and more mysterious Tuscany, its long beaches forming an imagined Mediterranean landscape.⁵

The tourist image mirrors and supports the creation of a regional identity in the context of contemporary European regionalism. Istrians have been quick to ignore the twentieth century and dwell on almost forgotten Habsburg, Venetian, Roman, or Illyrian roots instead, for archaeology here serves as a better guide to the past than history. The recent past is so problematic, so traumatic, so filled with uncertainties and problems that a mythical history with a strong connection to the landscape is more appealing. Medieval towns, old folk customs, and ancient folk music and instruments still prevail (Frykman 2002). The new narration of Istrian identity is told in poetic terms that allude to this mythical past, and it is articulated in objects or souvenirs, and by “colonizing” the extant territory of Istria with a history open to the multitudes and to the many (Frykman 2003).⁶

The borderland experience has meant Istrian popular culture remains extremely local, for the population cowered through the ages while the great rulers were fighting. The abundance of dialects, music, food habits, and variations in material culture is still striking today. The place where you lived provided continuity, while capital cities changed and emperors played with language and names.⁷ Even now there are no dominant urban centers, just a larger commercial town on the west coast (Pula), and an inland administrative center (Pazin).⁸ People continue to live in small towns or in the countryside.

After the Second World War, the majority of Italian-speaking Istrians were forced to leave, and some of the houses left empty were nationalized or taken over by people moving in from Medjimurje in northern Croatia, or from Macedonia or Serbia or other far-away places. The actual number of *esuli* – Italians – forced to

leave has been hotly debated, since their number is politically important in claims over the contested territory. Anthropologist Pamela Ballinger suggests it may have been from 200,000 to 350,000 people, though this includes Dalmatian refugees (2003:1). Other investigations have suggested there were only half or a third that number.⁹

But this was not the only exodus, for after Mussolini’s takeover, some 70,000 Croats were forced out of their Istrian homes. In the Croatian cities of Karlovac and Zagreb, entire blocks carried names of Istrian towns. To fill the gap, some 50,000 Italians, mostly from southern Italy, moved in; many *esulis* were thus actually newcomers. The man from Motovun cited above held the opinion that 70,000 of today’s Istrian population were “parachutists” with no roots in the place. On these grounds, any story of who the territory “belongs” to and whose roots are the deepest is easily challenged. As a result, all groups compete over who had been most victimized. Only on political grounds – the victory over fascism – was it possible to write a message into the landscape.

A Partisan Monument

Istria was the scene of intense fighting at the end of the Second World War. Numerous memorials, monuments, and graves are devoted to human sacrifice and the victory over fascism. Detailed notes from my field-diary show how such monuments are given a predominant position not only in the cemeteries where they are found but also in the entire landscape.

“Easter is the time of death, burial and resurrection. 2002 was the coldest in living memory in Istria. Istrians, as well as many holiday-makers from Germany, Austria and Italy preferred to stay indoors. The *bura* – a northern wind that sweeps icy weather down from the Alps and makes the trees sway and the tiles clatter – even brought snow some days ago. My wife and I were staying at one of the two well-equipped hotels in Opatija for its convenient location for this project. On Maundy Thursday, we drove along the curvy road to the nearby village of Veprinac, trying to get a view without

the wind chilling us to the marrow.

The customary churchyard, sheltered by the church and surrounded by a wall, was defended by a row of cypresses. We were the only visitors. Most of the graves bore post-1970s dates, with names hinting that those interred here were of Croatian origin. Only a few faded, moss-covered stones with Italian names remained from earlier generations. In the center of this small churchyard stood a huge square block of pure white marble. As with many of the partisan monuments, the stone had been brought in from the island of Brač, its marble renowned since Roman times for its luster and durability. Crowned with a red, five-pointed star, the porous, almost living marble had such a majestic presence it involuntarily caught the eye. As we drew closer, we saw that the huge block was surrounded by smaller blocks, all with the same cubic form, but made of granite and polished to near-perfection.

The marble block carried the inscription '1945' and to highlight it, a red star crowned the year. Each small stone bore a name, but no date or place of birth. Perhaps they were so well-known by every villager that nothing more was needed? Or perhaps not? Several of them carried the inscription *Nepoznat* – unknown. The blocks commemorating the unknown contributed to the impression of a completely symmetrical archipelago, a solar system where all the planets rotated around the sun at right angles, or perhaps a Roman army clustered around its centurion.

The monument depicted an insistent, idealized picture of a State and its citizens where everything is a carbon copy of the State, where every individual – to use Althusser's expression – is interpolated by power. Men had died for a good cause and even the death of the unknown had contributed to the cause. Their sacrifice had not been in vain, their otherwise fragmented, risky life had direction and purpose: The Cause and not Foolishness had won. As things appeared here, in the churchyard at Veprinac, so they should be perceived in the country as a whole, the small scale reflecting the larger scale. Rudoljub Čolaković, in his diary of the partisan battles during the National Liberation Struggle, writes about the symbolic importance of granite:

"To have spent oneself and fallen in a senseless struggle leading nowhere would have been terrible. Yet nothing could have been more glorious than thus to give one's whole self to a cause . . . From the blood my lost comrades had shed had sprung the triumph of the revolution. By their death they had placed their noble lives into the foundations – firmer than granite – of a new and brighter world, which it was now for us to construct" (1962:415).

Most graves were decorated with daffodils, as an Easter symbol and token of respect for the dead. Even the partisan monument was decked with a wreath bearing the red, white and blue ribbons of the Croatian flag, but without greeting from either the party or the city council but instead from "The Association of Opatija Fighters" honoring their former comrades. They were now commemorating something private that justified their lives, rather than something that concerned society as a whole.

In the Land of Monuments

Those who fell, as victims on the losing side, however, were not commemorated. As in all of former Yugoslavia, monuments and politics went hand in hand, creating a cultural web so dense that any deviation would be unthinkable. In market places, at road crossings, parks, and on individual buildings, the same messages were spelled out. In Istria today they are more numerous than churches and chapels. Working the fields, transporting the harvest of grapes, meeting at the café and in church entailed passing a memorial of some kind. They became not only a part of the landscape and its architecture but were also intertwined with body movements and everyday tasks and practices, part of peoples' life-worlds. Perhaps they are not something to think *about* or reflect over, but something people think *with* (cf. Frykman & Gilje 2003:37; Gillis 1994:5).

Monuments are a strange kind of material culture – with lives of their own. To see a monument in Istria is like striking a key on the piano and listening to the full resonance, or like a choir with high, low, and loud voices all singing the same tune. They were meant to create the

memory that the State rested upon, yet victory over fascism was only the beginning of a larger collective story. Just as a single church could extend its message through all of Christianity, so every local partisan monument could call to those in Pazin and Zagreb, in Belgrade, in Sarajevo, in Skopje, Titograd and Ljubljana, as well as to those in socialist Eastern Europe. Ideologically connected, these monuments emphasized that power and real life had been created somewhere else – while at the same time shrinking Marshal Tito to local proportions.¹⁰

Monuments are not the equivalent of memories. Usually they remain a part of everyday life, something you pass when going to work. But under what circumstances do they come alive? The war in the 1990s documented and clarified the answer, for many of the half-forgotten partisan monuments throughout Croatia took on a different life. What had been integrated into village life for decades suddenly became visible and laden with meaning, reminding all of long-suppressed injustices.

The ancient town of Solin is situated a few kilometers from the Dalmatian coastal town Split, and is a former Roman settlement filled with archaeological remains and monuments. Solin also held memories of partisan fights that had slowly seeped into local cultural heritage, and a partisan monument, in the form of a bridge parapet, stood over a small river in Solin's central park. Names of townsmen killed in the fighting were cast in copper and mounted together on a perforated wall background, and the fast-flowing water of the river glittered through the names. As a monument it was simple, tastefully designed, and unpretentious. Passing the bridge meant being made aware of the suffering. In the war that started in 1991, the Yugoslav Navy blocked the harbor of Split while the Army occupied the hinterland. Anti-Yugoslav sentiment ran high. And during the conflict, someone blasted a big hole in the middle of Solin's partisan monument.

Symbolically, this vandalism could be interpreted as a sign that people had become aware of the missing past, of the memories the monument was supposed to repress. To gain access to a local identity, a historic continuity,

another memory, the monument had to be pierced. Solin was not the only place where such iconoclasm took place. According to a survey recently published by *Savez Boraca* (the "Association of Anti-Fascist Fighters"), 731 partisan monuments in Croatia were destroyed during the 1990s – most in places where active fighting took place and sentiments of national belonging were thereby provoked – and 2,233 other war memorials demolished (*Rušenje antifašističkih spomenika u Hrvatskoj 1990–2000*, 2001).

Invisible Monuments

Perhaps violence is needed to make certain monuments visible, for there is such a self-destructive capacity built into them. Monuments are built to create clarity and unity where doubt prevails – irrespective of the ideology of the regime – and they are expected not just to have the power to commemorate but also to forge and sustain a single version of the past (Gillis 1994).

Yet memorials are often over-explicit, repeating the same message in different forms. Solin's bridge parapet was an illustration: Cast in bronze and stretched over the flowing water, the names were meant to create stability in the midst of movement, with stone laid on stone and names cast in copper. Monuments seldom commemorate variation, multiplicity, or the transitive, but rather are aimed to create continuity and confidence. Yet confidence has a strange capacity to remain unseen, unless of course it is no longer there. As phenomenology points out, the life-world that we encompass has to be invisible in order to be open and manageable (Frykman & Gilje 2003).

Therefore the life of a monument is much more precarious than any other kind of public art, as it depends on its ability to be itself through its expression while at the same time representing something else. Martin Heidegger points out that art has a particular capacity to "transport us out of the realm of the ordinary," as "artwork opens up a world and at the same time allows us to see that something is concealed" (Polt 1999:138) in its transgression of immediately available interpretations.¹¹ Monuments generally do not create a multitude of inter-

pretations through their own expression and are a mere representation or a cliché; they also seldom serve as an expression of the place where they stand, nor do they interact with the surrounding landscape.

The general idea is *not* to let the landscape and its people emerge, but to challenge them instead to tackle the past in such a way as to make it appear as quantifiable or offering a clear message. Showing the exact number of the fallen gave the state, or the cause, added credibility and confidence by creating memory. The intention was to give to the everyday, to people, animals and nature – everything we call *hic et nunc* – a framework that would transform it into a personal recollection of private and collective suffering.

Yet when political intention meets an over-explicit artistic expression through socialist realism, monuments become paraphrases rather than original works of art. Once you have seen Comrade Tito on hundreds of stones, with fist outstretched in front of fluttering standards, and red stars, and tensed arm muscles lifting rifles, or swords, or hammers, or axes, you start to wonder why the message has to be so all-embracing. An over-explicitness actually diminishes the melancholy nature of the many partisan monuments of Istria, as if they intended to deprive the past of its secrets rather than reveal them.

In the late 1940s, large red letters were daubed on the walls of most towns, proclaiming: “Long live Free Yugoslavia. Long live Tito. Long live Stalin. Our dead haven’t given their lives in vain. We want to belong to Yugoslavia.” Such slogans were meant to justify and convince everyone that the region should come under socialist rule.

For many years after the war, it was unclear if Istria really should belong to Italy or Yugoslavia. As time went on, these stirring messages became self-evident, and in practice invisible. Today, only pale pink fragments of the letters remain, blending in with numerous alternate and later layers of lime wash and plaster. No destruction of partisan monuments took place in Istria, for in a number of ways these memorials were so much part of the everyday that they had become invisible. No acts of violence could make them come alive again.

Opposing the Slavs

The majority of the Italian-speaking population of Istria was forced into exile. A coherent narrative took shape among them, highlighting their pain and losses but also identifying the perpetrators as ethnic Slavs operating under the banner of Communism. The official Yugoslav version says: the Italian minority “chose” to emigrate, since as fascists they had to save their necks.

Pamela Ballinger has movingly described how the stories were not only kept alive in ghettos, refugee camps and among the many *esuli* in exile, but also how they were supported by right-wing political parties that had reason to despise the communist regime in Yugoslavia. In exile, the vision of an Istrian landscape, never to be seen again as it had been, somehow became truer. It was not possible to visit and thus remember the places where they had once lived and where their relatives were buried. In Italy, as well as among those who remained – the *rimasti* – centers for collecting life histories were organized, and documentation of a life once “Italian” was conducted. Being *esuli* was often understood as being a victim, and as such, certain about your belonging and cultural identity: it promoted an essentialist understanding of who Italians were and who their opponents were. Communists who had taken over Istria were viewed as barbaric Socialist Slavs – *schiavi* – from the Balkans, and the antithesis of Europe, of Culture and Civilization, which were what the Italians possessed (Ballinger 2002:245). Yet such stories could easily be countered by tales about what Italian fascists had done to the Croats and Slovenes living in Istria. After all, the landscape had been impregnated with memorials to the victory over fascism.

With the beginning of the war in the 1990s, the stories told by the *esuli* in Italy started to resemble the ones told by Croats of the Communist Serbs, to say nothing about what the Serbs were saying about the fascist Croats. Out of this confusion – of stories about the *chetniks*, the *ustashi*, the partisans, and the fascists – the *esuli* could tell was this was all about: It was the Slavs doing it again! It was the ever-repeating

pattern of the Balkans! When the Bosnian atrocities in Srebrenica and Omarska hit the front pages, exiled Italians could say: "What the Slavs are doing to one another they did to us fifty years ago" (Ballinger 2003:146). Gruesome stories about how Communists engaged in ethnocide were revived: how they rounded up Italians, tied their hands together with metal wire and threw them down, still alive, into deep caves (*foibe*) to die a slow, cruel death. Such mass executions were the preferred method in the process of ethnic cleansing, and symbolically, *esuli* were siding with Jewish victims of the Holocaust (Ballinger 2003). No other argument can gain such instant moral support in today's political rhetoric, and thus old accusations gained new credibility in the 1990s, and voices were raised to put the perpetrators guilty of old crimes finally on trial, and to finally force official admission that past atrocities had been inflicted on the Italians.

The Eternal Return of the Same and Truths More True

Yet while the *esuli* worked to form a coherent interpretation of their past as one of ethnic victimization, there is always the possibility of simply being a victim in a destiny of greater magnitude than man can affect. The Serbian anthropologist Ivan Čolović has described it as a step beyond historical time into mythical time. People in Serbia realized that what were once private memories now fit a pattern that was the fate of "our people" – an ethnic group beyond history. Events during the break-up of the Yugoslav federation gave meaning to events fifty years before, and from that it was easy to slip deeper into a mythical time. People were faced *not* with factual events, but with the eternal presence and eternal return of the same: It started for the Serbs with Kosovo Polje in 1389, but each ethnic group had its own story of victimization (Čolović 2002:13).

When Slavonia (bordering Serbia) was invaded in the spring of 1991, one of my interview partners received a telephone call from his elderly aunt, who like him lived in the capital city of Zagreb, and who sobbed into the receiver:

"Now it has started! Look at what they are doing to us again," *Us* was the Croatian family, where since the days of Maria Theresia, Hungarians, Croats, Serbs, Germans, Slovaks, and French had produced a remarkably multiethnic mix that was the hallmark of the Danube basin. *They* were yet another instance of the returning Serbs who marched in waves through her home village.

My interview partner was a retired Senior Administrative Officer who had moved to the capital from his Slavonian home village a long time ago. As a young boy he had watched his village being invaded by armed men. The educated bourgeoisie and civil servants, the pharmacists, doctors, veterinarians, school-teachers, lawyers, shopkeepers, and businessmen, about three hundred of them, were rounded up that first evening at one end of the small marketplace. "They weren't further away than this," my partner said, spreading his arms out wide. As state and local government employees, these men were connected in different ways to Ante Pavelić's fascist vassal state, and some were also *Volksdeutsche*. To the partisans, these were by definition enemies: class enemies, political enemies, collectively guilty, ethnically suspect. They were taken to the rubbish dump of the village and proceedings were kept short. As a token of contempt, their bodies were dumped into the village sewers. Some time later, a monument was erected in the village to commemorate the victory of the partisans and the destruction of fascism.¹²

In this family, the memory of those prominent villagers was kept alive through half-whispered stories, was alluded to among relatives, formed the basis of their understanding of the world: The remembrance was obvious yet seldom expressed. It is said that every generation has to live through its own war, yet the aunt lived long enough to live through three of them. Like so many others, she carried a memory that was hard to manage simply because it was so seldom articulated. It would have been politically dangerous, and a threat to her own safety to articulate that memory during the Yugoslav era, so that the "they are doing it to us again" complex could only be communicated to someone close, or to someone who had experienced the many

transformations that same place had gone through, and who carried similar recollections. And now it was made obvious through the war: this story was told to me in visible, intense anger. The past was not dead; it had only been biding its time.

When people grow accustomed to the loose-endedness and superficiality of what is recorded in books, they live in increased fear of the past returning. When a new conflict breaks out, what has long been pushed aside will float to the surface as a commentary upon the present. In the former Yugoslavia, the past was therefore ready to wend its way back in, through a door standing ajar, with a nagging dread that the door might be flung wide open. In the many whispered narrations, everything was boiled together into a witches' brew of publicly acknowledged acts (some commemorated in monuments) and privately acknowledged cruelties and horrors. Secret information was handed down through families or heard from friends, and the fear thus conveyed made it reliable, physically tangible, yet with all the gory details. It was recognition rather than critical assessment that shaped the reception of the stories, for if you believed in the person, then you believed in the story: the accuracy did not need to be questioned.

The Dutch anthropologist Mattijs van de Port (1998) says that in the Balkans the past has a strangely formless character, present everywhere and yet nowhere. In his study of Novi Sad in 1990–92, he witnessed hatred and kinship suddenly blossoming alike. For generations, ill-treatment had been meted out by *them*, and an almost forgotten solidaristic *we* was suddenly triggered among ordinary businessmen, academics, bourgeoisie, and workers alike. People saw themselves as being at *their* mercy and living through a familiar, tragic fate.

Van de Port says something similar to Čolović, that the past is not so much something to be *understood* intellectually, as it is to be *remembered* – and unfortunately, also to be *repeated* – but he turns the argument around. To Čolović, mythical time is a time of no war, while real time appears less often but bears the terrible hallmark of authenticity. But people in Novi Sad in the early 1990s lived instead with a dual chronology, a

virtual one of Peace, Civilization and Culture and a real one of war, one where nightmares appear in the daytime and have a face. For in real time, you reconnect to a deeper truth, an inevitable insight into the fragility of human existence and to the realization that civilization is only a thin varnish on a harsh reality – and it is self-deception to deny it. Van de Port thus turns Norbert Elias' ideas about the process of civilization upside down. Elias's argument is only an ideology of the well-to-do in the Western world, a middle class belief that human nature is an ongoing project of progress and education. War makes the urgent undercurrent of barbarianism all too visible.

Thomas Hobbes would have agreed; peace is only a pause in Leviathan's heavy breathing. The culture Van de Port describes shows the eternal return of the same, an imagination heavily impregnated with the idea that war will repeatedly be unleashed, like the dark rain cloud hanging in the sky throughout Milcho Manchevski's film *Before the Rain*. When the rain cloud bursts, it is both expected and as impossible to stop as war itself; it washes everything clean as naturally and inevitably as the sun dries it up. Unreason temporarily takes over the power to control life, and while there is a bitterness in realizing "that which exists in me but also in you", there is also a strange sweetness.¹³ War then serves the purpose of creating clarity in what, paradoxically, has been obscured in daily, peaceful life. Friend can now be differentiated from foe, good from evil, the brave fighter from the cowardly terrorist: "it is only in war that the true can be separated from the false" (van de Port 1998:222).

If so, then the draught from the door standing ajar is always wafting round your legs in an otherwise warm house. That understanding opens up no possibility of reconciliation, and no possibility of letting past terrors be instances of a unique combination of circumstances that we later will call history. Trying to make past horrors fit a pattern is like trying to control the past, and that is a road well travelled in narratives and tradition. It is a more dangerous conviction to hold to this notion of "the truer truth".

Off the Beaten Track

It is also not altogether true that the past was turned into history in an uncomplicated way or that past ills were forgotten. The pain was still there. Field notes from my visit to a grave – this time the first “illegal” commemoration of the fallen Italians – could serve as a basis for understanding the possibilities for reconciliation.¹⁴

“On Good Friday, we pointed our car in the direction of the town of Motovun, one of a number of small towns that crown the hills in this undulating landscape. In recent years it has become a popular tourist attraction. But it was the road to Motovun that was our goal, not the town itself. The day before, the archivist at the Istrian Center for the Registration of Cultural Memorials in Pazin had told us such an improbable story that we wanted to investigate it for ourselves. We drove by the village of Čiže, to find the memorial for the Italians who had fallen in the Second World War. We had never seen anything like it during our fieldwork excursions through the countryside mapping partisan monuments.

During the autumn of 2001, the road had been rebuilt to carry the increased traffic between Motovun and the regional center of Pazin. As the works’ manager had driven along the road to inspect the upcoming tasks, he came across a newly built, enclosed space in a place that later became known as a ‘Park of Remembrance’ or memorial grove. Stones were exposed on which Italian names – and thus allegedly Fascists – were engraved.

In the summer, the authorities in Pazin had received a petition from a group of Italians – *esuli* from Istria, allegedly belonging to the Famiglia Montonese, in other words of Motovun origin – who had asked for permission to build a memorial. It was likely their relatives or neighbors had been killed here on May 10th 1945, but as yet these *esuli* had no place to go where they could mourn them. An agreement recently had been reached between Croatia and Italy concerning the protection of war graves, which in practice meant that *esuli* were given the right to commemorate their countrymen

who had been executed during the war.

The Mayor of Pazin didn’t know what to do. No one had ever considered that anything other than monuments for partisans could be built in the commune. One hardly needed permission for that – although it was a long time since one had been erected. In the old days, a monument was by no means a private thing but a concern for decision-making bodies like Savez Boraca. In the previous era, a monument had wider purposes: a token of appreciation or faithfulness to the Party, or to the whole idea of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ – which could come in handy when asking for favors or privileges. If a costly road needed to be built, or water pipes laid and sewers constructed, an appeal was easier to accept if it came from people who had previously proven their reliability and citizenship. Besides, financial support could be obtained for building a partisan monument locally. It was a political statement aimed at the future.

The new request was made at a time when the authorities were not so much afraid about which monuments should be built, as they were considering which ones should be demolished. This was a region trying to repair its image among tourists after the recent war. Many a potential tourist was still afraid of coming to Croatia because warfare continued in Kosovo, Macedonia, and other distant parts of former Yugoslavia. For obvious reasons, many of the tourists who did come were from Italy – Trieste is only about an hour’s drive away.

In towns like Motovun, newly painted road signs are in both Croatian and Italian. The names of the great partisan heroes now adorn not the center but the periphery, used to name ‘donkey-paths,’ as a local member of the Savez Boraca said with contempt. Joakim Rakovac is now the name of a back street, while the main road by the city wall has regained the old, Italian sounding toponym of Barbacan. This bilingualism does not really give in to the claims of the many *esuli* or right-wing parties, but to the fact that the Italian language and European belonging happen to coincide. Tolerance and multiculturalism are the politics of the EU. This implies that gratifying memories from fascist Italian times coincide with cultural heritage and the defense of ethnic minorities. How can

one, if one is decently compassionate, prevent anybody from mourning their nearest and dearest at a place special to them?

Though the request caused some surprise, there was much that spoke against denying it outright. The result, therefore, was a very pragmatic decision: Erecting the Italian memorial site did not disturb the plans for further roadwork, so it was allowed to proceed. The applicants took this to mean they were given a free hand – provided that they didn't make a big fuss about it. So on May 10th 2001, the 'Park of Remembrance' – which the road manager had discovered – was inaugurated. A priest arrived from Italy to give a sermon, together with a local priest, a streamer was unfurled to blow in the wind, local dignitaries from Pazin and Motovun were present – and a few days after the ceremony, the local paper carried a short news item about it.

After a thorough search we found the memorial. The road runs through an agricultural landscape here, where cultivated fields alternate with shrubs and pine groves. If it had been partisan fights to be commemorated, this would not have been the place for a monument. While it was easy to find stretches of road with views extending for miles on either side, right here the countryside was undulating – hardly anything more – and there was nothing extraordinary about it. In the shadow of towering pines and next to a smaller road, was a green, waist-high, ordinary mesh wire fence with a gate, surrounding an area about half the size of a tennis court. As we opened the gate, we noticed a sign with an inscription in both Croatian and Italian that declared that though this was private property, those who wished to enter to pray were welcome to do so.

On the recently cleared, red Istrian soil, lay twenty white and roughly-hewn small stones, with one side inscribed with the names of the men to be remembered here – Tullio Stefanutti, Mario Reser, Giuseppe Belletti, etc. With one exception, they were all men who had died on the same day, May 10th 1945, the day after the official last day of the war. Their dates of birth and home districts were noted, all of them indicating surrounding villages and small towns – Trevisio, Montana (Trviž, Motovun) – and the men were all young. No other information was given.

The occasional visitor might stop to ask: Why here, in this comparatively out-of-the-way place? Was it a platoon of soldiers, a fascist *lega*? Were there as many as you could make room for on a lorry? Had there been a battle? Or was it an execution? It was difficult to find a context in which to fit the circumstances. There was no placard visible, as is usually the case for partisan monuments, and no standard holder for the three flags of Yugoslavia, the Republic, and the Party. Nor was there any sign of a Cause for which they had died, no company or country that they had fought for, no ideal.

Lying in front of each stone, on the grave, was a red, burnt-out candle and a bouquet of those strange churchyard flowers specially made so they never wither – obviously placed there by the same visiting party. In the center of the memorial grove, an altar had been built with the Latin inscription *Fiat voluntas tua*, "They will be done". The resurrection cross had been placed to the right of the altar, and someone must have given it a severe blow as it had fallen over on its side. To the left of the cross stood a simple marble tablet with a poem in Italian inscribed on it. While the altar expressed one expectation of a hidden Godly will, as it was unclear what significance the deaths held, the poem itself expressed only the grief and distress of the surviving relatives.

You did not hear the cries
of spouse or mother
when darkness fell upon you
and the horror.
A pain, bereft of word and end
became the lot of us
who stayed behind,
by force dispersed
around the world.

It was private, and not an official mourning, that pervaded the landscape, the grief of families once part of the region, and from their scattered diaspora in Australia or South America or the USA, the *esuli* had claimed their right to be remembered where they had once lived, and to bury their dead accordingly. Now, though the dead are commemorated in their rightful place, the memories have to be protected by fences,

and constantly run the risk that they are more important to their old opponents than their relatives. Quietly provocative, the 'Park of Remembrance' challenged the ideological hegemony established by the partisan monuments. A message had surely been written into the landscape that had much wider implications than mere personal grief. Čiže was one of a number of mapped *foibe* where crimes against Italians had supposedly been carried out. For a long time, this and other places should have been made into real sites of mourning, the *esuli* claimed.

Thus, this was a successful statement that was bound to be followed by others, and the politicization of Istrian territory by monuments was about to begin once again. But this presupposed that the provocations were being registered as such. Silvio Delbello, President of the *Unione degli Istriani* (Association of Istrians) in Trieste gave a speech at the inauguration, defiantly stating that people in the abyss should have been treated as prisoners of war. The head of the Famiglia Montonese said instead that for them, creating this park ended the war, because they could now come without any fear to these graves and leave flowers.

Later that year, the chairman of the Istrian Committee for Old Partisan Combatants protested that by allowing this park of remembrance, an attempt was being made to rewrite history and honor unduly being rendered to wartime criminals. Those cast into the (alleged) *foibe* were supposedly all well-known fascists. So the eternal return of the same could have been going on, if it were not for the fact that this was no longer part of a discussion where anyone could make sense of connecting past memories to contemporary situations. Who would listen? The strongest nationalist voice came from a group in the diaspora who had no real opponents left: the Yugoslav state was being put as much into question by the Croats as by the *esuli*. Only the old partisan fighters might feel insulted, but they in turn were more in the nature of local Istrian nationalists – and being Istrian implied today that you were connected to a more tolerant tradition of multiculturalism . . .”

A Multicultural Region

During the war in the 1990s, Istrians were searching for cultural and political distinctiveness they could use or lean on – and many found it in the history of diversity, and it became an almost classic example of a “difference that could make a difference”. In registering their national identity during 1991, people in the area were sensitive to the hidden suggestions of homogeneity the act implied. “Like many others, I did not want to register as a Croatian national”, a high-ranking local tourist official told me, “so I wrote ‘Istrian’ instead. Others just wrote Human. No one has to tell me that I’m not as good a Croat as any, but I also didn’t want to have it be forced down my throat. Like many others, I knew a war was coming and I did not like it. To write ‘Istrian’ meant taking a stance against forcing destiny on people. Coming out as a nationalist opposes our entire tradition. Striving for freedom from any oppression is characteristic for the region. People have been exposed to the presence of many lords – Venetian, Austrian, Italian, German . . . They might change, but we won’t.”

From the point of view of the ruling HDZ-party in Zagreb, Istrians were sometimes seen as “selling out to the Italians”. When Franjo Tuđman visited Pazin in 1991, he accused Istrians of not being “Great Croats” – a wartime term used to characterize those who were strongly, or particularly, nationalistic. “I guess he was met with whistles!” an 80-year old former partisan from Pazin remarked. “My family has been here for hundreds of years. We were fighting the fascists when the *Ustasha* state was selling out to Mussolini. 17 000 Istrians fell on this soil and none of them had any connection to the Ante Pavelić regime.¹⁵ We would also have fought the English, if need be, to keep Istria free. My mother went to an Austrian school trying to keep her Croatian, I went to an Italian school trying to keep my Croatian, and my children went to a Yugoslav school, and my grandchildren to a Croatian. We certainly know who we are.”

The *rimasti* – the Italians who stayed – made similar statements about the dexterity of living with a reality that seemed to be ethnically diffuse or unclear only on the surface. The

Mayor of Brtonigla belonged to a family that had lived in the same village for more than 400 years. This is an Italian-speaking town, and he therefore had to use Italian at work although he mostly spoke Croatian at home. He had sent his son to study economics in Trieste, while his daughter had gone to an Italian school in nearby Buje; now she attended a Croatian business high school in Višnjan.

People in Istria looked for a workable compromise – *convivenza* or *suživot* – in the post-1945 era. Diversity has defined people in terms of *where* they were rather than *who* they were, without raising exclusive claims to territory on ancestral grounds. The experience of managing different dialects or languages was a necessity and not a sign of excluding belonging. People knew perfectly well about their family, its legacy and the group they came from, but this did not give them a right to dominate or any idea of a “hybrid identity” or “creolization”. The identity of being Istrian opened a variety of possibilities rather than clear-cut identities. In resisting Zagreb homogenizing efforts, Istrian politicians chose to pronounce the entire region as “multicultural and tolerant,” and it was a message which worked both locally and for elections to the Croatian Parliament. By stating that Istria should recognize the rights of all its major linguistic groups, it was in practice giving the large Italian-speaking population the right to use its language in education and administration. When Istria applied to become a Euroregion, it was bound to comply with the entire rhetoric of contemporary EU politics of Unity in Diversity.

More importantly, no acts of war were carried out in Istria during the 1990s. In making sense of the past, in creating a real memory that spoke of and to the present, the Istrian experience radically differed from that in the rest of Croatia. What came out of the process was not a “constant return of the same” but an instance of the different. The past was turned into history, and a slow process of recognizing the suffering without wanting to justify the many wrongdoings seems to be underway.

Notes

1. This essay is part of the project Borders of Europe, financed through the Centre for European Studies at the University of Lund. The fieldwork was made possible by the comparative project Annerledslandet (The Different Country) at the University of Bergen, Norway. The collection and compilation of material has, for the most part, been the result of teamwork with Maja Povržanović Frykman.
2. For a discussion of the politics of dead bodies in Romania, see Verdery 1999; for the use of similar arguments among the Istrian *esuli* in Italy, see Ballinger 2003.
3. Letting landscapes speak about the dead is not merely a matter of blood-soaked European fields where ancestors have made their sacrifices for the living. The September 11 attack on New York City has shown how even urban landscapes can come to resound with memories of loss and terror connected to national identity. “Memories of this landscape have been reflected in narratives of New Yorkers since the event and will be referred to in historical accounts for years to come” (Stewart & Strathern 2002:10).
4. In a rather confusing 20th century, Istria belonged to Habsburg until the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, when it was handed over to Italy. The fascist period under Benito Mussolini lasted from 1922 to 1943, after which it fell under German military command. From 1945 to 1947, Istria was divided into Zones A (Allied) and B (Yugoslav) control, and it was not until 1954 that the entire region became part of Yugoslavia. With Croatian (1991) and Slovenian (1990) independence, the major part of Istria became Croatian.
5. The Croatian Tourist Board, in marketing the Adriatic coast, uses the slogan: “The Mediterranean as it once was”.
6. As Ballinger (2003) has pointed out, a latent risk exists of creating a new “multicultural Istrian identity” that takes the shape of still another form of regional essentialism.
7. Slovenian ethnologist Borut Brumen (2001) has argued that the experience of living under so many rulers made people extremely aware of place itself, with its nature and particular memories. Historical time has been overtaken by virtual and social time, merging people and place into one.
8. There is a pre-history of how Istrian identity became rooted in landscape and material culture rather than ethnic and national difference. Towards the end of the 19th century, when Austrian ethnologists started to investigate this province of the empire, they became convinced they had captured the last remains of an archaic, pre-national phase of European popular culture (Nikočević & Škrbić 2001). In the widely read newspaper *Glas Istre* (The Voice of Istria) and in

the dominant local political party, *Istarski Demokratski Sabor* (Istrian Democratic Assembly), the idea of Istria as multicultural and multilingual is taken for granted – even as it is factually constantly challenged.

9. Davor Mandić, Director of the War Museum in Pula and historian of Croatia, gives 89,000 as the number of applications accepted from those who “opted for Italy” in all of Dalmatia and Istria, although he also estimates the total number to be 101,000.
10. Unlike the parish church that made something beyond visible and present, a monument openly proclaimed the Promised Land was realized and the results could be seen all around.
11. Polt is particularly good on Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, and I draw here as well on Rüdiger Safranski’s masterful intellectual biography (1998).
12. There are countless similar stories throughout Eastern Europe today: “What occurred in my village happened to the Don Cossacks and the Sudetendeutsche to the same or greater extent”, my interview partner said, as if to generalize his own experiences (see also the discussion in Verdery 1999).
13. Rebecca West, in her classic book of travels *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), makes similar observations where she brings out both the magnificent and tragic in the Yugoslavian culture of the time. The book “is an attack on the Christian doctrine of the Crucifixion and the atonement, in which our sins are forgiven by God in return for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross”, she writes, for “All our Western thought is founded upon this repulsive pretence that pain is the proper price of any good thing”. But is there really any meaning to pain and to sacrifice? See Kaplan 1994:4.
14. The interviews revealing the events that had taken place in 1945 and 2002 were carried out by the Director of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Pazin, Lidija Nikočević.
15. A reference to the many references the HDZ made to the “Independent State of Croatia” led by Ante Pavelić.

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