Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall

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Abstract:

Contemporary politics of memory and space/place in Serbia exhibit certain characteristics which would be partially examined through focusing on the memorial site of Staro Sajmište in central Belgrade. Once a concentration camp, this location underwent several phases of memorial (de)commemoration and various stages of public (in)visibility while competitive memorial traditions interchanged and defined this anthropological place both discursively and physically. Site's characteristic during its entire existence has been parallel urban centrality and symbolic marginality. Special emphasis is given to symbolic construction of this site in recent times and ways of its memorialization in the transitional period which depends on interplay of various global and local memorial cultures. Politics of partial remembrance which strive to accommodate potential oblivion of the historic heritage of this particular location seem to accommodate interests of several social groups.

Recycling Space and Memory

It could be argued that political power is expressed through control of both landscape and history, with the goal, among other things, to contribute to the establishment of a desirable political and/ or national consciousness among the population (Verdery 1999). Ideologically encoded space, with its communicational power and discursive potential, becomes an active participant in construction and perception of social reality, therefore transforming history into an element of "natural order of things", hiding at the same time its induced and artificial character (Azaryahu 1997: 481). Because of its physical character, space (both natural and built) is colloquially seen as less temporary and culturally affected than other traits of culture (although it ultimately never is), connoting at the same time solidity, authenticity and sense of longevity. Politics of space (and place) usually tend to transform as much space into place, i. e. space that occurs on level of identity (Tuan 1977). Such politics of space/place, combined with continuously defining culture of remembrance, endorse gradual formation of cultural management of place(s) and socio-cultural engineering of national identity in transitional Serbia, which is especially noticeable in respect to reconfiguration of Serbia's historical heritage of the 20th century. Responsibility of the vast majority of the post-Milošević ideological coalition for 1990s downfall and failed and criminal war efforts, led to direction of the public focus on socialist era and its overall condemnation, so as to swiftly bypass questions of responsibility for Yugoslav wars and war crimes. Gradual European shift from the "patriotic memory" to the "memory of genocide" (holocaust in particular) in public remembrance of World War 2 (Francois 2006: 228), found its equivalent in Serbia (already in 1990s) with the focus of memory being relocated from the resistance mythology to the evocation of ethnic Serb victims of that war. At the same time, new East European culture of remembrance of communism (especially Stalinism, gulags and Soviet occupation (Leggewie 2009)), produced its counterpart, notably in 2000s, in the public narratives of perceived Serb suffering under communism. These politics of memory in Serbia sometimes legitimize themselves with growing trans-national memorial culture, while at the same time they extensively alter and mystify them in the local context, and for local (political) use. Wrapped within the web of multifold national and global politics of memory and space/place, Serbian elites are trying to generally ignore the most recent past (wars in former Yugoslavia), focusing on narratives and images of previous historical eras, thus pursuing a discursive politics which could be designated as "simulation of continuity" (Malešević 2008: 17).

Within such a frame, numerous cases of transitional time/space reconfiguration emerge in Serbia, but one of them received special attention recently. British pop band Kosheen scheduled a concert in Belgrade for November 3rd 2007. The concert venue was Poseydon club in city's Staro Sajmište area (Staro Sajmište meaning Old Fairgrounds in Serbian, as to be distinguishable from modern fairground venues built in 1950s). The concert eventually never took place: combined domestic and foreign red alert was signaled, since the internationally acclaimed musical group was to hold a gig in a building which back in 1940s had mostly been frequented by Nazi guards and concentration camp inmates. First major concert by an international band triggered public acknowledgment of the more-less known fact that the particular venue used to be a pavilion of the German run WW2 concentration camp, locally known as Staro Sajmište or Sajmište, internationally as Sajmiste, Sajmiste (Semlin) or Semlin Lager (Semlin being German name for once separate town of Zemun, now a major Belgrade borough). After several years during which public ignored the fact that former house of terror was being used as an amusement facility, the story was out, and there's was no going back. In this short essay I'll try to shed some light on contemporary politics of memory and space in Serbia by examining the (de)construction of a site that never fully represented a memorial in strict sense.

Memorial Undone

Sajmiste was built and opened in 1937, less than a kilometer away from Belgrade city center en route to Zemun/Semlin. It originally represented a show-case trade-fair and amusement venue encompassing dozen pavilions at the doorstep of the city center, built in monumental modernist manner. With the German occupation of Serbia in 1941, fairground pavilions were turned into Nazi concentration and transit camp. From autumn 1941 until mid 1942, Sajmiste camp was a concentration site for Jewish women and children (*Judenslager Semlin*), mostly from Belgrade, who found their death on site, or, more often, in moving gas vans (transportation wagons turned into mobile gas chambers where victims were suffocated to death while the van was still moving) – approximately 6 500 mostly Serbian Jews lost their lives that way, and occupied Serbia was proclaimed to be the first *judenfrei* European territory. Some Holocaust researchers see the Sajmiste case as a significant landmark in the escalation of Nazi policy toward Jews from then onwards – utilization of gas vans and swift extermination of Serbian Jews "presaged the efficiency and routinized detachment of the death camps" (Browning 1985: 84). Once Serbian Jews were annihilated, the site had become a transitory camp for partisan resistance fighters, antifascist sympathizers and civilians from entire Yugoslavia (*Anhaltelager*

Semlin) – it is estimated that some 30 000 men and women passed through the *Anhaltslager* during this period (most of them were transferred further to forced labor camps and death camps), of whom more than 10 000 died from exhaustion, dysentery and beatings in the camp. Sajmiste was finally shut down in September 1944 (Koljanin 1992).

Following the end of the war, former camp facilities which survived Allied bombings went into further decay with some badly damaged pavilions being demolished, while those that remained temporarily housed labor brigade members, artists' studios, people with no adequate housing etc. Memorial status of the site was also provisory since the only commemoration that took place till mid 1980s was the erection of two secluded memorial plaques placed by local veteran and political organizations. During most of the socialist era the site was central in terms of urban positioning (since it covered the area between the historical city nucleus and newly built representative administrative quarters of socialist Novi Beograd/*New Belgrade*), but at the same time it was symbolically marginal when it came to historical and public prominence and value in the overall "city text" (because of reduced memorialization of the site, absence of urban or architectural regulation etc.). Reasons for petrification of this urban area during socialism are manifold, and they range from lack of interest in urbanization of the wider area of Sajmiste (because of private ownership of land parcels surrounding it), to Yugoslav WW2 memorial politics which emphasized locations of partisan and antifascist armed resistance (rather than sites of mass sufferings and civilian deaths) as prominent "realms of memory" of post-war Yugoslavia. Some authors argue that Yugoslav perception of the Holocaust also played a significant role in memorial neglect of this site, since official narratives didn't emphasize unique and specific character of the prosecution of Jews in WW2 (a discourse which wasn't at all present in other socialist countries, and which acquired prominence in the West only after 1960s) – bearing in mind that in the first phase of its existence Sajmiste camp served exclusively as a Jewish extermination camp, complete and overall memorialization of the site would pose a possible opposition to then prevailing politics of WW2 remembrance which placed genocide against Yugoslav Jews aside the main stream representations of the war (Ignjatović, Manojlović Pintar 2008a: 32).

In 1980s, a temporary commemorative 'revival' of the Sajmiste site occurred with the erection of a monument dedicated to WW2 camp prisoners and annual evocation rituals on former camp premises. This revival was determined by efforts to consolidate the crumbling socialist ideology and, even more, by the eruptive restitution of Serb nationalism which emphasized the Serb civilian martyr cult

(Ignjatović, Manojlović Pintar 2008b: 34). With the onset of Yugoslav wars, the site was additionally exploited by Serb nationalist regime which (mis)used the historical heritage of the camp to promote ideas about establishment of Serb *Yad Vashem* in the remaining camp pavilions, and emphasized Serb victims of fascism (not only of the Sajmiste camp but of other terror sites in former Yugoslavia) while publically neglecting victims of other ethnicities (Byford 2009). Following the downfall of Serb nationalist projects in 1990s, Staro Sajmište definitely sank into public oblivion being now of no political use to ruling elites. Following the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2000, former camp area no longer represented the place of "reduced" history (which was the case in socialist times), nor the place of "fabricated" history (what used to be in Milošević era), but empty space "cleansed" from any history. Newly established ideological hegemonic coalition kept on sending WW2, its results, context and heritage into further (public) oblivion. Three key pillars of contemporary memory politics of WW2 (and of recent Yugoslav wars as well) are summoned in gradual amnesia, partial amnesty, and substantial public revisionism, with cluster of public discourses comprising revisionist historiography, banal anticommunism, selection of memory, and "anti-antifascism" (Kuljić 2002: 405, 441). Given such ideological circumstances, the most appropriate concept of the camp's memorialization was no memorialization whatsoever, i. e. further marginalization of the site: thus, some buildings of the historic site were sold or leased during past ten years, and used for different activities, including entertainment. Seventy years after its initial erection, this location has returned to its original use, commercial amusement, but this time lacking pre-war grandeur and representation, and presenting itself in the normalized context of small-scale amusement entrepreneurship instead.

A question arises though: why was the Sajmiste issue brought to public attention amid overall oblivion and revision of the WW2 in Serbia? A possible answer might originate from the global, rather than local context: "Kosheen affair" was initiated abroad, not so much in Serbia. Special sensitivity and attention towards the treatment of Holocaust sites across Europe is facilitated by the net of transnational organizations and groups that nurture genocide memorial culture, at the same time determining intensive reinterpretation of the WW2 remembrance across Europe (Francoise 2006: 232). Such increased focus led to eventual recognition of embarrassing commercial activities taking place in remaining camp facilities in Belgrade, and subsequent responsive echo in Serbia. Rather than grassroots, the issue has

been set forward laterally. Nevertheless, local response (of city officials and cultural elites) was swift, affirmative and apparently promising.[1]

Multifunctional Oblivion

Embracing the newly raised issue, Belgrade officials and elites promptly and loudly announced future establishment of a memorial and museum complex in Staro Sajmište and overall regulation of the area. But, silence that occurred just several months past the Kosheen incident indicated differing motifs guiding the adoption of the camp issue than those publicly acknowledged. Rather than guided with principles of rightful commemoration of the terror site, it seems that local elites responsiveness was determined by need for definite urban regulation of previously neglected area. Staro Sajmište with surrounding urban parcels remains one of last unbuilt spaces in central Belgrade which is conveniently placed on the Sava river bank less than one kilometer from the historical city center. Construction boom which is steadily becoming stronger is guided by profit-oriented goals of private financiers who place large amounts of capital into construction projects in Belgrade which seem to be among the most profitable. Financial interests are in no position to ignore or indefinitely delay the issue of urban and infrastructural renovation and construction of one of the most attractive Belgrade areas on riverside banks (furthermore, this interest entirely overlaps with goals of city officials). Given the fact that Staro Sajmište is located in midst of this unbuilt urban area, it could be argued that, besides political and cultural elites, financial circles represent equally influential players in this particular urban planning and memorialization project. Naturally oriented toward maximizing gains, commercial interests realize that the less history there is per square meter of a construction plot, the bigger are the profits. At the same time, ruling political elites effectively pursue politics of revision of results and values of antifascist struggle with collateral damage being WW2 victims and their commemoration. Thus, the most powerful social players of both physical and symbolic city-building tend to ideologically destruct certain historic localities (Staro Sajmište included), and try to transform what once represented, or still represents, a (anthropological) place, a space congested with meanings and values shared by many people, into a

[1] Such situation also testified to political influence of particular associations: while the attention initiated by local and international Shoah researchers and organizations resulted in immediate official and media outcry, previous initiatives regarding the state of the former camp by groups gathering WW2 veterans and antifascists in former Yugoslavia, left the public discourse unchanged and silent. With new groups exercising dominant influence onto majority elites in this question, public perception of the Sajmiste camp in Serbia shifts gradually more towards the image of Sajmiste as primarily a Holocaust site (a perception already dominant in foreign academic and cultural circles) than as a "fascist terror site" the way it was usually perceived in previous decades. Such a shift does not originate from a special sensibility regarding the Holocaust, or acceptance of newly defined global European WW2 memorial culture, but rather from systematic denial and rejection of local, Yugoslav and Serbian, memorial culture and heritage of WW2 in former Yugoslavia.

"non-place", locality not connected with collective identities and with no, or minimal cultural significance (Auge 2005: 52), as to either maximize political, or financial gains; or both.

Such ambitions regarding urban planning of Staro Sajmište can be located by reading the subtext of several suggestions for memorialization of the site. In contrast to the time that immediately followed the intensive debate in 2007 (when sole and unanimous option was a memorial museum dedicated to victims of the camp, or fascism in general), 2008 saw somewhat novel concepts being proposed. Favorable option ceased to be a public memorial or a museum; instead, a concept sometimes designated as a "multifunctional center" emerged – media reported on a proposal of a museum centre that would include a number of institutions besides the Sajmiste Museum, like "Tolerance Museum" and range of other museums, including the museum of fine arts. Other options suggested interpolation of additional facilities to the historic site such as cafes and concert halls, and some went as far as opting for complete demolition of remaining Sajmiste pavilions. The red line of all such proposals was bluntly delivered aloud at the 2008 "Belgrade Salon of Architecture": thematic exposition of Staro Sajmište reconstruction plans exhibited projects of several authors to whom a specific approach was suggested - as Belgrade daily *Blic* reports in its April 22nd issue, the authors were advised by the organizers to bear in mind that "the memory of those who lost their lives there should be present, but it should not be dominant." Discourse of "suppressed memory" in recycled and interpolated space opportunely blurs and marginalizes particular historic memory, and, at the same time, introduces commercial interests in planning and exploitation of urban space. Although opposing opinions can be heard on this issue, such voices lack social or political power, while economic interests are gaining momentum: when dealing with certain public spaces, financial circles try to accommodate, to use Connerton's (2004) expression, "wall against memory", so as to detach potential consumers from cultural meanings associated with particular places which could negatively affect attendance or consumption in certain commercial (non)places/spaces. The same way building a place from space is sometimes deemed necessary, the opposite process, destruction of a particular place, serves the similar function. Amid slowly emerging global memorial culture of WW2 and presently oppositional memory of WW2 in former Yugoslavia (mostly defined during socialism) on one side, and prevailing and politically opportune culture of WW2 revision and oblivion in contemporary Serbia on the other, it seems that eventual memorial construction of Staro Sajmište area in near future would, at best, send out additionally reduced and commercially restrained message to the public. Instead of a memorial place, in such a case one could expect to visit a memorial "non-place". Ironically, this year (2009) almost nobody is mentioning the potential memorial,

while occasional gatherings at the Poseydon club show that everything is, more or less, business as usual. The only noticeable novelty is the mammoth shopping mall built 100 meters away from former camp pavilions – the transitional consumerist city is inevitably approaching the historic site. Public astonishment caused by efforts to build a shopping mall opposite the entrance to the Auschwitz memorial site in 1990s (which eventually wasn't undertaken) repeated itself in Belgrade in 2007 and 2008 once current uses of former camp facilities were publically acknowledged, and paraphrased question from the Polish case was occasionally raised: "Is it appropriate to place a mall in the vicinity of former concentration camp?" However, it seems that in this particular Serbian case, a somewhat different dilemma is haunting local elites: "Is it appropriate to erect a memorial of the former concentration camp in the vicinity of the mall?" – genocide and dark past simply don't make a good business opportunity.

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