The Battle of Vukovar: A Turning Point in the Croatian “Homeland War”

Dražen Živić and Iva Šušić Degmečić

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/5457>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.5457

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2016

Number of pages: 182-191

ISBN: 987 2-9600926-4-6

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Dražen Živić and Iva Šušić Degmečić, "The Battle of Vukovar: A Turning Point in the Croatian "Homeland War"", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 123 | 2016, Online since 02 November 2021, connection on 04 November 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/5457> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.5457>

The Battle of Vukovar

A Turning Point in the Croatian “Homeland War”

→ Dražen Živić
Institute of Social Sciences
Ivo Pilar

→ Iva Šušić Degmečić
The Memorial Centre of
Homeland War Vukovar

VUKOVAR: A TOWN WITH A LONG AND RICH HISTORY

Vukovar is situated in the eastern part of the Republic of Croatia. The town has a long, interesting and turbulent past, comprised of rich historical, cultural, spiritual, urban, architectural and economic heritage. The evidence of continuous settlement in Vukovar broader area dates back five thousand years, from prehistoric Vučedol culture, Ancient Rome, Middle Ages, Ottoman Empire, Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to present times. The town's population and economy increased due to its remarkable geographical position. Vukovar lies on fertile soil of loess plateau, on the right bank of the Danube. It is situated at the crossroads of historical encounters and confrontations of many different nationalities and cultures. For more than 800 years, Vukovar has been deeply and permanently influenced by Croatian, Central European and Danubian cultural and civilizational identity. The evidence can be seen in many aspects of life and work of local residents along with a complex, multi-religious and multiethnic demographic picture.

Due to its favourable geographical and geopolitical position where historical, social, and cultural influences of Danubian region and Dinarides intertwined for centuries, Vukovar remained the shortest and fastest link between Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. The town and its broader area were often at the very heart of political and armed conflicts where armies of different national and ideological perspectives met. Nevertheless, because of the strong connection between the town and its residents, and between the place and its memory, Vukovar always managed to renew what was damaged and faced the future with a creative and positive spirit.

During the summer and autumn of 1991, the self-proclaimed Republic of Croatia was forced to defend its independence and sovereignty with very modest weaponry when Vukovar found itself in the midst of an aggression without precedent in the town's history. The goal of the invasion was not just the occupation of the town and the broader area in accordance with Greater-Serbian national policy (“all Croatian

– The Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of the Homeland War.

occupied territory annexed by Serbia and organized in some kind of ‘union of Serbian countries’” (Rogić Nehajev 1998, 20¹)), but also to violently erase all symbols of Croatian national and cultural identity. The aim was “to create a new identity for the town, which will be based on historical oblivion” (Žanić 2007, 80). The Croatian roots and history of Vukovar had to be wiped out and the town turned into something it never was: the “Serbian Athens” on the Danube.

THE BATTLE OF VUKOVAR: BASIC FACTS

The Battle of Vukovar, which lasted from 25 August to 20 November 1991, has been in many aspects (military, political, demographic, victimological, humanitarian, social, international) an interesting phenomenon with complex causes and far-reaching consequences, not just for the Vukovar area but for the whole Republic of Croatia. Along with the Croatian soldiers, who were poorly armed and not very numerous, the town was defended by the members of other ethnic groups including

(1) All translations from Croatian are the authors’.

Serbs, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, and Germans. Opposing them were tens of thousands of soldiers, members of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) and Serbian forces who were also much better equipped. They disposed of ten times more artillery and a hundred times more shells, mines and other ammunition.

In spite of the enormous disproportion in arms to the advantage of the aggressor, the defence obtained some military successes. This turned out to be crucial to attain diplomatic and international recognition, and eventually to establish the modern Croatian state (Jurčević 2000; Sučić & Živić 2000). However, as Ivan Rogić reminds us,

it is completely obvious that Vukovar was defeated if observed only on an empirical level. The town, goods and many lives were lost. Nevertheless, in the overall context of the war between Serbia and Croatia, the losses of the JNA and local Serbs were so enormous that it irrevocably stopped the main strategic JNA military plans and consequently changed the relations in the War. It can be said that Vukovar was lost, but Croatia was saved. (Rogić 1993, 509-510)

— The monument at the site of Ovčara Mass Grave.

© Croatian Homeland War Memorial and Documentation Centre

After three months of severe daily bombing, Serbian forces broke the last line of defence of the encircled Croatian forces on 18 November 1991 before occupying the town's centre and, the following day, the borough Borovo Naselje in the north-western part of Vukovar. Only a few Croatian soldiers continued to put up resistance until the early morning of 20 November 1991. The cease of military actions did not bring relief neither to the civilians who lived in dark and damp basements and shelters nor to the imprisoned Croatian soldiers. With the occupation of the town, numerous and systematic individual and mass executions of Croatian military and civilians followed, as well as the expulsion of civilian population including the elderly, sick, wounded, women and children.

The international community failed to recognize the suffering of the people in Vukovar and did not intervene to stop the aggression and war crimes. It was incapable of preventing the destruction of the town and the abduction of wounded civilians, military and medical staff from the Vukovar Hospital to Ovčara farm, where they were tortured and executed. According to Bruna Esih, the international community, and Europe in particular, did not properly respond to calls for help:

The European security system appeared to be completely inefficient and inactive regarding the Serbian aggression against the Republic of Croatia. The implementation of its protection mechanisms was not in accordance with demands and principles of international humanitarian law [...]. (Esih 2007, 117-124)

As Vlado Šakić puts it,

the world considered and sometimes still considers the conflict in former Yugoslavia as a civil war with divided responsibility. [...] 1991 Vukovar and Croatian Homeland War happened in the gap between Croatian aspirations for independence and intentions of a few powerful international circles to build the third Yugoslavia on the ruins of the first and second. (Šakić 2000, 26)

MATERIAL AND HUMAN LOSSES

During and after the siege of Vukovar, thousands of persons were wounded, killed, executed in individual or mass shootings, forcibly taken away, or they went missing. Around 20,000 people were expelled from their homes. These figures reveal the gravity of the Greater-Serbian aggression against Croatia which bears the mark of genocide.

On top of the human trauma, the town suffered serious material damage. Due to the heavy and incessant artillery and air attacks of the JNA, around 90 percent of Vukovar's housing stock was destroyed (Živić 2012). The estimated war damage for housing units, economic and infrastructural objects amounts to hundreds of millions of euros. The town's landmarks and identity symbols such as the Franciscan monastery and the Church of St. Philip and Jacob, the Castle of Counts of Eltz,

the Palace Syrmia, the valuable baroque city centre, and cultural monuments were singled out for systematic destruction during the siege (Karač 2004). Even hospitals, schools, parks and graveyards were not spared.

Vukovar fell victim to several crimes of “urbicide” (the deliberate destruction of the town and the consequent change in demographic structure), “culturecide”, and “memoricide” (the deliberate and systematic mass destruction of material and non-material historical and cultural heritage, and the suppressing of memories) (Grmek, Gjidara & Šimac 1993; Sjekavica 2012; Stanić & Kutleša 2008). The historic urban area in Vukovar was the best conserved site in continental Croatia. During the three-month siege, 118 individual monuments were demolished, damaged or completely destroyed. According to *World Monuments Watch*, Vukovar’s historic city centre was among the one hundred most endangered monumental sites in the world during the war (Karač & Štulhofer 2008). It is important to emphasize that the material devastation of Vukovar continued in the years of Serbian occupation from 1991 to 1997 and ended only with the Peaceful Reintegration in January 1998.

Not only was the infrastructural damage immense, many books and collections were taken away from the Vukovar City Museum, the Franciscan monastery, the city library, private owners and other institutions (Kurolt 2013; Šulc 2012). The artefacts attested to the long history of Vukovar, which was an important demographic, cultural, administrative, crafts and trading centre before the invasion. Indeed, Vukovar was the material and spiritual centre of eastern Croatia with a Croatian, Danubian, and Central European civilization, as proved by these documents. The stolen collections thus transmitted the memory of Vukovar’s past from which gradually the multicultural identity of the town and its residents was formed.

In 2005, a trial against JNA officers Colonel Mile Mrkšić, Major Veselin Šljivančanin and Captain Miroslav Radić commenced at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague (Vukovar Hospital indictment, IT-95-13/1). On this occasion, demographic figures regarding the events in Vukovar in 1991 were presented. It was defined and documented that during and after the occupation at least 1739 Croatian military and civilians were killed (Marijan 2013). This number is far from accurate, however, because it does not include the people that are still listed as missing, forcibly taken away or detained.² Also, we do not know the death toll among JNA members, members of Serbian forces and civilians who lived in parts of occupied Vukovar outside the control of Croatian authority.

Which is more, forced war migrations also fall within the category of human and demographic losses that are a direct consequence of the ethnic cleansing conducted by the JNA and Serbian occupational authorities. According to official records presented at ICTY during the Vukovar hospital trial in 2006, the total number of displaced persons from the area was 23,174, 91.6% of which were Croats, 1.7% Serbs, 1.6% Ruthenians, 1.3% Hungarians, 0.6% Bosniaks, 0.5% Ukrainians and 0.4% Albanians.

After the occupation, the JNA and Serbian forces imprisoned several thousands of Croatian soldiers and civilians and took them to the camps set up in Vukovar and

(2) According to the records of the Administration for Detained and Missing Persons from 31 December 2015, 303 persons from Vukovar are reported missing. Their fate is still unknown, since mass and individual graves with their remains are not yet found, or their bodies are not yet identified after being exhumed from previously discovered graves in Vukovar area.

— Devastated Vukovar.

its surroundings, and in Serbia. The camps were an integral part of Greater-Serbian policy and conditions were harsh:

Housing conditions on the premises were absolutely inappropriate, not only for people but even animals [...]. The camps were established in abandoned farms, warehouses, basements of different public and private buildings, sections of army barracks and regular prisons, etc. [...] Prisoners were tortured individually or collectively, day and night, during line-ups, meals, work and sleep. They were treated the same way during systematic interrogations, which all of them had to go through several times (Jurčević & Ivanda 2004, 64-65).

At least 2796 Croatian military and civilians imprisoned in Vukovar area in 1991 were tortured and maltreated in camps or prisons in Croatia and Serbia. The youngest detainee was 15, the oldest 81 years old.

In September and October 1996, during the Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danubian area (which lasted from 15 January 1996 to 15 January 1998), the exhumation of the mass grave at Ovčara farm began. The remains of 200 wounded civilians, military and medical staff from the Vukovar Hospital, executed on 20 November 1991 by the JNA and Serbian paramilitary forces, were exhumed. The youngest victim was 16, the oldest 72 years old. The bodies of two women, one of

whom was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, were also recovered from the grave.

The crime at Ovčara is one in a series of mass crimes committed by the JNA and Serbian forces in Vukovar for which the International Court of Justice established the existence of the *actus reus* of genocide in the case concerning “Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Croatia v. Serbia)” in February 2015 (Nazor 2015). Over time, Ovčara has become a symbol of remembrance for all the execution sites and graves in Vukovar and its broader area.

In 1998, the largest mass grave in Europe since World War II was discovered at the New Cemetery in Vukovar, from which the remains of 938 victims were exhumed. Croatian soldiers and civilians were buried there by the JNA after the occupation of the town. The Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of the Homeland War was inaugurated on the site in the year 2000 and is one of the most important and most visited memorial places in Vukovar today.

The war has left deep wounds and affected the lives of the people who returned to Vukovar (Cvikić, Živić & Žanić 2014). However, despite the fact that the town was devastated and thousands of lives were lost, it survived in the memory of those who lived and those who were expelled. It is remembered in documents, archives, museums and family photographs. These memories instigated people to return and reconstruct the town, not only in its material dimension but also

the spiritual. It was important to rebuild the houses, roads and economy, but it was even more crucial to symbolically reconstruct everything that confirmed and strengthened Vukovar’s identity as the old Croatian cultural capital on the Danube – Rogić refers to it as the town’s “Croatian Danubian façade” (Rogić 1993, 501-519).

1991 VUKOVAR: SYMBOL AND SIGNIFICANCE

Due to the resistance by Vukovar defenders, and because of the human losses and material destruction that remind us of World War II, for Croatian citizens, Vukovar became a symbol of resistance, courage, loyalty, patriotism, unity, victory, sacrifice, suffering and above all love of life, liberty, people and homeland. The Vukovar episode is regarded throughout the country as a tragedy, and people strongly associate it with the unfortunate ones who had to leave their hometown. Vukovar, the “hero town” (Žanić 2008, 29-50), thus became the symbol of a young Croatian state facing an uncertain future (Kale 2000; Rogić 1993; Rogić Nehajev 1998; Skoko & Bagić 2007, 169).

In time, Croatians started to perceive Vukovar as a “winner because it is a victim” (Živić, 2012) and now frequently visit the town’s memorial places: the Memorial Home “Ovčara”, the Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of the Homeland War, the Vukovar Hospital, the Memorial Home of Croatian Defenders, the Water Tower, “Veľepromet” Hangar, the Franciscan monastery and the Church of St. Philip and Jacob, the Memorial Centre of Homeland War Vukovar, the Castle Eltz. Around the Memorial Day of the Sacrifice of Vukovar on 18, 19 and 20 November, visitor numbers peak. Thousands of people from all over Croatia and the world come to the area on these days, forming a long Column of Memory in which they march from the Vukovar Hospital to the Memorial Cemetery (Žanić 2014).

Twenty-five years after the events, Vukovar is still seen as “the town whose persistent defence saved the rest of the country” (Žanić, 2007, 83). The 1991 events have shaped modern Croatian national identity and informed its democratic principles at a time when the country was liberating itself from the inherited Yugo-communist model of governing. Vukovar is also a moral benchmark Croats refer to in order to encourage unity on a social and political level, and to promote humanistic values such as love, respect and freedom. For the international community, Vukovar was a turning point which eventually led to the recognition of Croatia’s independence.

In many ways, 1991 Vukovar was a European and even global matter illustrating both the inadequacy and effectiveness of internationally coordinated legal and administrative processes. Despite the proceedings instituted before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the punishment of crimes that happened in 1991 in Vukovar, the international community could not prevent atrocities from happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina a few years later. The genocide in Srebrenica was one of the most horrific episodes of this war. On the other hand, the process of Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube region and Vukovar into Croatian legal and territorial system (1996-1998) is justly considered to be one

— Devastated Vukovar.

of the most successful peace missions of the United Nations, and now serves as an example for the resolution of crises elsewhere in the world.

Although not all aspects are scientifically and objectively investigated yet, there is no doubt that Vukovar holds a central position in the preservation and transmission of Croatian national memory. More than a simple episode of war, Vukovar teaches us about reconstruction of life in a post-war period (Žanić 2007). ■

WORKS CITED

- Esih, Bruna, 'Europski sigurnosni mehanizmi i vukovarska (po)ratna stvarnost' [European security mechanisms and the reality of the Vukovar war], in Dražen Živić & Ivana Žebec (eds.), *Vukovar – hrvatska baština i perspektive razvoja*, Zagreb & Vukovar: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2007, 117-124.
- Cvikić, Sandra, Dražen Živić & Mateo Žanić, 'Vukovar 1991 Battle and Cultural Memory', *International Journal for Cultural Researches* IV(5), 71-80.
- Grmek, Mirko Dražen, Marc Gjidara & Neven Šimac, *Etničko čišćenje: povijesni dokumenti o jednoj srpskoj ideologiji* [Ethnic cleansing: historical documents about Serbian ideology], Zagreb: Globus, 1993.
- Jurčević, Josip, 'Povijesno značenje Vukovara '91.' [The historical significance of Vukovar 1991], in Josip Jurčević (ed.), *Vukovar '91. Značenje, vrednote, identitet*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2000, 11-18.
- --- & Katica Ivanda, 'Vukovar '91 – Geneva Conventions and Camp Experiences', in Josip Jurčević, Dražen Živić & Bruna Esih (eds.), *Vukovar '91: international echoes and significance*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2004, 43-76.
- Kale, Eduard, 'Hrvatski domovinski rat i kulturni identitet' [Croatian Homeland War and cultural identity], in Josip Jurčević (ed.), *Vukovar '91. Značenje, vrednote, identitet*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2000, 111-118.
- Karač, Zlatko, 'The Tragedy of the Urban Heritage of Vukovar. Destruction of the Croatian and European Town Identity in 1991', in Josip Jurčević, Dražen Živić & Bruna Esih (eds.), *Vukovar '91: international echoes and significance*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2004, 125-144.
- --- & Arijana Štulhofer, 'Obnova povijesne urbane cjeline Vukovara nakon Domovinskog rata. Kritika modela i metodološki aspekti' [The restoration of the historic city of Vukovar after the Croatian War of Independence. Review of the model and methodological aspects], *Društvena istraživanja* 17(1-2), 149-170.
- Kurolt, Marko, *Treba li sve zaboraviti?! Spašavanje vukovarskog kulturnog blaga. Dnevnički zapisi, 1991-1999* [Should we all forget?! Saving the Vukovar cultural treasures. Diary entries 1991-1999], Zagreb & Vukovar: Hrvatska franjevačka provincija sv. Ćirila i Metoda, Franjevački samostan Vukovar, 2013.
- Marijan, Davor, *Obrana i pad Vukovara* [Defence and fall of Vukovar], Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2013.
- Nator, Ante, *Greater-Serbian Aggression against Croatia in the 1990s*, Zagreb: The Croatian Memorial-Documentation Centre of the Homeland War, 2011.
- ---, 'Presuda Međunarodnoga suda pravde u Haagu 3. veljače 2015. i povijesne činjenice' [The judgment of the International Court of Justice in The Hague on 3 February 2015 and historical facts], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 47(3), 2015, 635-654.
- Rogić Nehajev, Ivan, *Smaragdni brijed. Vukovar 91. i hrvatski identitet* [Vukovar and Croatian identity], Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 1998.
- Rogić, Ivan, 'Vukovar '91. i hrvatski nacionalni identitet' [Vukovar 1991 and Croatian national identity], *Društvena istraživanja* 2(2-3), 1993, 501-519.
- Šakić, Vlado, 'Što je načelo Vukovar (znanstvena bilješka – 17.11.1998.)' [The principle of Vukovar (scientific note)], in Josip Jurčević (ed.), *Vukovar '91. Značenje, vrednote, identitet*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2000, 19-26.
- Sjekavica, Marko, 'Sustavno uništavanje baštine – prema pojmu kulturocida/heritocida' [The systematic destruction of heritage – on the concept of culturecide/heritocide], *Informatica Museologica* 43(1-4), 2012, 57-74.
- Skoko, Božo & Dragan Bačić, 'Image Vukovara u hrvatskoj javnosti – 15 godina nakon stradanja' [Image of the Croatian inhabitants of Vukovar, 15 years after the suffering], in Dražen Živić & Ivana Žebec (eds.), *Vukovar – hrvatska baština i perspektive razvoja*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2007, 167-180.
- Stanić, Sanja & Ana Kutleša, 'Rat i okoliš' [The war and the environment], *Polemos* 11(1), 2008, 11-31.
- Sučić, Stjepan & Dražen Živić, 'Značenje Vukovarske bitke u stvaranju i obrani hrvatske države' [The significance of the Vukovar battle in the creation and defence of the Croatian state], in Dražen Živić & Ivana Žebec (eds.), *Vukovar – hrvatska baština i perspektive razvoja*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2007, 73-96.
- Šulc, Branka, 'Zaštita i obnova spomeničke baštine' [The protection and restoration of cultural heritage], in Živić, Dražen (ed.), *Vukovarsko-srijemska županija: prostor, ljudi, identitet*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 271-282.
- The Croatian Government, State Committee for War Damage Assessment, *War damage in the Croatian Republic: Final report*, Zagreb, September 1999.
- Žanić, Mateo, 'Važnost rituala u poslijeratnom razdoblju – primjer Vukovara' [The importance of rituals in the postwar period – the example of Vukovar], *Polemos* 10(1), 2007, 73-90.
- ---, 'Konstrukcija poslijeratnog prostora: simbolička izgradnja Vukovara' [The construction of the postwar space: the symbolic construction of Vukovar], *Polemos* 11(2), 2008, 29-50.
- ---, 'Društveni okviri obilježavanja. Vukovarska bitka i Dan sjećanja na žrtvu Vukovara 1991. godine' [The social frameworks of commemorating. The battle of Vukovar Remembrance Day and the sacrifice of Vukovar 1991], in Ivana Žužul et al (eds.), *Kultura, identitet, društvo – europski realiteti*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2014, 262-277.
- Živić, Dražen, 'Izazovi i mogućnosti poslijeratne revitalizacije Grada Vukovara' [The challenges and opportunities of post-war revitalization of Vukovar], *Hrvatski geografski glasnik* 74(1), 2012, 75-90.
- --- (ed.), *Victor Quia Victima, Nada za Hrvatsku* [Hope for Croatia], Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2012.