The Memorial Centre of Homeland War Vukovar, Croatia

Mémorial de la guerre patriotique de Vukovar

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Memorial site

THE MEMORIAL CENTRE OF HOMELAND WAR VUKOVAR, CROATIA

Reconstruction of concentration camps Stajićevo and Begejci.

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The military siege of Vukovar began on 25 August and ended on 20 November 1991. During the three-month period, the town was completely surrounded and all entrance roads were blocked. The only way into the town was the so called “corn road”, the supply route that connected Vukovar to Vinkovci via Bogdanovci and Marinci. On 1 October the JNA (Yugoslav National Army) captured Marinci, thus cutting off the only remaining communication with Vukovar (Sučić, 2011, 33). Even though the town was totally surrounded from that moment on, it took the JNA another month and a half to crush the Croatian defence.

The siege by Serbia, the JNA, the territorial defence of Serbia and Serbian paramilitary units left Vukovar completely demolished. The number of armed defenders in the town itself never exceeded the figure of 1800 to 2000 policemen, members of the National Guard and volunteers from all parts of Croatia (Nazor 2011, 220). According to a JNA source, the strength of the JNA in eastern Slavonia on the contrary was estimated at 37,613 troops, 667 tanks, 505 armoured personnel carriers, 428 units of support artillery, 158 units of anti-armour artillery and 380 units of anti-aircraft artillery (221). The evident disproportion in arms and military equipment has contributed to the perception of Vukovar as a symbol of the Croatian War of Independence – called “Homeland War” in Croatia – and to the image of its defenders as “national heroes”.

Even if most of the defenders, who were organized through local communities, had not had any formal military training, they were able to withstand for three months. The JNA and the Serbs eventually took control of the town, but were weakened on a military and political level. According to the figures of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia, the Serbian forces lost several thousands of soldiers and about 600 armoured vehicles (Marijan 2002, 398). The fact that the JNA was not capable of further advances ...

●●● as originally planned by the Supreme Command of the armed forces of the SFRY (the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) had a devastating effect on JNA soldiers' morale and motivation. During the period of the invasion, other parts of Croatia also managed to mobilize men (Jurčević 1993, 496), an important factor for the overall defence of Croatia. Moreover, the Vukovar tragedy produced a turnaround in the attitude of the international community which started to sympathize more with the Croatian cause, and eventually acknowledged the newly formed Republic.

The post-occupation events in Vukovar – mass killings, executions, torture, sexual abuse, concentration camps, ethnic cleansing and looting – left permanent wounds that shaped the town's identity. Siniša Glavašević, a journalist of Croatian Radio Vukovar, describes the town's ordeals as follows:

Someone simply stole everything [...]. Your past is simply destroyed and now you have nothing. You must build from scratch, first your own past, look for your own roots, and then for your own present. And if there is still any strength in you, invest it in the future.¹

The aim of the Memorial Centre of Homeland War Vukovar is, in the spirit of Glavašević, to connect Vukovar's past and present, and to shape its future. It was founded in 2013 in honour of the soldiers, civilians and the city itself, as a site of remembrance, education, research and documentation. Among the many activities of the Centre are: the organization of commemorative ceremonies and anniversaries, the collection of artefacts and historical

documents, the preparation of exterior and interior exhibitions, and the maintenance of memorial buildings. The Centre displays a permanent exhibition, "The Memory of the Homeland War – the Battle of Vukovar", which presents the events from May 1991 and the rebellion of the insurgent Serbs in Borovo Selo, the first barricades and blocking of roads and rail routes, and the beginning of the organized defence of Vukovar. Visitors can also see the exhibition of infantry weapons used in the War, the reconstruction of Serbian concentration camps Stajićevo and Begejci, the simulated battlefield "Brigade Reinforced in Defence" and outdoor exhibits. The camps are reconstructed in the basement of a military barrack, showing the living conditions through videos and photos. The Memorial is also involved in the organization of conferences, seminars and symposiums linked to the Croatian War of Independence and the Battle of Vukovar.

Although the Centre is still very young, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports has made the project "Eighth-graders' Visit to Vukovar" mandatory for all primary schools in the Republic of Croatia. The program includes a visit to a number of memorial sites that remember the war and are important for the construction of Croatia's cultural memory. The pupils also visit Vukovar City Museum, situated in Castle Eltz, and Vučedol Archaeological Museum to gain insight into the town's broader history. The two-day visit ends with Peace Education focused on values of coexistence, understanding and tolerance.

Twenty-five years have passed and in Vukovar, "the traces of the War can still be seen in the streets and faces of

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people" (Živić 2008, 128). Suspicion and distrust are still present in people's hearts and minds. Vukovar remains deeply divided until today. Although there is no physical segregation, the social division is visible in stores, café-bars, restaurants, kindergartens, schools and sport events. The process starts from a very young age and continues through elementary schools and high schools where Croatian and Serbian children go to separate classes, use different manuals and focus on different aspects of history. Some kindergartens in Vukovar even have separate entrance doors and their playgrounds are divided by a wire. There have been initiatives since 2003 to develop a "New School"

project that would be open to both Croatian and Serbian children. Although the initiative was applauded by several parents, the system is still not implemented due to a lack of political will. Clearly, the Peaceful Reintegration process in 1998 did not transform Vukovar into an intercultural community. Finding the missing persons and prosecuting the perpetrators are preconditions to true peace, trust and consolidation. The Memorial Centre therefore aims to be a place of reflection and remembrance for young generations. ■

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Memorial Centre of Homeland War Vukovar

◆ The Memorial Home "Ovčara".

(1) 'Story about a town' by Siniša Glavašević, a journalist of Croatian Radio Vukovar who was taken prisoner at the Vukovar Hospital and was killed at Ovčara after the occupation of Vukovar. The text was written during the siege and destruction of Vukovar (Nazor 2011, 402).

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◆ Simulation of a battlefield: “Brigade Reinforced in Defence”.

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