

Unearthing the Past?

The Controversies of the State-Funded Quest for Graves of Victims of Communism in Serbia

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Paper Presented at the 2019 ASN World Convention, Columbia University 2-4 May 2019

Do No Cite Without the Permission of the Author(s)

Abstract

In 2009, the Serbian government established two fact-finding commissions dealing with the gravesites of the post-war period. The centrality of the Chetniks and their leader Dragoljub Mihailović in hegemonic memory politics and discourses on victims of communism and the vast importance of finding Mihailović's burial site is evident in the fact that the first commission that the state formed had only one task – to find more information about the circumstances of Mihailović's execution, with an ultimate goal of finding his remains. In addition to that, the State Commission for Secret Graves of Those Killed after September 1944 was established in the same year, with a broader scope of locating and marking all graves in the territory of Serbia. Both commissions involved historians and were affiliated with the Institute of Contemporary History. In 2011, during the process of rehabilitation of Mihailović, they joined their efforts searching for his remains in Belgrade, however, without success. These efforts were predominantly based on testimonies of a very uncertain reliability and they often ended in embarrassing public failures. Involving interesting characters transforming into important actors and exhumations of an amateur nature, the state attempts often resembled spontaneous self-initiated actions. This paper discusses the work and results of the two fact-finding commissions, illuminating the informal nature of state-sanctioned memory politics and underlining that the Chetniks and Dragoljub Mihailović constitute the central theme of institutional level of memory work in contemporary Serbia. Besides the sources generated by the commissions and the public discourses, the paper is based on the interviews of the members of commissions and extensive fieldwork in Serbia. Established by the government, the commissions did not resemble a state-funded investigative body, but it often seemed like an informal endeavour. Because of this oscillation between an official governmental body and a bottom-up initiative, the sensationalist media reports, and the failure to fulfil their goals, the two commissions represent a fascinating case study for the wider dynamics of state-sanctioned memory politics on the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia in Serbia. Moreover, using this case study, the paper demonstrates the superficial nature of the state interest for all other groups considered victims of communism within the hegemonic discourses, except the Chetniks, that often does not go far beyond the symbolic and rhetorical level.

While painting an iconostasis in a church on the mountain of Zlatibor in October 2017, speleologist and fresco painter Dimitrije Mirko Ćelić met a local who told him a story about two mass graves in the area, containing remains of local young men executed at the end of the Second World War by the Yugoslav communists because of their belonging to the Chetnik movement.¹ He immediately called his fellow speleologists from Belgrade to join him in explorations of a cave nearby and, as they climbed down to the bottom of Cerova cave, he discovered dozens of human skeletons. According to Ćelić, each one had a wire around wrists.² He found various objects: shoes, belts, cigarette cases, mirrors, and other personal belongings, but no military symbols, because “the Chetniks had most probably taken them off in fear of revenge and hoping to survive the war”, as he clarified.³ After the discovery, Ćelić, also a history enthusiast committed himself to the study of the post-war executions in the area through testimonies of the oldest locals and came to the conclusion that between two and three hundred Chetniks had been tricked and executed by the Partisans there. He called Milan Stamatović, the mayor of Čajetina, who also went down to the cave, accompanied by six speleologists and four priests. The priests climbed down a rope to perform a memorial service for the unknown dead at the bottom of the cave. The police were informed about the findings, in the hope for a professional exhumation and identification of remains.⁴

Glasses resembling those worn by Dragoljub Mihailović were among the objects found in the cave. Immediately, the news about the possibility of a discovery of Mihailović’s remains broke out. The “greatest Serbian secret”, hidden for seventy years, was about to be solved.⁵ There were more reasons to think Mihailović could have been buried in Zlatibor, according to Stamatović: certain testimonies claimed that Slobodan Penezić Krcun, the leader of the action of capturing Mihailović, and Miloš Minić, the prosecutor in his trial, used to come to Zlatibor

¹ The Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, more commonly referred to as the Chetnik movement, were a royalist and predominantly Serbian nationalist movement active during the Second World War under the leadership of Dragoljub Draža Mihailović. Although officially representing the Yugoslav government in exile and enjoying the Allied support as a resistance movement until 1943, the Chetnik units also engaged in collaboration with occupation and quisling forces and committed atrocities against civilian population. Led by anti-communism, they started fighting the Partisans already in Autumn 1941 and this conflict determined their position until the end of the war, based on a passive and nominal resistance to occupation and collaboration. Mihailović was captured at the end of the war, sentenced to death in the 1946 Belgrade Process, and subsequently executed, while the Chetniks were marked as collaborators and war criminal during Yugoslav state socialism.

² Nikola Janković, ‘Predali se partizanima, pa završili na dnu jame!’, Večernje novosti, 7 October 2017, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:689418-Predali-se-partizanima-pa-završili-na-dnu-jame>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nikola Janković, ‘Naočare đenerala Draže pronađene u jami Cerova?’, Večernje novosti, 8 November 2017, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:694670-Naočare-djenerala-Draze-pronađene-u-jami-Cerova>.

⁵ Ibid.

in the post-war years and ask questions about the cave. As Stamatović explains, “it was important to them to find out personally, without intermediaries, what the locals knew about the secret hidden in the cave”.⁶ He claimed that researchers had been zealously and knowingly kept away from the Cerova cave. Thus, something important had to happen there, such as that Mihailović had been executed and thrown into the pit where his young comrades had been buried a year earlier.

If anyone involved in this discovery had checked the facts, they would have quickly realized that it was impossible that Mihailović had been buried there. More specifically, the glasses discovered in the mass grave in Zlatibor could not belong to Dragoljub Mihailović because they are kept at the Security Intelligence Agency, together with other personal items he had with him at the time of his capture. Three years before the Zlatibor discovery, the glasses had been exhibited in the Historical Museum of Serbia in Belgrade for months, as a part of *U ime naroda* exhibition about political repression in Serbia in the period after the Second World War. The media reported about them extensively, including *Večernje novosti* newspaper that published the news about Zlatibor as exclusive. The glasses and other personal belongings were presented to the Serbian public for the first time in 2010, in the new permanent exhibition of the Military Museum involving personal belongings of both Mihailović and Tito.⁷ After the news revealing that it could not be Mihailović, the media interest disappeared and a professional exhumation and identification of remains has not been done.

Almost a decade before the “Draža’s glasses” controversy, the Serbian state authorities had initiated and supported attempts to solve the greatest Serbian mystery of the location of Mihailović’s remains. In a similar way to the discovery at Zlatibor, their efforts were predominantly based on testimonies of a very uncertain reliability and often ended in embarrassing failures. Involving interesting characters accidentally turning into important actors and exhumations of an amateur nature, the state attempts have often resembled the self-initiated action of a fresco painter and a group of speleologists.

In 2009, the Serbian government established two fact-finding commissions, both operating under its jurisdiction and dealing with the gravesites of the post-war period. The centrality of the Chetniks and their leader Dragoljub Mihailović in dominant memory politics and discourses on victims of communism and the vast importance of finding Mihailović’s burial

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ‘Dražine lične stvari prvi put na izložbi u Vojnom muzeju’, Blic, 6 May 2010, <https://www.blic.rs/kultura/vesti/drazine-licne-stvari-prvi-put-na-izlozbi-u-vojnomo-muzeju/qfl65vp>.

site is evident in the fact that the first commission that the state formed had only one task – to find more information about the circumstances of Mihailović's execution, with an ultimate goal of finding his remains. In addition to that, the government established the State Commission for Secret Graves of Those Killed after September 1944 (*Državna komisija za tajne grobnice ubijenih od septembra 1944.*, in further text: Commission for Secret Graves or the 1944 Commission), with a broader scope of locating and marking all graves in the territory of Serbia. Both commissions involved historians and were affiliated with the Institute of Contemporary History. In 2011, during the process of rehabilitation of Mihailović, they merged and joined their efforts searching for his remains in Belgrade, however, without success.

This paper discusses the work and results of the two fact-finding commissions, illuminating the informal nature of the institutional level of memory work and underlining that the Chetniks and Dragoljub Mihailović constitute the central theme of official memory politics in contemporary Serbia. Established by the government, the commissions did not resemble a state-funded investigative body, but it often seemed like an informal endeavour. Because of this oscillation between an official governmental body and a bottom-up initiative, the sensationalist media reports, and the failure to fulfil their goals, the two commissions represent a fascinating case study for the wider dynamics of state-sanctioned memory politics in Serbia.

The Mihailović Commission

The State Commission for the Investigation of the Circumstances of the Execution of Dragoljub Mihailović (*Državna komisija za utvrđivanje okolnosti pogubljenja Dragoljuba Mihailovića*, in further text: Mihailović Commission) was formed by the Republic Public Prosecutor in April 2009. The Commission consisted of state officials, representatives of archives and museums, state security and intelligence agencies, and historians, including Bojan Dimitrijević and Kosta Nikolić. Only a few days after its establishment, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, on the proposal of the Ministry of Justice, removed the confidentiality stamp from all documents associated with the execution of Dragoljub Mihailović.⁸ The documents were only made available to the Commission members, as is the case with the Commission for Secret Graves, meaning that only a handful of historians who

⁸ Kosta Nikolić and Bojan Dimitrijević, 'Zarobljavanje i streljanje generala Dragoljuba Mihailovića 1946. godine - Nova saznanja o arhivskoj građi', *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 2 (2009): 10.

have acted as mnemonic agents at the institutional level have gained access to these materials.

The work of the Mihailović Commission went through two phases, the first encompassing the archival search for information on the location and circumstances of Mihailović's execution in documents. Although a few alleged discoveries appeared in 2010, this phase of the work was practically done in June 2009. The Commission introduced an open telephone line for everyone with helpful information on the issue, but the calls they received turned out worthless. The search for witnesses and their hearing was also not fruitful even though it was always announced in media as relevant. The first phase was succeeded by the physical search for Mihailović's remains in 2011. During the research phase, the Commission did not find any documents revealing where Mihailović's remains could be. As historian Bojan Dimitrijević eloquently summarizes:

We did research in the Military Archives, in the archives of the State Security, the Archives of Serbia, and that was it. The commission had regular meetings; a public call was published so that people who knew anything about it could get in touch. The people who knew nothing at all mostly called, we did not have a single relevant witness, and we did not find anything relevant related to this topic during the archival research, so we practically finished the whole research already in June 2009 and it was already then when we, at least the two of us here in the office, realized that we would not find anything special.⁹

The archival research revealed possible locations in Belgrade where Dragoljub Mihailović could have been shot, either Ada Ciganlija or somewhere in the proximity of Beli dvor,¹⁰ but there were no documents or witness statements that would definitely confirm it.¹¹ A general issue the Commission members encountered was the disappearance of a segment of documents related to Mihailović's case, as they had been often moved, hidden, destroyed, and taken by the Yugoslav officials when they were writing memoirs and other publications. According to Nikolić and Dimitrijević, the most interesting parts of this "special archive" disappeared over the decades.¹² This had been, in fact, known to the Serbian intelligence and state security services before the Commission was established. Namely, the representatives of these institutions and their archives attended the Commission meeting already in May 2009, stating both there and in media afterwards that they did not have any relevant documents about the execution of Dragoljub Mihailović in their possession, raising concerns that such

⁹ Bojan Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, March 2016.

¹⁰ The White Palace, former royal residence of Karađorđević dynasty.

¹¹ Nikolić and Dimitrijević, 'Zarobljavanje', 13–14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

documents did not exist at all.¹³ As opposed to that, Miladin Gavrilović, the director of the Oplenac memorial complex and a member of the Commission, repeatedly complained in the public that the documents existed but were hidden and deliberately not made available to the Commission by the state security services.¹⁴

The entire existence and activities of the Mihailović Commission were followed by sensationalist media reports, even though they did not discover anything leading to Mihailović's remains. Members of the Commission, especially Slobodan Homen, contributed to the increasing media interest by announcing great discoveries of documents that would certainly lead to the location of Mihailović's remains. For Dimitrijević, it was the members active in politics who wanted to make the Commission seem more important in the public at all costs, creating the impression that they were close to a discovery, as opposed to him and Kosta Nikolić:

The two of us constantly said that the Commission's work should not be discussed until we reach a concluding point in research. However, we had the problem that, after every meeting, someone of these people talked publicly what the Commission had done and how it had almost discovered everything. And we knew from the start, as we had gone to the archives before everyone, that there was not much there.¹⁵

In this sense, the first alleged discovery happened in 2009, when the Commission announced to have found an archive near Belgrade, consisting of documents related to the execution of Mihailović. An anonymous source close to the Commission revealed this information to the *Press* tabloid, but Slobodan Homen confirmed the story, explaining:

In these documents, there are, among other things, photographs of the execution of Draža Mihailović, a complete documentation and transcript about the implementation of the death sentence. This is completely new information because the archive has not been opened since 1946. The photographs were made to show the regime that the death sentence was carried out. The archive is outside of Belgrade, but we do not want to reveal where exactly.¹⁶

This archive turned out to be non-existing and none of the Commission members, including Homen, mentioned it in the public again. A year later, they made another revolutionary discovery. The delegation of three Commission members travelled to London to search for documents regarding Mihailović's death. Even though the British sources had been used

¹³ Dragan Vlahović, 'Tajne službe ne znaju gde je Dražin grob', *Politika*, 21 May 2009, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/87924/Drustvo/Tajne-službe-ne-znaju-gde-je-Dražin-grob>.

¹⁴ Jelena Čalija, '„Dražina” komisija u rasulu', *Politika*, 26 May 2010, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/136215/Dražina-komisija-u-rasulu>.

¹⁵ Bojan Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, 2016.

¹⁶ S. Dedeić and V. Arsić, 'Grobnice svuda po Srbiji', *Press Online*, 7 June 2009, <http://www.pressonline.rs/info/politika/67957/grobnice-svuda-po-srbiji.html>.

extensively in scholarship, the Commission “found” thousands of pages of documents dealing with the period between 1941 and 1945 in Yugoslavia and had them copied and delivered to Serbia. As Homen further explained, a few files mentioned Mihailović’s name.¹⁷ According to him, the Commission discovered a document with a double confidential stamp and the same date as the date of Mihailović’s death, making Homen certain that the document was connected to Mihailović and crucial for solving the mystery of Mihailović’s burial site. The date of Mihailović’s death, 17 July, was determined by the discovery of the telegram of the British Embassy in Yugoslavia informing the Government about the death sentence.¹⁸ The Commission expected the document to be delivered by September 2010, Homen expressing the hope to find out where Mihailović had been buried in a month. However, nothing further happened.

The first phase of the work of Mihailović Commission reveals numerous issues characteristic for this state body. First, the Commission looked for the non-existing, starting with the hypothesis that every event in the past had to have a reflection in documents, so they assumed that there had to be a document describing where Mihailović was executed and buried. This would be a report, a transcript, or a note someone made after the act of execution.¹⁹ The search continued for months in 2009 after the meeting where the Commission had found out that no institution or archive had such documents in their possession. Moreover, it is unclear how the Commission reached the conclusion that the British institutions could possess a written document entailing the information where the Yugoslav authorities had buried Dragoljub Mihailović. The Commission did not examine any other foreign sources. In addition to that, their work involved regular public announcements of alleged discoveries and the subsequent silence when the Commission members’ expectations turned out to be wrong, as they did after every endeavour. In addition to this and regardless of the failure of the quest for documents, the media interest their work generated from the beginning made the image of Dragoljub Mihailović as a victim constantly present in the public. Finally, the very existence of the Commission, even if its establishment was the result of the personal interest of the state actors such as Slobodan Homen, shows that the Chetniks and their defeat became such a

¹⁷ B. Bilbija, ‘Tajni dosije o Dražinoj smrti otkriven u Londonu’, *Politika*, 22 June 2010,

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/139599/Drustvo/Tajni-dosije-o-Drazinoj-smrti-otkriven-u-Londonu>.

¹⁸ ‘Srbija čeka dokument o mestu streljanja Draže Mihailovića’, *Blic*, 15 July 2010, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/srbija-ceka-dokument-o-mestu-streljanja-draze-mihailovica/47xkwgs>.

¹⁹ Miroslav Jovanović and Radivoj Radić, *Kriza istorije - srpska istoriografija i društveni izazovi kraja 20. i početka 21. veka* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2009), 78–79.

significant historical reference in the post-Milošević period that the question of location of the remains of their leader became a state affair.

The State Commission for Secret Graves

The Commission for Secret Graves was officially established in July 2009. In 2011, the results of its research were published as an online database entitled *The Open Book*, the latest version of which encompasses 59,554 names.²⁰ The Ministry of Justice, under whose jurisdiction the Commission operated, concluded that the work of the Commission had been done and it had formally ceased to exist in 2015.²¹

The inception of the Commission did not emerge from the state institutions or a demand of a victim association, as it is often the case, but it was a very rapid process and a result of the joint initiative of Momčilo Pavlović, the director of the Institute of Contemporary History, and *Večernje novosti* newspaper. What later became a state commission started as a daily feuilleton under the name *Unearthing the Truth (Otkopavanje istine)*, publishing lists of people executed and burial locations, accompanied by emotionally charged testimonies by either victims or their descendants. The media action ended with a roundtable discussion on crimes of communism, involving the representatives of the Institute and *Novosti* and prominent scholars.²² Two state representatives attended the roundtable, including Srđan Srećković of the SPO, the Minister of Diaspora at the time, and Slobodan Homen, the State Secretary in the Ministry of Justice and a member of the Mihailović Commission. As most of the other roundtable participants, they were known for their anticommunism and had acted as prominent memory entrepreneurs, becoming crucial for bringing the Commission to the Government's agenda. Just a couple of days after the roundtable, the Commission for Secret Graves came to existence.

Having had the experience of working in the Mihailović Commission and perceiving the political climate as favourable for their objectives, historians lobbied for another commission, securing positions for themselves and their colleagues. The perception of “the passive and silent resistance of former communists, their descendants, and supporters, infiltrated in all

²⁰ “‘Otvorena knjiga’”. Registar žrtava Komisije za tajne grobnice ubijenih posle 12. septembra 1944.’, accessed 21 August 2018, <http://www.otvorenaknjiga.komisija1944.mpravde.gov.rs/>.

²¹ V. Jeremić, ‘Komisija za tajne grobnice više ne postoji’, *Danas*, 15 June 2016, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/komisija-za-tajne-grobnice-vise-ne-postoji/>; V. Jeremić, ‘Pronađene sve tajne grobnice’, *Danas*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/pronadjene-sve-tajne-grobnice/>.

²² Čedomir Antić, Radoš Ljušić, Vladimir Cvetković, Slobodan Antonić.

pores of the Serbian society” was an additional motive.²³ Furthermore, as Pavlović explains, “understanding that Serbia does not have anything to hide or anyone to protect moved me to begin with the story about ‘crimes of liberators’, or, more precisely, to try to make the political decision-makers interested in this question, with the best intentions and with deep conviction that I do not only serve the truth but that the research results can help the much-needed process of appeasement of Serbia”.²⁴ Interestingly, in the opening speech at the roundtable, Pavlović linked the need to deal with the post-war executions with the wars of the 1990s, arguing that, even today, confronting the past usually refers to the events of the 1990s, and by the rule implies the Serbian guilt, based on the pattern dominant in the West – that Serbs are the biggest and the only culprits for the destruction of Yugoslavia, aggressors while everyone else victims.²⁵

The Commission started working in November 2009 with Slobodan Marković as a president.²⁶ The second most important person with constant media presence, was secretary Srđan Cvetković, at the time a doctoral student examining the repression in Serbia in the post-war period employed at the Institute for Contemporary History. The Institute constituted a crucial segment of the Commission and a key location where almost everything except fieldwork took place. The Commission was officially organized in two boards, one responsible for research and locating the burial sites and the Board for Exhumations dealing with forensics and identifying the remains. The research board was situated in the Institute and its coordinator was Momčilo Pavlović. The Commission formed the Documentation Centre within its structure, with the purpose of gathering and archiving documents, photographs, and audio and video files received from citizens and descendants.²⁷

The official name of the Commission represents another example of the centrality of the Chetnik movement and Dragoljub Mihailović for the institutional level of memory work. Even though the specific Mihailović Commission had already existed, and the 1944 Commission had a broad scope of post-war executions in general, its title links it closely to the Chetnik movement. Namely, 12 September 1944 is taken as the starting date because, as Cvetković explains, “it was then when the Partisans with the Red Army entered Serbia and

²³ Momčilo Pavlović, “‘Zločini oslobodioca’ - Zadatak srpske historiografije visokog prioriteta”, *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 3 (2010): 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶ Previously active as the coordinator of the first investigative initiative on the post-war retribution and a member of the Crown Council of Karađorđević family.

²⁷ Momčilo Pavlović and Srđan Cvetković, ‘Istraživanja državne komisije za tajne grobnice ubijenih posle 12. septembra 1944.’, *Istorija 20. veka*, no. 3 (2012): 15.

liberated it from the German occupation, and this was also when the King called all members of the Royal Army in the Homeland led by Draža Mihailović to put themselves under Tito's command".²⁸

The purpose and its framing

The Commission for Secret Graves had a task to “investigate, find, and mark all secret graves with remains of people killed after the 1944 liberation by: locating and marking all grave sites and determining the exact number of people; by exhumation and personal identification at those locations where possible ...; to prepare and deliver a special report on its work to the Ministry of Justice and Government”.²⁹ The purpose of the Commission did not imply any evaluation, but finding facts about the numbers of people who lost their lives after 12 September 1944 in Serbia. As Pavlović outlines, “we are not interested in the determination of guilt, or the level of guilt or innocence. We are interested in and motivated by the fact that a significant number of families whose members were shot have never received any written verdict, not even a manipulated one, and a burial site is unknown for a large part of them”.³⁰ In a similar way, Cvetković emphasizes that their work represents a simple survey of how many people were executed, not how many innocent people were killed and that it would be impossible to do it differently but to list everyone.³¹ However, he underlines that:

But they did, when they were shooting, when OZNA did it and later during the court processes, they are all deliberately mixed like that and put together in books and lists. They did it on purpose to cause confusion, so that if anyone would try to talk about it today, the reaction would be “you are rehabilitating war criminals”, because they tied them together in this way. Why is it then always in the lists, for instance, a Gestapo agent and then some industrialist, or a priest, student, I don't know... So, they always put two, three, four persons to compromise everyone. That's a classic UDBA technique. And that UDBA technique is used by a modern *udbaš*³² to discriminate and discredit people who research that.³³

The only formal criterion of the investigation and database is that the Partisans *killed* a person after 12 September 1944. The official documents do not use any other phrases such as persecuted, missing, or perished. Additionally, the Commission members predominantly use

²⁸ J. Arsenović, ‘Ozna streljala, udbaš otkrio spisak žrtava’, Vesti online, 18 August 2010, <https://vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/75425/Ozna-streljala-udbas-otkrio-spisak-zrtava>.

²⁹ ‘Poslovnik Državne komisije za pronalaženje i obeležavanje svih tajnih grobnica u kojima se nalaze posmrtni ostaci streljanih posle oslobođenja 1944. godine’, 15 December 2009, <http://www.komisija1944.mpravde.gov.rs/cr/news/vesti/poslovnik-komisije.html>.

³⁰ Pavlović, ‘Zločini oslobodilaca’, 13.

³¹ Srđan Cvetković, interviewed by author, March 2016.

³² Udbaš usually refers to a person working or having worked for the UDBA, the Yugoslav state security, as well as the state security in Serbia in general. It is also very broadly for people from the state security and police sector. It has a pejorative meaning.

³³ Srđan Cvetković, interview, March 2016.

the term “shot”. The database, however, involves numerous issues of inconsistency, such as people who died in combat, missing persons, as well as those, especially German population from Vojvodina, who died in camps and were not directly killed. Moreover, the list includes combatants of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland who might have lost their lives while retreating and fighting against the Partisans in Bosnia. As the goal of the Commission was to locate burial sites, the largest problem arises concerning people who died outside of Serbia and missing persons who are in the database that is supposed to encompass people killed by the Partisans.

The public representation of the 1944 Commission in media, also by the Commission members themselves, is a further issue because the people whose names are contained in the database are usually referred to broadly as “victims”. In this way, they attach the notion of innocence to the people executed, indirectly representing them as innocent victims of communism executed only for ideological and political reasons. Moreover, while the database allows additional information, there are no comments for persons who, for instance, had been responsible for war crimes, either directly or by command responsibility.³⁴ In this sense, the Commission reflects the wider tendencies of the observation of the entire Second World War and the period state socialism through the narrow lens of the immediate postwar period, while ignoring the wartime activities of the persons concerned. The occasional acknowledgement that some people faced retribution because of their wartime activities is usually relativized by insisting that they represent the minority: “There were, understandably, also people who no court could exonerate because they had committed crimes during the occupation, but the majority are the people who would not even be found guilty or sentenced by the most unjust court. Especially not sentenced to death”.³⁵

With all its flaws, the results of the Commission for Secret Graves have had a positive effect on debates and number games about the post-war executions. The numbers used to be exaggerated up to 300,000 people executed, while claiming that Serbian population, especially from central parts of Serbia, was the largest victim of the post-war violence. In addition to that, the argument that the Chetnik movement was destroyed by the Partisans has become a commonplace repeated in numerous publications of an academic and non-academic type. The Commission results proved these claims wrong. First, the number of victims they

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of the contradictions and flaws in the database and the problems with the numbers, see: Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2015), 546–98.

³⁵ Pavlović, ‘Zločini oslobodilaca’, 13.

have determined is lower than 60,000, out of which 68.85% came from Vojvodina and were by majority German or Hungarian. The territory of Serbia without Vojvodina and Kosovo covers 27.59% or 25,219 persons.³⁶ Vojvodina Germans represent the largest group, while Serbs in whole Serbia make up 26.30% of all listed persons.

The study by Radanović reveals that more than seven thousand persons listed in the database in 2014 were members of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, which comprises 49.07% out of all victims in central Serbia. Considering that the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland had around 25,000 members in August 1944 according to the German documents, it can be concluded that the majority of the Chetniks from Serbia survived the war and the post-war period.³⁷ Around one half of the Chetnik forces joined the Partisan side in summer 1944 when the Allies switched their support to the Partisans, while amnesty was offered to those who had not committed war crimes. Based on the Commission data, it is evident that civilians did not represent a majority of those executed within Serbia, because members of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland and other armed forces constitute more than a half of the Serbian victims.

As opposed to the results of their work, the Commission members, especially Cvetković as the most present in media, still insist on arguments like before the database had existed. In one of the more recent journal articles, Cvetković offers an analysis of the structure of the victims, arguing that most of them were civilians and that the primary targets were members of urban citizenry, critical intelligentsia, politicians, merchants, clerks, factory owners, priests, and wealthier peasants.³⁸ This is one of the central arguments of memory entrepreneurs and revisionist historians regarding the post-war retribution, that the aftermath of the 1944 liberation represented the moment of destruction of Serbian political, economic, and intellectual elite. As Cvetković claimed at the beginning of the Commission's work: "The sword blade was turned to the old bourgeois class and inherited social elite of pre-war Serbia".³⁹ According to such a view, settling accounts with the issues of collaboration and crimes was only a disguise for the specific aim at the destruction of Serbian elites.

³⁶ The numbers in this paragraph are based on the database as it was in 2014, when it encompassed 56,147 people.

³⁷ Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji*, 595.

³⁸ Srđan Cvetković, 'The "Savage Purges" in Serbia in 1944-1945, with a Brief Consideration of Yugoslavia as a Whole', *Review of Croatian History* XII, no. 1 (2016): 67–102.

³⁹ P. Vasiljević, 'Ubijani noću, u potaji', *Večernje novosti*, 6 November 2009, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.69.html:242369-Ubijani-nocu-u-potaji>.

Even though the Commission database stands in contradiction to these claims, Cvetković, in his publications and numerous public appearances across Serbia, argues that the post-war purges were of a higher intensity and different nature in the Yugoslav case because they were meticulously planned and had collaboration only as a pretence, underlining that Yugoslavia is incomparable to any European country because it was more brutal, more repressive, and more systematic than elsewhere.⁴⁰ Going even further, he underlines that Serbia was an exceptional case within Yugoslavia because the victims were predominantly civilians.

Results

The main task of the 1944 Commission was to find and mark all burial sites, determine the number of people killed, with its Board for Exhumation exhuming the graves and identifying the remains. Besides the database that encompasses 59,554 names, the Commission managed to make only two exhumations happen. In addition to that, a map of all graves in Serbia was made, with more than 200 locations on it, but, as of 2012 when the Commission practically ceased to exist, none of them had been marked.

The two exhumations referred to as “tests” in the 2010 annual report were, in fact, entirely amateur, done by the Commission members, volunteers, and adherents, and most probably illegal.⁴¹ The first initiative of this kind took place in October 2010 near Boljevac in eastern Serbia. Obtaining necessary tools from locals, Srđan Cvetković, with two volunteers, the landowner, and “interested descendants of victims”, and without forensic experts or responsible officials, started digging and found human bones.⁴² According to the Commission’s previous investigation, at least 44 people from the area shot in late 1944 had been buried there. As Nikola Baković, a volunteer in the Commission at the time, remembers:

People in the village were talking that people had been shot there, it was also known which local people had been taken there. So, we basically came there with two-three shovels and spades, we started digging, and, first, very soon, the digging didn’t even last that long, we found flagstones. Slab stones under a very thin layer of soil. However, they got a bit fragmented over the time, so they were not that bulky anymore, so three or four of us could move them away. There was more dirt underneath. Soon after that, we found certain, how I should put it, things that looked like bones. We couldn’t figure out if they were bones or not at first but then we

⁴⁰ Cvetković, ‘The “Savage Purges” in Serbia in 1944-1945, with a Brief Consideration of Yugoslavia as a Whole’, 69.

⁴¹ Srđan Cvetković, ‘Godišnji izveštaj 2010’, ed. Momčilo Pavlović (Državna komisija za tajne grobnice ubijenih posle 12. septembra 1944., Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2010).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40.

found something that looked like a skull fragment. So, those were really someone's bones. There were quite a lot of them, a lot of those bones.⁴³

The way the tomb was unearthed was far from an official fact-finding commission at work. As Srđan Cvetković summarizes the paradox: “We are digging with a brittle shovel in the presence of an older man who came back from Munich after being in emigration for 50 years ... he came back to, after 50 years, dig out his father in a remote area in east Serbia, illegally, half-illegally, although we are the State Commission. Although we are the State Commission and I am its secretary there with some shovel”.⁴⁴ The “exhumation” attracted media interest and the police and prosecutor's office were contacted to mark the location. Upon their return to Belgrade, Cvetković and Dobrivoje Tomić went to the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor where they were told that the burial site was not in the Office's jurisdiction. Finally, the court in Zaječar took over the exhumation in 2011, but the case stopped there. In Cvetković's opinion, this case shows the lack of will of state institutions to confront the past and totalitarian legacy.⁴⁵

The only other exhumation took place near Vlasotince in southern Serbia where around 60 people had allegedly been executed after the liberation, including the wounded members of the Yugoslav Army of the Homeland, civilians, and personnel of a nearby hospital.⁴⁶ Witnesses or relatives of the people buried there informed the Commission about the location. Once they found it, the Commission members “began probing the site with the regular shovel, the method applied in the case of Potok Zmijanac near Boljevac”.⁴⁷ Conducted in the same informal way, the “test exhumation” also revealed stones and human remains underneath. The local police, county prosecutor, and media were informed, and a further investigation was left to the state institutions, forensic experts, and the Board for Exhumation. The 2010 report of the Commission suggests that the location should be appropriately cleaned and marked so that the descendants could come close and pay their respects.⁴⁸

Besides the two rather informal attempts of unearthing the remains, the Commission has not done anything regarding exhumation and personal identification. In fact, the Board for

⁴³ Nikola Baković, interviewed by author, March 2016.

⁴⁴ Srđan Cvetković, interviewed by author, March 2016. The man Cvetković refers to here is Dobrivoje Tomić, also a member of the commission as a representative of victims.

⁴⁵ Cvetković, interview, 2016.

⁴⁶ Cvetković, ‘Godišnji izveštaj’, 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

Exhumations existed only on paper. During my conversation with Srđan Cvetković and Marija Ilić, they could not remember the name of the person responsible for the Board:

That did not function in practice, it was a hoax. The Commission cannot do it without the concrete assistance from the prosecutor's offices and courts... And since the Commission did not have a budget, or funding, or will to do something like that, it was, how should I put it... a dead letter.⁴⁹

Apart from their visual representation on the map of Serbia, nothing has been done about almost 200 identified locations. During the first phase of their work, the Commission members, mainly Pavlović and Cvetković, travelled across Serbia and visited the supposed burial sites, talked to the locals, and took photos. Failing at another objective they outlined, the 1944 Commission did not mark any of the gravesites. During their visits, Pavlović and Cvetković discussed the publications that would deal with the crimes of communism in each county, suggesting to local municipalities to erect a monument or mark the burial sites in some other way. However, as it will be discussed in the chapter that follows, the sites that have been marked are the results of local grassroots initiatives.

Regardless of the failure to complete the planned objectives, the feuilleton about the postwar executions that provoked the creation of the Commission and its constant presence in media makes the Commission for Secret Graves a very powerful mnemonic agent. The public discourses surrounding the Commission's findings, as discussed previously, together with its official position as a state body representing the Government, made it all seem more relevant than it was. In addition to that, the results, the gathered facts, and testimonies were later made public in a form of a highly visited exhibition followed by a series of public lectures, discussions, and film screenings. Finally, despite its failures, the Commission's work was constantly surrounded, supported, and praised by a significant number of people from Serbia and emigration, mostly descendants and relatives of those executed, who ascribed it a large symbolic importance. With the involvement of external actors, the Commission became more than just a state enterprise of fact-finding, constantly oscillating between multiple levels of memory work.

Informalities

The work of the Commission for Secret Graves did not entirely resemble a state-sanctioned investigative body. There are numerous reasons why the 1944 Commission should be

⁴⁹ Marija Ilić and Srđan Cvetković, in discussion with author, November 2016.

regarded as a very informal network instead. First, the lack of resources and state involvement in the daily work of the Commission, entirely outsourcing it to the Institute of Contemporary History, represents a crucial factor for the way the Commission would later function. This, together with the participation of different ministries and other institutions that existed only formally, contributed to the Commission's informal and frivolous nature, and its personal dimension, roots of all problems in the Commission's results and their public representation. However, the symbolic power of the Commission as a mnemonic agent was not less intense but was even reinforced by involving actors of the individual and social levels of memory work.

Officially, the list of its members involved historians, different ministries representatives, the Security Intelligence Agency, archives, and Branimir Aleksandrić of the Institute of Forensic Medicine as well as Dobrivoje Tomić as the victims' delegate.⁵⁰ There was an obvious lack of expertise for the topic of investigation among historians, the Commission's secretary being a doctoral student at the time of the establishment. Additionally, many state officials were involved only on paper and did not actively participate in the Commission's work. The exception is Slobodan Homen as a crucial agent that made both fact-finding commissions in Serbia happen, with Slobodan G. Marković as another influential person in this period. Finally, as noted previously, the Institute of Forensic Medicine was represented only formally, as they did not engage in exhumations nor did the Board for Exhumation really exist. The common denominator of the Commission's active members is anticommunism, rooted in their political convictions or, in the case of victim delegates, in personal or family experience of the post-war retributions.

In addition to the official list of Commission members, dozens more people were involved contributed in different ways. As Cvetković explains, three categories of people existed: the people who actively engaged in the Commission's work with or without an honorarium, the employees of local and municipality archives who volunteered to send materials, and, finally, people who sent their family archives, stories, and documents.⁵¹ In the beginning, the Commission did not receive significant funding from the Ministry of Justice, so it could not employ professional research associates. The personal contacts of Srđan Cvetković became crucial for animating the people across Serbia and creating the circle of associates:

⁵⁰ Cvetković, 'Godišnji izveštaj'.

⁵¹ Srđan Cvetković, interviewed by author, March 2016.

When the Commission had already been established, when I came there, as I knew many people who dealt with this topic because of my doctorate, I contacted all those people, I used my position to make them into a team to help me ... I gathered all those people to work on the quantification, I divided them into counties, so the team was growing and had dozens of associates. Everything volunteer. At some point, when the enormous documentation of BIA was opened, I demanded that something should be paid to those students; they were mostly graduate students of history. So, they were paid a little bit, maybe ten to fifteen thousand. ... Some people entered out of curiosity, some as archivists, there were different motives. It was completely spontaneous, unpaid, and volunteer. Then some worked here, some came, some left. This is how we collected... now already 59 thousand people are in the database, and then we made the cooperation with the SANU commission that only researched Vojvodina.⁵²

From early 2010 on, the Commission had volunteers based in Belgrade, retyping the OZNA lists of executed persons that had been handed over to the Commission by the archives of the Security Intelligence Agency.⁵³ The main work consisted of copying and retyping these lists in the Archives of Serbia. As Nikola Baković explains, the lists were typed in an Excel table, he also updated the website content, and sometimes they went to interview the relatives of the people executed. He also took part in the first “test exhumation” near Boljevac.

We were basically copying how those lists originally looked like. So, there was usually the name, last name, father’s name, the year of birth or the date, and then there was the place where the person comes from, but it was not clear whether that means where they were born or where they lived, and this is where dilemmas often occurred, how to write that... what other categories were there... profession, the date of execution, as well as the reason, which formation they belonged to. ... we followed those lists and it is true that those lists could but do not have to be true, but OZNA made them so, it was written by the people who were either directly involved in executions or were superiors. That gives the lists a certain credibility.⁵⁴

History students or graduates like Baković represented the minority among the people working with archival documents. For them, enthusiasm about working with the previously not researched primary sources turned quickly into a disappointment about the nature of the Commission’s work and its public representation. Reflecting on his time in the Commission, Baković explains that everything became non-serious later - the way the Commission’s work was promoted in the public, the people it affiliated itself with, the political emigration and flirting with anticommunism, and how the Commission represented itself in media. For him, determining how many people were killed is purely a fact-finding endeavour, but the problem

⁵² Srđan Cvetković, interviewed by author, March 2016. The 1944 Commission included 27,000 names results from the Vojvodinian Survey Committee in their database. When the bilateral commission was formed, Cvetković became its coordinator for the Serbian side and used the overlaps in the two commissions and the Vojvodina resources for the 1944 Commission.

⁵³ These documents were only opened for the 1944 Commission and were made available to other researchers.

⁵⁴ Nikola Baković, interviewed by author, March 2016.

lies in treating everyone as victims.⁵⁵ Danilo Šarenac, a historian of the First World War who worked for the Commission in 2011, recalls numerous practical issues, such as months-long waiting for the equipment or symbolic salaries, but also a strange mélange of people who gathered around the Commission:

Just retyping... It was really tiring because everything had to be checked once or twice to see if someone had maybe been left out. We had a set norm, some number of names that would be adequate, so we really worked and Zorica⁵⁶ really kept those standards, so that literally there were no breaks. There was a fine difference between historians and, let me say it, amateurs because she brought coffee to the reading room of the Military Archives, which was strictly forbidden, but no one rebuked us, and it was interesting because no historian would do that. It made my hair stand on the end, but I didn't want to say anything.⁵⁷

OZNA's lists of executions were crosschecked with other materials: secondary sources, materials received from archivists and other enthusiasts, and, most importantly, testimonies of victims, descendants, and witnesses. During his work on the master's and doctoral thesis, Cvetković contacted numerous people whose family members had faced some sort of persecution in the postwar period. When the Commission was established, with Cvetković as its secretary, they got involved, mainly through Marija Ilić who personified the Commission's Documentation Centre of Victims (*Dokumentacioni centar žrtava*) and who was the only person on the regular payroll by the Ministry of Justice although she did not have any professional expertise. The 2011 annual report mentions that the Documentation Centre received around 60 binders from the Ministry of Justice and the Institute of Contemporary History made additional 300 folders, to use for collecting and archiving the documents and photographs received from citizens and descendants.⁵⁸

The interest of people with direct or family experience of the post-war retributions was immense. According to the Commission members, a few hundred people passed through it. Sometimes, they formed queues in front of Cvetković's office at the Institute for Contemporary History. The so-called documentation centre, namely Marija Ilić, was meeting the interested parties, taking information and materials from them, and organizing them into

⁵⁵ Nikola Baković, interview, 2016.

⁵⁶ Zorica Marinković was invited to join the Commission by Cvetković and she worked with him on research and gathering testimonies. Her motivation comes from the fact that her grandfather was killed in 1944. Gaining always more prominence, she was listed as a project coordinator for *U ime naroda* exhibition in 2014 and made a film and a variety of YouTube videos for it. In 2017, she has released a documentary on Goli Otok. Ljiljana Keković, 'Bog UDBE molio za oproštaj', *Ekspres.net*, 18 August 2018, <http://www.ekspres.net/istorija/bog-udbe-molio-za-oprostaj>.

⁵⁷ Danilo Šarenac, interview, 2016.

⁵⁸ 'Godišnji izveštaj 2011.' (Državna komisija za tajne grobnice ubijenih posle 12. septembra 1944., 27 February 2012), <http://komisija1944.mpravde.gov.rs/cr/articles/aktivnosti/godisnji-izvestaj-2011..html>.

folders.⁵⁹ She was also responsible for administrative issues. The testimonies of descendants (*potomci*), how these persons are referred to by the Commission members, were crosschecked with the archival documents and the database. A testimony would sometime confirm something already found in the documents and sometimes the documents confirming the testimony would be found afterwards. Besides gathering testimonies, Ilić was explaining the families of those executed what rights they had, informing them about the possibility of judicial rehabilitation. She considered the testimonies crucial for the Commission's work:

The documentation is necessary, and archives are necessary, but, without the living descendants and their memories, without them, everything seems prosaic, it doesn't seem credible. They were crucial for us, not because of the information, but to help us experience that time in a different way. Historians will provide statistics, how many people were killed, how many people imprisoned... but those are just numbers. What we all need is taking a step back in time through those memories, to see what really happened, if it was justifiable, then why was it justifiable, if it was not justifiable, why was it not. Because, the Commission did not make judgements, it was not made to judge the executors, it was also not made only to praise the victims, but to show us the time that was as it was. Many innocent people perished, many innocent people perished overnight, from 20 October mostly until April, June 1945. This story of the internal civic suffering is the hardest for us. This is why it is necessary to look at what was done back then and face it, to look at the numbers but also to hear the experiences of descendants, people whose property was taken away, who were kicked out in the street, young girls who perished just because they had a French last name, for instance, 16 year old little girl imprisoned, legs and arms broken, raped... A completely unjustifiable use of force.⁶⁰

The importance of these testimonies for the Commission lies in the fact that this was the source of the information about all mapped burial sites. The OZNA documents rarely included insinuations about the locations of burial sites, making oral testimonies crucial for mapping of graves. However, the Commission, as well as Cvetković in his research, accept the testimonies with all their details uncritically, without questioning their reliability. The texts the Commission has generated, including its official reports, very often use the vague phrases such as "it is believed", "the locals think" or "according to our estimates" when talking about the locations. The lack of exhumations further complicates this issue.

The testimonies did not only help the Commission, but they transcended it. A few dramatic and very vivid stories of executions, imprisonments, and torture have been reproduced numerous times in media, public talks, and scholarly publications, finding their way into the 2014 exhibition and becoming its pillar. The significance of these stories lies in their

⁵⁹ Marija Ilić, interviewed by author, November 2016.

⁶⁰ Marija Ilić, interview, 2016.

emotional power and not factual accuracy, showing the brutality of the new regime and the innocence of the victims. Some of these stories of suffering have been repeated so much that they have become a commonplace: in Cvetković's publications, media appearances, and hundreds of travelling lectures he has done; in media, starting with the *Večernje novosti*'s feuilleton in 2009; in the public outputs of the different anti-communist groups.

The epilogue

In a similarly unusual way like its establishment, the Commission for Secret Graves ceased to exist in 2015, although it had practically stopped working in 2012. After years of constant media presence, it withered away silently. Cvetković was in resignation for years, which was not officially acknowledged by the Government. During the personal interview with him in March 2016, Cvetković was not aware of the fact the Commission had not existed since the end of 2015. The official statement of the Ministry of Justice said that the Commission did its job independently and on its own and the only obligation of the Ministry was to provide administrative support to its work, encompassing the employment of one person on the recommendation of the Commission's president.⁶¹

The informal nature of the Commission, the involvement of a wide circle of people, Cvetković's status within this group, and his personal motivation made the Commission transcend the form of a state-sanctioned fact-finding endeavour and continue existing. First, its findings generated the previously mentioned travelling exhibition in the House of Terror style in 2014, visited by more people than any other museum project in Serbia and accompanied by numerous events, lectures, film screenings, and discussions. In a way like the Commission, the exhibition balanced on numerous levels of memory work, based on the partial state support and bottom-up efforts. Moreover, Srđan Cvetković worked tirelessly on the dissemination of his work through hundreds of public lectures entitled *U ime naroda*, the same as the exhibition, which he gave across whole Serbia, in city halls, libraries, schools, in churches, and offices of the SPO political party. His lectures gather people brought together by their self-identification as victims of communism or their anticommunism, including libertarian and monarchist organizations. Finally, the findings of the 1944 Commission and everything related to the exhibition, including its name, social network profiles, and website, transformed into *In the Name of the People for Free Serbia* association of citizens (*U ime naroda za slobodnu Srbiju*). The association is led by Srđan Cvetković and presents the 1944

⁶¹ Jeremić, 'Pronađene sve tajne grobnice'.

Commission's results, such as the database, on their website and other public outlets. The association, examined in the next chapter, involves the people who gathered around the 1944 Commission.

The Quest for the Grave of Dragoljub Mihailović

And then, after a few hits with the shovel by the author of this text, the spade in the hands of Blažo Đurović pulled out around eight centimetres long human bone at fourteen minutes past two o'clock, a sign to the group of diggers that they are on the verge of solving the dark secret and that it is possible, at least in this case, to neutralize the Bolshevik punishment of deprivation of a right to grave.⁶²

The state commissions responsible for the investigation of secret graves and the execution and burial site of Dragoljub Mihailović joined their efforts in 2011 with the goal of finding Mihailović's remains, as the process of his rehabilitation was gaining momentum. As the joint initiative of the two state bodies reached the fieldwork phase in June 2011, it was followed and supported by different individuals with vested interest in the outcome of the search, who also got involved in their work. Announcing the usage of "3D technology" that would enable digital section of the soil, Srđan Cvetković called Mihailović's grave one of the biggest Serbian secrets.⁶³ Followed by enormous media attention, various speculations, and sensationalist statements, the physical search for Dragoljub Mihailović ended in failure. This initiative of the state-sponsored actors reflects the informal and often amateur nature of the state commissions. Moreover, it is another example of the image of Dragoljub Mihailović as a symbol of the narrative of the Serbian victimhood under communism and the central motif of contemporary memory politics.

In April 2011, the Mihailović Commission presented the results of their investigations to the public. After two years of work, the Commission could only conclude that Dragoljub Mihailović had been executed in early morning of 17 July 1946 and had been buried in Ada Ciganlija in Belgrade, besides a prison that was later demolished. During their research in Serbian and foreign archives, the Mihailović Commission had not found any direct evidence about the time and the place of the 1946 execution, so their conclusions were deducted from a variety of written and oral sources. Claiming that Mihailović's remains had been moved and

⁶² Milan Četnik, 'Tajna grobnica na Adi Ciganliji', *Politika*, 18 June 2011, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/181386/Tajna-grobnica-na-Adi-Ciganliji>.

⁶³ 'Dražin grob nikad neće naći', *Večernje novosti*, 14 April 2011, www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:327110-Дражин-гроб-никад-неће-наћи.

buried at another location, Slobodan Homen announced probing of the primary location in Ada Ciganlija.⁶⁴ In the opinion of Slobodan Radovanović, the Commission president and the Republic Public Prosecutor, the secondary grave could probably never be found, but he emphasized the significance of the Commission's work as correcting a great historical injustice done to Mihailović.⁶⁵

The discovery at Ada Ciganlija

The first probing of the location in Ada Ciganlija on 18 June 2011 resembled the “test exhumations” of the 1944 Commission, as it was also named by a journalist who not only attended the discovery, but took part in digging.⁶⁶ Similarly to Boljevac, this exhumation attempt was led by Srđan Cvetković and was amateur, without forensics or archaeology specialists, and it involved a random group of people, including journalists of *Blic* and *Politika* newspapers and passers-by, who picked up shovels and spades. In addition to that, Blažo Đurović, the vice-president of the Association of Political Prisoners and Victims of Communism, provided his company's land surveying equipment. Not affiliated to any state body nor an exhumations expert, Đurović became a prominent actor of the Ada enterprise, regularly giving media statements and opinions on forensic issues. His equipment that Cvetković refers to as “3D technology” had already been used by the 1944 Commission a few months earlier. As Đurović explains: “I accidentally had an opportunity to see probing and exhuming of mass graves in Slovenia by modern technology and, soon after that, I saw Srđan Cvetković unearthing a mass grave with a shovel. This is where I decided to make all my capacities available to commissions in Serbia for free”.⁶⁷

The beginning of explorations at Ada Ciganlija had been announced by Momčilo Pavlović a few days earlier as locating where the prison foundations used to be, followed by exhumation and a graduate investigation of the area at a later stage.⁶⁸ However, the group that met at Ada did not wait for a professional exhumation, they instantly started digging around the place where the prison used to be, and they found bones. Without any analysis of the findings, the

⁶⁴ B. Bilbija, ‘Dražu, i zvanično, traže na Adi Ciganliji’, *Politika*, 14 April 2011, www.politika.rs/sec/clanak/174049/Друштво/Дражу-и-званично-траже-на-Ади-Циганлији.

⁶⁵ ‘Primarna grobnica generala Mihailovića na Adi Ciganliji’, *Radio televizija Vojvodine*, 14 April 2011, http://www.rtv.rs/sk/drustvo/primarna-grobnica-general-a-mihailovica-na-adi-ciganliji_248862.html.

⁶⁶ Četnik, ‘Tajna grobnica’.

⁶⁷ M. T. Kovačević, ‘Traže masovne grobnice’, *Večernje novosti*, 19 April 2011, <http://91.222.5.72/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:327713-Traze-masovne-grobnice>. Slobodan Đurić, the president of the Association of Political Prisoners and Victims of Communism, was also invited and he attended the exhumation.

⁶⁸ V. C. Spasojević, ‘Potraga za Dražinim ostacima’, 17 June 2011, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:334782-Potruga-za-Drazinim-ostacima>.

members of the commissions and others who joined them in the Ada excavations assumed that they found human bones. Media coverage started immediately, considering that journalists took part in digging up the bones. Leading into his report published in *Politika* in the evening of 18 June, Milan Četnik writes:

Whether the human bones, found yesterday next to a rose bush at Ada Ciganlija in Belgrade, represent a part of the remains of Draža Mihailović, will be shown by a DNA analysis. The assumption that it is a secret tomb on that spot was confirmed by the discovery of primitive wire handcuffs that were used to tie the wrists and arms of victims of the post-war Partisan torture in the prison complex of Ada Ciganlija.⁶⁹

The actors involved in the discovery did not refer to their findings as anything else but human bones. The stories of wire handcuffs, of remains deliberately destroyed by communists using fire, and of Mihailović being thrown in a mass grave with other highly prominent Serbs spread quickly and the Commission members did not deny them. They rather contributed to the belief that Mihailović had been buried there. Changing his theory of primary and secondary burial sites, Cvetković now claimed there was a possibility that the remains belonged to Mihailović. He argued that the discovery of human remains at the location where Mihailović and his comrades had been executed opened the possibility that there had been no moving at all, but it was a “scam to hide the real truth” instead.⁷⁰ Because of the burned bones and pieces of glass found in the soil, Cvetković explained that the Molotov cocktail had been used to burn the bones.⁷¹

Although a detailed investigation of the findings had not even started, the Commission members and affiliates acted in the public as if they knew everything about their discovery at Ada, going into details in their description of the findings. Mere speculations were presented as facts. In this way, Blažo Đurović described that more than ten bones were found and were assumed to be human arms and hands, with metal and wire as the handcuffs with which the victims had been tied.⁷² In another newspaper, Đurović claimed that the first discovered remains had belonged to older people.⁷³ Slobodan Homen seemed to have even more information:

⁶⁹ Četnik, ‘Tajna grobnica’.

⁷⁰ Veljko Miladinović, ‘Rešena misterija posle 65 godina: Draža iskopan na Adi’, Press Online, 19 June 2011, <http://www.pressonline.rs/info/politika/165472/resena-misterija-posle-65-godina-draza-iskopan-na-adi.html>.

⁷¹ Četnik, ‘Tajna grobnica’.

⁷² ‘Na Adi nađene kosti, metal i kreč’, Danas, 19 June 2011, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/na-adi-nadjene-kosti-metal-i-krec/>.

⁷³ Miladinović, ‘Rešena misterija posle 65 godina’.

It is a mass grave of a three times four meters perimeter where seven to nine persons were buried together with handcuffs. This is a proof that they were prisoners who were most probably also executed at that place, and the remains of quicklime and burnt bones point out to the attempts to destroy traces. There are remains of numerous skeletons and the DNA analysis will show who they exactly are. This case now completely goes under the jurisdiction of the Public Prosecutor's Office that will continue to cooperate successfully with the State Commission. It is important to precisely determine whom the remains belong to because, according to the witness testimonies, it was the highest representatives of the previous government and generals that had ended up in that mass grave. Their families deserve to know the truth.⁷⁴

The discourses about the Ada discovery revolved around the interpretation of Dragoljub Mihailović as a victim. Serbian media published daily vivid stories of Mihailović's victimization, such as that his body had been cut in pieces by axe, while the bodies of others executed in the same night had remained intact.⁷⁵ The context of the Second World War was entirely sidelined in the image that only focused on Mihailović's murder by communists. In a similar way that had followed all activities of the Mihailović Commission, the question of the location of his burial was narrated as the biggest mystery that was finally solved. The Yugoslav authorities, referred to simply as "the communists", were portrayed as perpetrators who not only deprived Mihailović of his life but also of a right to a proper burial and a grave.

Before a proper examination of the Ada findings, the actors of the "test exhumation" financed a trial forensic analysis on their own that allegedly proved that the bones were human.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the state institutions, including the prosecutor's office and police, had to get involved in the process leading up to the professional exhumation and examination of the findings at the Institute for Forensic Medicine in Belgrade. As the Ada team and state commissions were primarily interested in the question whether it was Dragoljub Mihailović, they reached out to his grandson Vojislav Mihailović for a DNA sample. Mihailović, who had been critical of the Commission before and called it "a yet another unserious attempt of the state", refused the State Prosecutor's invitation.⁷⁷ The idea to exhume Dragoljub Mihailović's parents appeared as a backup plan.

⁷⁴ V. C. Spasojević, 'DNK vodi do Draže Mihailovića', Večernje novosti, 19 June 2011, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:334952-DNK-vodi-do-Draze-Mihailovica>.

⁷⁵ V. C. Spasojević, 'Dražu su isekli sekirom?', Večernje novosti, 23 June 2011, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.69.html:335456-Drazu-su-isekli-sekirom>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ A. Roknić, 'Pronađeni živi svedoci likvidacije Draže Mihailovića', Danas, 27 April 2009, <https://www.danas.rs/hronika/pronadjeni-zivi-svedoci-likvidacije-draze-mihailovica/>; 'Dražin unuk ne da DNK na analizu', Vesti online, 22 June 2011, <https://vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/145714/Drazin-unuk-ne-da-DNK-na-analizu>.

Exhuming Mihailović's parents and a DNA analysis were finally unnecessary because the analysis of the bone fragments that the state commissions and their adherents had found showed that they were not human. It took only a day or two for the Anthropology Lab of the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade to conclude that the bones could not belong to Dragoljub Mihailović because they were animal bones.⁷⁸ While other members of the test exhumation team, who had been prominent in media, became silent after this discovery, Srđan Cvetković spoke out, explaining that they had never had a task to find the remains but to check whether the results of the Mihailović Commission had been correct.⁷⁹ Satisfied and considering the Commission's job done, Cvetković clarified:

In this job, one can expect attacks from all sides. If you find something, why did you find it, if you don't find anything, why didn't you find anything? I think that, we who dedicated a lot of efforts to it, that we contributed significantly and made the job easier for the people who would eventually come after us to do further research, that it will be a far easier job than simply finding a lime pit and prison walls, considering how much time has passed and how difficult it is to reach witnesses, while documenting materials don't exist.⁸⁰

Already before the self-initiated digging initiative at Ada, the Higher Court in Belgrade instructed the Institute of Forensic Medicine to conduct examinations and exhumation at Ada Ciganlija. A professional team composed of anthropologists, archaeologists, and other forensic experts was established for this purpose. This was highly unusual for the Serbian context, as such exhumation teams had not been formed many times, the first and most prominent case being the excavations of mass graves of the war in Kosovo in Batajnica in 2001. They started working in Ada Ciganlija in August. The area of examination, a large space around the former prison walls, looked entirely different than in June 2011, fenced and guarded by the police, divided into squares, and with the archaeological equipment and tools, a ground-penetrating radar (from Blažo Đurović's company), and computers lying around. No passers-by could enter the site and join the team. Instead of the expected excavation of a body, the multidisciplinary team engaged in a forensic search for an unknown grave.⁸¹

The expert excavations did not discover any traces of Dragoljub Mihailović. Moreover, they completely negated the main conclusions of the Mihailović Commission's two-year work in

⁷⁸ 'Iskopane Kostu Nisu Dražine | Društvo | Novosti.Rs', accessed 5 September 2018, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:338879-Iskopane-kosti-nisu-Drazine>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "'Dražine" kosti su - životinjske', B92, 24 July 2011, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2011&mm=07&dd=24&nav_category=12&nav_id=527432.

⁸¹ The expectations explained by archaeologist and team member Andrej Starović, as quoted in: Slobodan Bubnjević, 'Tri kutije i sedamnaest čaura', Vreme, 15 September 2011, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1010677>.

just one month. The careful examination of the area around the prison revealed that Mihailović had never been buried there. In addition to that, the Commission's first theory of Ada as the site of execution and primary burial site and another location as a secondary gravesite where Mihailović had been moved also proved implausible. Namely, if there had been a gravesite at Ada, regardless if moved later or not, it would have left traces visible to researchers. The lime pit had probably been only occasionally used for producing lime plaster for painting the guard's house and was too shallow to be used for anything else.⁸² Another six pits were discovered, however, of a more recent date and with modern artefacts in them.⁸³ All bones that were found belonged to animals. As Marija Đurić, who led the team, and Andrej Starović explain, after the field research was completed, they used Blažović's ground-penetrating radar to scan the entire area and then excavated all places where disturbances were noticed by the radar. All irregularities were, however, caused by the city water supply works.⁸⁴

Conclusion: Informalities and Failures of the Official Fact-Finding Efforts

The two state-sanctioned investigative commissions dedicated to the post-war period entail numerous mutual characteristics. They both proved unsuccessful in fulfilling their purposes. The 1944 Commission did not mark nor exhume any of the burial sites it had mapped. Its final database, lacking data for the biggest cities in Serbia, contains many inconsistencies and names are mixed together regardless if they belong to civilians, members of the Chetniks or other armed or police forces, if executed by the Partisans, gone missing, or killed in combat. On the other hand, the work of the Mihailović Commission validated certain previously known details about the arrest and execution of Dragoljub Mihailović but did not discover the site of his execution nor burial. Every alleged archival discovery publicly promoted with optimism ended in a dead end. Finally, the joint initiative of the two commissions in the search for Mihailović's remains at Ada Ciganlija was an embarrassing public debacle after the discovery referred to as Mihailović's remains turned out to be animal bones.

The state commissions illuminate the centrality of the Chetnik movement within politics of memory in post-Milošević Serbia as well as the superficial nature of the state interest for all other groups considered victims of communism. The entire Chetnik movement is

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Marija Đurić and Andrej Starović, 'Forensic Archaeology in Serbia: From Exhumation to Excavation', in *Forensic Archaeology: A Global Perspective*, ed. Michael Groen, Nicholas Márquez-Grant, and Robert Janaway (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 156.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

encapsulated in the image of Dragoljub Mihailović, who takes the highest position in the hierarchy of victims of communism and is, thus, entitled to a commission dedicated specifically to the search for his grave. The fact-finding commission dedicated to all victims of the post-war retribution in Serbia was established only afterwards and not because of state efforts but lobbying by historians and a newspaper. The lack of resources and state involvement that followed contributed to the informal, frivolous, and personal dimension of the 1944 Commission.

The commissions were characterized by their dual nature of the official and informal, of the institutional and social level of memory work, oscillating between being a governmental body and a bottom-up initiative. The state involvement in the regular commissions' work came down to Slobodan Homen, whose personal dedication was crucial for their establishment and funding, while the participation of other state actors existed only formally. A small group of historians of the Institute of Contemporary History emerged as central actors in both commissions. The formal members of the commissions were aided by numerous people who lacked necessary expertise but had political and personal motivation and vested interest in the outcome of the official fact-finding endeavours. The congruity of the commissions came from strong anticommunism that all actors involved had in common.

Even though they represented strong mnemonic agents with significant symbolic power, the state-supported efforts in the sphere of fact-finding can be considered unsuccessful when their outcomes are taken into consideration. They did not result in marked graves, memorials, or the location of the grave of Dragoljub Mihailović. Different actors who got involved for various reasons received nothing in return, the state failure eventually convincing them to organize themselves as memory entrepreneurs of the social level of memory work.