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Introduction

Since 1991, I have been working on the transnational dimensions of the transition from Yugoslav socialism to Croatian statehood, specifically the disproportionately large amount of political and economic influence of conservative diaspora Croats in nation building. The Toronto diaspora in particular where I first did research, is estimated to have raised over \$1 million towards the cause of independence primarily funneled through support for the political ambitions of Franjo Tuđman (Winland 2002, Glenny 2000, Hockenos 2003). Some who ‘returned’ to the homeland from Canada were attracted by the promise of patronage appointments in parliament, ministerial positions, and benefitted from an entrenched system of clientelism (cf. Stubbs and Zrinščak 2015, Winland 2018). A lesser discussed dimension of diaspora involvement is the commitment of socially and politically conservative diaspora Croats who find common cause with right-leaning political, religious and socially conservative groups in Croatia and beyond.

I build here on my ongoing research on the diaspora support, promotion and dissemination of a traditionalist vision of Croatia as reflected in the celebration of controversial commemorations, conferences, monuments, film screenings, invited speakers and book launches. I argue that, as in the early 1990s, some diaspora Croats who were active in homeland affairs currently remain preoccupied with the sense that Croatians have a tragic past and continue to face an existential

threat.¹ Indeed the first book I was given to read in 1991 about Croatians was titled *Tragedies and Migrations in Croatian History* (1973) was published in Toronto by a Canadian Croat, George Prpić. The promotion of conservative moral/religious, social and political values are underpinned primarily by a deep sense of grievance (and victimhood) over what are understood and/or were personally experienced by diaspora Croats as injustices committed during the communist period of 1945-1990. Some of the most problematic examples of commemoration that have continued since Croatian independence include the annual resignification of Bleiburg², attempts to diminish the scale of atrocities at the Jasenovac concentration camp and rehabilitate the fascist Ustaša regime, the dissemination of revisionist publications and films in the diaspora about ‘communist crimes’, as well as support for referenda seeking to place restrictions on minority representation in parliament and reproductive rights in Croatia. Conservative diaspora Croats and returnees have been complicit in support for these commemorative and legislative projects.

The increasingly widespread examples of historical revisionism globally have been flagged as a threat to evidence-based research and discourse upon which social, political and moral beliefs are based. (citations) A recent report commissioned for the European Commission states that historical revisionism is the worst in Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Lithuania. (Echikson 2019)

¹ The responsibility to serve as a bulwark against Muslim-Ottoman expansion has been part of the propagandist rhetoric of nationalist Croatians who make reference to Pope Leo X’s declaration in 1519 that Croatia is the *Antemurale Christianitatis*.

² At Bleiburg, the Yugoslav Army executed about 70000-80000 people (see fn. 6 in: Pavlaković et al., 2018), mostly members of the defeated NDH military accompanied by some fleeing civilians. However, due to the fact that the Ustasha insignia and symbols can be seen during the commemoration, Austria proposed the new law which took force on 1 March 2019 with the expanded list of banned symbols including the Ustasha insignia.

As the Croatian ombudsman Lora Vidović has recently argued, revisionist historiography has been largely unresponsive to the weight of legitimate evidence and, as the examples that follow illustrate, virulently opposed to it. I focus on the uses of revisionist framings by conservative diaspora Croats and returnees, and the circumstances under which they are harnessed and mobilized. The value of research on the transnational dimension of what is a growing phenomenon globally is in understanding the particular contexts and conditions in which support for revisionist claims based on victimhood narratives and the perceived injustices that frame them are generated, disseminated or challenged.

Lachrymosity, victimhood and the “stories people tell about themselves”³: diaspora Jews and Croats compared

I explore some of the connections that can be made between diaspora Jews and Croats in particular in order to understand the appeal of historical revisionist accounts. This stems from my earlier work on lachrymosity, the history of victimhood, loss and suffering in Jewish historiography (1992) as well as my own family history (Holocaust survivors) and personal involvement as a youth in the Zionist movement. As a descendent of family, some of whom perished in the Holocaust, as well as of early “pioneers” to Palestine in the late 19th century, of (political) architects of the State of Israel, as well as having belonged in my youth to *Betar*, the inter-war right-wing Zionist Revisionist group (from where Benjamin Netanyahu gets his inspiration), I have a strong appreciation for what scholars like the anthropologist Nadia Abu El Haj and others argue are the practices and processes informing the problematic historiographies that feed the imaginaries of peoplehood and state.

³ Cf. Živković, 2000, 4

What has emerged from these experiences is a curiosity concerning the suturing of pasts to the presents. In the Jewish context, this process has taken many forms and has generated a great deal of conflict and contestation (cf. Baron 1973), especially since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.⁴

Having spent my youth navigating the terrain of Jewish identity, I have been variously exposed to the power of victimhood narratives in Jewish education, liturgy, commemorations and performances both grieving the past and celebrating the future of the Jewish people, as well as debates over the meaning of being a modern Jew. One constant has been *Zakhor* (Yerushalmi 1982), the biblical entreaty to remember which has been central to the narrative of Jewish victimhood and suffering but also of survival and resilience. Annual pilgrimages of young diaspora Jews to visit the sites of Nazi-era concentration camps in Eastern Europe organized by diaspora sponsors (*March for the Living*⁵) and to the State of Israel (*Birthright Israel*⁶), are carefully curated to reinforce the obligation of Jews to remember their history of suffering and survival. The Jewish calendar is packed with commemorative holidays both ancient and contemporary – *Passover*, the exodus from Egypt; *Chanukah*, the rededication of the Second Temple in the second century BC. *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and *Yom Hazicharon* (Day of Remembrance) are more recent established by the State of Israel to commemorate fallen soldiers and, more recently, victims of terrorism. There are both held within

⁴ “the notion that gentile persecution and Jewish suffering have been the shaping forces of Jewish history” (Baron, 1973, 2). The challenges by the “new historians” to Israel’s nation-building myths in the 1980s (Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé and others) shook the canonical foundations not only in ancient conquests such as Masada but of the War of Independence of 1948-9.

⁵ <http://marchoftheliving.org/> accessed 3 April 2019

⁶ <https://www.birthrightisrael.com/> accessed 1 April 2019

the first week of May as is May 8, *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day, and so all three are eternally linked in the Jewish imagination.

Upon learning that I have Jewish background during an interview in the early 1990s, a prominent diaspora Croat in Toronto asked; "How do the Jews do it, you know, get such huge support for Israel? Is it the Holocaust?" The question did not surprise me because he was a major fundraiser and was curious as to how he could better tap into and strategically mobilize Croatian connections to the homeland. The question though also struck me as familiar. The foundational role of conservative Croats (from Toronto) in homeland independence revealed a narrative structure of suffering and victimhood similar to that of diaspora Jews, but also tensions and disputes over Croatian history, memory and collective experience. (Winland 2002, 2007)

While the historical experiences of both the Jewish and Croatian diaspora communities, of course, vastly differ, there are parallels in the entreaty to remember through the commemoration of the past built on histories of injustice, victimhood and suffering, however configured.

I follow the diaspora Croats and returnees I began working with in the early 1990s and their continued involvement in conservative causes and initiatives since Croatian statehood in order to better understand transnational support for historical revisionism.

The evolution of a diaspora-homeland bond: 25 years later

In the late 1980s, Franjo Tuđman who later became the first president of the Croatian state, made three trips to Toronto to drum up support for his new party, the HDZ, and to further his political ambitions. Although Tuđman initially sought out the support of his politically moderate friends in Toronto, he was quickly drawn into a small circle of radical nationalist diaspora Croats

originating mainly from western Herzegovina in Bosnia (which has a history of nationalist sentiments). Some of my research participants in the early 1990s, leaned heavily to the right and rapidly became the gatekeepers and self-selected interlocutors for diaspora Croats before and during the Homeland War (Hockenos 2003). The animus for their political sympathies lay in deep resentment, if not contempt, for Tito's Yugoslavia and what they referred to as the "crimes of the communist regime" and the "tainted" legacy of the Ustaša (fascist) regime during WWII. They argued then and now that émigrés were the sole voice for Croatia's freedom from Yugoslavia. Diaspora Croats affiliated with radical groups such as *Otpor* (meaning 'resistance') engaged in agitation and in some cases, terrorist acts against Yugoslavia. When it became clear that Yugoslavia's days were numbered, they threw their support behind Tuđman. Some of these early diaspora supporters became and, in some cases, continue to be, key players officially and unofficially, in Croatia's cultural and political landscape, nationally and transnationally.⁷ The continued importance of diaspora-homeland ties is also evidenced in the multiple visits made by the president of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, to diaspora communities as part of her *Global Croatia* appeal for investment and for diaspora return to mitigate Croatia's demographic decline due mainly to emigration.

A number of scholars have pointed out the ubiquity of victim narratives and their manifestations in post-Yugoslav contexts (cf. Jansen 2016, Hodges 2019, Živković 2000, Helms 2013, Schauble 2017, Čolović 2000, Denich 1995, Verdery 1996, Žanić 2000). Marko Živković, in his analysis

⁷ The continued disproportionate influence of Canadian Croats is on view in the *Sabor* (Croatian parliament) in membership in the HDZ, including Tihomir Orešković from Hamilton Ontario who was briefly Prime Minister in 2016, Željko Glasnović, currently a member of parliament representing diaspora and Ruža Tomačić, Croatian representative in the European parliament.

of the “wish to be a Jew” trope among Serbs, identifies Judaism as a preeminent technology of memory and a set of practices designed to make the past present. (2000) What he is referring to is the process of mapping Jewish history of suffering onto one’s own in order to elicit support for one's own cause. (Živković 2000, 74; cf. Benbassa 2010) In the *Holocaust of Croats* (1986) written by Ivo Omrčanin, a prolific writer for émigré magazines who was also a member of the NDH (the Ustaša), claims that the Croats were the “greatest victims” during the Second World War. On a 2005 visit to the *Yad Vashem* memorial to the Holocaust in Israel, then Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader identified Croats with Jews, pointing out that in the Homeland War of the 1990s, the Croats were also victims of the “same kind of evil as Nazism and Fascism, and that no one knows better than the Croats what it means to be a victim of aggression”. (cf. Radonić 2018, 526.) Even when evacuated of context or veracity, historical events like the Holocaust can be exploited in the service of validation and/or rehabilitation of the past.

Most recently, Stjepan Štimac, a self-styled historian and a regular contributor to *Projekt Velebit*, a right wing organization in Croatia (with an online presence including videotaped podcasts of interviews with ultraconservatives) has made the connection with Jewish history: “Indeed, in a lot of the fate of the Croat people is similar to the fate of the Israeli people, from the struggle for survival, liberation from slavery, Holocaust both nations have experienced.... The Israelites wandered in the wilderness long before Christ, while the Croatians are still in the desert today.” This philo-Semitic tone though abruptly ends when discussing the fate of Jews at the Jasenovac concentration camp during the Second World War. What follows are examples which illustrate how and in what ways the strategies and actions of diaspora and returnee Croats have

evolved from support for Croatian independence to the harnessing of lachrymose narratives of suffering for the promotion of conservative and revisionist forces in Croatia and the diaspora.

Jasenovac - One of the main preoccupations of Croatian revisionists is the diminishment of crimes committed by the Ustaša in the Jasenovac concentration camp. In response to these revisionist efforts in Croatia, there has been a robust debate on the blatant misrepresentation of Jasenovac. Jewish Croats, Serbs, Roma and anti-fascists have boycotted the state-sponsored annual commemoration annually (since 2015) due to the government's anaemic efforts to acknowledge Ustaša crimes. Croatian intellectuals have also taken revisionists and those who either tacitly or explicitly support them, to task. Scholars like Ivo Goldstein, activists and others have publicly slammed revisionists who systematically distort the history of Jasenovac ⁸ who suggest, among other things, that it was a labour camp where inmates played games and had “fun”. ⁹

While the debate rages on in Croatia, revisionists take their message to receptive audiences in the diaspora. The diaspora spaces where these ideas are promoted, displayed and otherwise shared (other than via online portals), are typically community institutions frequented by Croats such as

⁸ The Ustaša killed over 83,000 Serbs, Jews, Roma and anti-fascists at the camp between 1941 and 1945.

⁹ Milan Ivkošić who writes for the conservative daily *Vecernji list* (a conservative Croatian daily) wrote that “there was fun in the camp”, complete with football matches and plays. The Croatian government is also tolerant of these revisionist claims, including donated 6,700 Euros to the *Society for Research of the Threefold Jasenovac Camp*, a group that distorts the facts about Jasenovac, claiming, without any academic basis, that up to 50 times fewer people died there than the Jasenovac Memorial Site has established. Some Croatian media sources have also given positive reviews of books and films by revisionists (Igor Vukić's book ‘Labour Camp Jasenovac’, Jakov Sedlar's documentary *Jasenovac - the Truth* and others.)

churches, social and cultural institutions, alumni associations and university student clubs. Blanka Matković, a university student and revisionist well known for her right-wing views, recently promoted one of her publications at a number of Croatian student associations in Ontario - the University of Toronto and at the Germanic and Slavic Studies Association at the University of Waterloo. The advertisement for the event stated that Matković, “will be presenting a monograph on historical crimes *concealed from the public* and will commemorate 75 years since the crimes of communism.” (emphasis mine). The hashtag “Never Again” which has historically been used by the right-wing Jewish diaspora group *Betar*, was also used in the promotional material. Significantly, one of the goals of the *Croatian History Society “Dr. Rudolf Horvat”* in Zagreb that she co-founded with Stipo Pilić in 2008, is to develop “links and cooperation with emigrant and homeland organizations with similar goals”.¹⁰ What is interesting is who in the diaspora supports these events: the Croatian Heritage Association of Ontario (which champions conservative causes) and the *Tribute to Liberty* organization discussed below.

Bleiburg: The annual pilgrimage of Croatians to Bleiburg, Austria to commemorate the thousands of NDH soldiers and civilian supporters who fled and were captured and killed after Tito took power, had its beginning in the diaspora. During the communist era in Yugoslavia mention of Bleiburg was taboo, and so diaspora Croats have gathered annually to pay tribute. After Croatian independence in 1991, commemorations of Bleiburg in diaspora communities began to fade but it remains a powerful symbol of communist repression. It has though also become a site of contestation as it too is widely seen as rehabilitating the ideology of the Ustaša regime (Pavlaković 2018, McDonald 2002, Radonić 2012, Tokić 2009, 2018), ever more so

¹⁰ <http://croatiarediviva.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ENG.pdf> Accessed 1 April 2019.

since 2016, when the ruling conservative HDZ decided to reintroduce state sponsorship of the Bleiburg annual event.¹¹ A new genre of Croatian “patriotic documentaries” featuring Bleiburg also makes the rounds in diaspora communities including “Bleiburg: the Forgotten Genocide”, “Macelj: Titovo Stratiste” and “Tito’s License for Genocide”, some of which receive funding support and/or are produced by diaspora Croats. Despite the controversy Bleiburg has generated, diaspora Croats in Canada have also taken the lead in fundraising for a memorial in Ottawa named, *Tribute to Liberty* which commemorates “victims of communist crimes”.¹²

Diaspora returnees and the transnational reach of revisionism

Croatian Diaspora Congress: Returnees to Croatia from Ontario who were active in mobilizing diaspora support in the early 1990s have also been advocating for greater diaspora engagement politically, financially and culturally. Although their numbers are small, some returnees are influential in Croatia and deeply committed to the promotion of a conservative vision of Croatia. For example, one of the diaspora Croats I encountered frequently in Toronto, who was instrumental in the courtship of Tuđman in Toronto in the early 1990s and very active in diaspora circles, was Marin Sopta. After returning to Croatia in the mid-1990s, he took on a variety of portfolios and patronage appointments, but his foremost commitment has always been the diaspora. Croatian victimhood narratives are central to Sopta’s efforts both in Canada and

¹¹ The commemoration, held in Bleiburg Austria is still marked in the diaspora albeit to a lesser extent, for example, in Canada, Argentina and in Germany. An event to commemorate the Bleiburg genocide took place in 2017 at City Hall in Mississauga, Ontario, and was organized by the Croatian Heritage Association.

¹² The group sponsoring the monument includes diaspora from the former Soviet Union, Southeast Asia and China. The former director of the initiative and now on the board of directors, Ivan Grbesić, was also appointed by the Croatian government to serve as Representative of the Croatian Diaspora (Canada) on its Advisory Council for Croats Abroad.

Croatia. The most recent incarnation of his efforts to engage diaspora in homeland affairs is the *Croatian Diaspora Congress* which he founded. The *Congress* holds annual conferences devoted to diaspora issues gathering together speakers and representatives with mainly conservative political, religious and ethno-nationalist convictions.¹³ The promotional material for the most recent conference held in Zagreb (February 2019) which focused on political emigration during the 20th century states: “It is well known that Croatian emigration, including its political organizations, contributed greatly to the defense of the homeland from the Greater Serbian aggression and the Yugoslav People's Army in the Homeland War”. The recurring theme of *Congress* presentations and panels was the “legitimacy of the violent struggle of Croatian political emigration”, “violence as a means of political struggle of Croatian emigrants” and, “the repression of Yugoslav secret services directed against Croatian political emigration”. One of the presenters, an associate of Sopta’s for decades, is Tomislav Sunić, briefly a diplomat in Tuđman’s government, and a well-known White Nationalist who presents his views not only online through a number of right-wing portals including the Croatian *Projekt Velebit*, but in extremist circles in Europe and the United States that include neo-Nazis and the KKK.¹⁴ Recently Željko Glasnović, a returnee who is currently the member of *Sabor* representing the diaspora, (and who served in the Canadian army for 5 years) was interviewed by Sunić in January 2019 on *Projekt Velebit* for a segment titled “Ethnic Replacement in Europe and White

¹³ The organization has also established a Croatian Emigration Research Centre.

¹⁴ His profile can be found on Southern Poverty Law Centre website.

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/tomislav-suni%C4%87>

Man's Guilt".^{15,16} The podcast was broadcast in both English and Croatian with some variations in content.

Vigilare, an increasingly powerful ultra-conservative Catholic NGO in Zagreb which is pro-life and virulently homophobic, is run by Vice (John) Batarello, a returnee from Australia. When I first met him in Zagreb in 2007 he was teaching and writing about the Australian diaspora, specifically about what he argues is the discriminatory treatment of Australian Croats who were agitating for independence from Tito's Yugoslavia (2014). *Vigilare* has strong ties to American and European conservative Catholic, pro-life and other organizations. The following statement he made at *Tradfest* ("a Festival of and Conservative Ideas") in Zagreb which he organizes provides a snapshot of the victimhood narrative that informs the ideological foundations of his convictions: "Imagine how many people before Croatian independence and the fall of communism, had to remain silent and suffer in solitude. That is why the common and public memory of the victories and the pain (for Vukovar ...), which eventually became a victory, is important."¹⁷ Vukovar in eastern Croatia which was bombarded by Serb forces and eventually fell during the Homeland War remains one of the "constituting myths of post socialist Croatia and symbolizes a central moment of Croatian resistance, suffering and heroism". (Brentin

¹⁵ www.projektvelebit.com/podcast-velebit-sunic-glasnovic-ethnic-replacement-in-europe-and-white-mans-guilt/?fbclid=IwAR2GMi68tD3heC3jtm0Gb4f6yox_iXzpPfyAKV5bm5Q7LaPUjKGFJXzHOCw Accessed 30 March 2019. The Great Replacement" is a White genocide conspiracy theory being propagated globally. Cf. projektvelebit.com/podcast-velebit-sunic-glasnovic-ethnic-replacement-in-europe-and-white-mans-guilt/?fbclid=IwAR2GMi68tD3heC3jtm0Gb4f6yox_iXzpPfyAKV5bm5Q7LaPUjKGFJXzHOCw. Accessed 2 April 2019

¹⁶ Ruža Tomašić (who was a police officer in Toronto) is a member of the European Parliament for Croatia.

¹⁷ <http://vigilare.org/vijest/zapazen-govor-dr-vice-batarela-na-otvorenju-tradifesta-2018/> Accessed 23 March 2019.

2013)¹⁸ The American Croatian Professionals Association has just launched an annual *Domovina Birthright* tour of Croatia aimed at youth 18-32 modelled almost to the detail on the Jewish *Birthright* program. The first stop on the tour is Vukovar.

Conclusion – [I am still writing the conclusion]:

The transnational dimension of historical revisionism and the victimhood narratives that feed them often define the agendas of radical nationalists, social and political conservatives and others are particularly potent in contexts defined by histories of migration and exile.

[As Tokić argues: “being forced to operate in transnational space led Croatian radicals to cultivate a culture of abandonment, betrayal, and persecution, in which the Croats were portrayed as a nation of victims without allies.” (2012)

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¹⁸ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/nations-most-holy-institution-football-and-construction-of-croatian-national-identity/>

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(Citations for Jansen 2016, Hodges 2019, Živković 2000, Helms 2013, Schauble 2017, Čolović 2000, Denich 1995, Verdery 1996, Žanić 2000, Winland 2002, 2007, 2018)