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The Staro Sajmiste Concentration Camp and Serbia's Ontological Security

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1. Introduction.....	4
2. Literature review	7
3. Methodology	15
4. Theoretical framework.....	16
4.1 Memory culture, collective memory and forgetting/oblivion.....	16
4.2 Ontological security	23
4.3 Mnemonical security as ontological security.....	27
4.4 The concept of denial.....	31
4.4.1 Confronting denial: acknowledgement and overcoming the past.....	36
5. World War 2 in Serbia and the Semlin Judenlager concentration camp	39
5.1 Beginning of the war and the quisling administration.....	39
5.2 Preparing the ground - legal discrimination of Jews and Roma in Serbia.....	41
5.3 Staro Sajmište: 1941–1944	42
5.4 Post-war period and memorialisation initiatives.....	45
5.5 Staro Sajmište today - Memorial Centre.....	48
6. Denial and ontological (in)security versus proper memorialisation	51
7. Conclusion and recommendations for additional research	55
8. Bibliography	57

1. Introduction

The subject of this master thesis is the former concentration camp in Belgrade, Staro Sajmište/Semlin Judenlager, one of the main sites of the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Serbia, and its largest concentration camp. The camp - which was set up by Nazi Germany in the fall of 1941 - was among the first death camps in Europe created specifically for the internment of Jews. Almost 7,000 Jewish women, children, and the elderly were interned in the camp from December 1941 to May 1942; they were killed in a mobile gas van, which they thought was transporting them to another labor camp.¹ The importance of the site is enormous, with historians referring to it as the second phase of the Holocaust in Serbia (the first phase took place between July and November 1941 and involved executions of Jewish men).² From May 1942 to July 1944, Semlin Judenlager became Semlin Anhaltelager - a detention camp for political prisoners, captured Partisans and forced laborers - almost 32,000 people altogether.³

However, despite its obvious significance not only for Serbian history, but for Holocaust remembrance in general, the site had been poorly marked for decades. Over the years, two memorial plaques were put in 1974 and in 1984, and a monument was erected. The buildings where detainees were held and killed served several purposes: they accommodated labor brigade members, artists' studios, people with no adequate housing; they were used as restaurants, night clubs, and a kindergarten, while some were also sold to private owners.⁴ The former camp has also served nationalistic purposes of the Serbian elites that have been using it to show the extent of Serbian suffering during WWII and even to compare it to those of the Jews, considering Jewish victims only as co-sufferers with the Serbs who were detained there. As Jovan Byford argues: "As a result of the way in which the Holocaust was remembered both during the socialist era and in the 1990s, there is not, in Serbia today, an appreciation of the Holocaust as a distinct historical event and a unique case of human suffering. This is not least because a large

¹ "Holocaust in Serbia," Semlin Judenlager in Serbian public memory, accessed 29.07.2024, [https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/holocaust-in-serbia.php](https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semnin/en/holocaust-in-serbia.php)

² Ibid

³ Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom sajmištu* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992)

⁴ Srdjan Radovic, "Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall", presentation from The Eleventh Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality - Memory Politics: Education, Memorials and Mass Media, Berlin, Germany, 21-26 October 2009.

proportion of the Serbian public remains preoccupied with the history of Serbian martyrdom and is consequently inclined to remember victims of the Holocaust primarily as fellow sufferers of Serbs, rather than as a discrete category of victims which warrants its own memorial or museum”.⁵

Even though there had been quite a few initiatives to establish a memorial complex, that finally happened with passing the law in 2020 which established the Memorial Centre “Staro Sajmište”. The site underwent a major reconstruction but has not opened its doors to visitors yet, so it still remains to be seen in which way the history will be presented there.⁶

The main research goal of this thesis is to explain why Serbia has been failing to properly memorialize the Staro Sajmište concentration camp and acknowledge the unique suffering of Jews and Roma in WWII. In addition, the thesis aims to provide the general public, as well as the expert public, with sets of recommendations that could help advance the current state of the Memorial Centre “Staro Sajmište”. The main research question of this thesis is: *Why has Serbia been failing to properly memorialize the Staro Sajmište concentration camp and acknowledge the unique suffering of Jews and Roma in WWII?* This thesis argues it is a psychological defense mechanism called denial that has been preventing the establishment of a proper memorial and the full acknowledgement of the Holocaust as an event on its own. (The concept of denial will be explained in greater detail, but in general it constitutes “a defense mechanism in which unpleasant thoughts, feelings, wishes, or events are ignored or excluded from conscious awareness”⁷). By denying its past misdeeds (such as the infamous role of the Serbian collaborationist government in the Holocaust; or the fact that the Sajmište was primarily established to liquidate Jews and Roma; or misusing the site to talk about Serbian victimhood), Serbian society manages to maintain its carefully crafted identity and related, affirmative narratives, needed both domestically and internationally. These are narratives of a victorious

⁵ “Remembering Semlin, 1945-2008,” Semlin Judenlager in Serbian public memory, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semnin/en/remembering-semnin.php>

⁶ Ivana Nikolic, “From Nazi Camp to Memorial Centre: In Serbia, the Transition Isn’t Easy”, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 14.08.2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/14/from-nazi-camp-to-memorial-centre-in-serbia-the-transition-isnt-easy/>

⁷ “APA Dictionary of Psychology,” American Psychological Association, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/denial>

nation that has suffered a lot and that has always been on the right side of history. The full acknowledgement of its past misdeeds - that would need to be part of any proper Holocaust-related memorial - would pose a significant threat to this well crafted identity and related narratives, and thus to the country's ontological security, as a security of its identity.⁸ In addition, the full acknowledgement would jeopardize another important narrative in the Serbian public, the one that Jelena Subotić calls "Serbs as Jews".⁹ According to this narrative, Serbs have suffered equally or even more than the Jews throughout their history. Victimization narratives such as this one are of utmost importance for keeping society together. Thus, in order to avoid shame and guilt and keep its image, Serbian authorities have been reluctant to properly memorialize the former camp, grant the Holocaust place it deserves, and acknowledge the unique suffering of Jews and Roma.

⁸ Ontological security will be explained in great detail in the subsequent chapters.

⁹ Jelena Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 89

2. Literature review

The concepts and theories will be explained in Chapter 4 (Theoretical framework), and the Staro Sajmište camp history in Chapter 5 (World War II in Serbia and the Semlin Judenlager concentration camp). This chapter will focus on key authors and their extensive literature on the Holocaust, exploring how it is perceived, remembered, and understood. In addition, it will present and analyze existing literature on the culture of denial in Serbia, highlight what is missing in these accounts, and suggest how this thesis might contribute to the existing literature.

Among the most important pieces of work which explores the Holocaust remembrance in Yugoslavia and Serbia is Jelena Subotić's "Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism" (2019). According to Subotić, there are four phases of postwar remembrance of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia: Holocaust Remembrance as Brotherhood and Unity; Jewish Remembrance as Affirmation of the Yugoslav Project; Heroes, Fighters and Victims of Fascism; Victims of Semlin as the Last Yugoslavs.¹⁰ The first phase took place in the immediate postwar years across socialist Yugoslavia. As in the rest of the East, Holocaust did not exist as an event *per se*, separated from the rest of World War 2. "Communist Yugoslavia, however, was ideologically committed to thinking of the Holocaust as primarily an antifascist struggle and as an atrocity that was universal to all Yugoslav nations, which served to further bolster two main pillars of communist Yugoslav identity - socialism and pan-nationalism".¹¹ In the newly formed socialist country, composed of nations that had been at war with each other, it was important to omit ethnicity and carefully—or rather, equally—refer to war criminals and perpetrators. This is also evident in Josip Broz Tito's postwar speeches, where he insisted on the joint and equal suffering of the people of Yugoslavia.¹² Similarly, the responsibility for the crimes on Yugoslav soil was attributed to the Germans and equally distributed among each of the constituent nations; there was no space for the specificity of the Holocaust and Jewish suffering, and there was no place for civilian victims of the war.¹³ The only ones worth remembering were "heroes, fighters,

¹⁰ Ibid, 80-88

¹¹ Ibid, 80

¹² Josip Broz Tito, *Izgradnja nove Jugoslavije I* (Beograd: Kultura, 1948), 22

¹³ *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 80

liberators, and to the extent that any victims were memorialized, they posthumously became reconstructed as heroes themselves”.¹⁴

According to Carol S. Lily, another significant feature of the new socialist country was destroying unpleasant memories of war and building new ones.¹⁵ That was the case with the Staro Sajmište camp, which was partly demolished, partly reconstructed, in the first postwar years, without mentioning its war years. “A wall of and suppression”¹⁶ was built around it and “a space of Staro Sajmište was left empty and ‘cleansed’ from the traumatic testimonies of the war”.¹⁷ Or, as Yugoslav Labour Action’s leaflets read: “We will forget the days of war, the horrors of Semlin, and build on what is now swampy, sandy, and empty space”.¹⁸

The Holocaust and Jewish remembrance in Yugoslavia are also seen as affirmations of the Yugoslav project. This is best described by Emil Kerenji, who stated that the revival of Jewish communities after the war “was a part of a wider Yugoslav narrative [which] defined Jewishness as an identity firmly rooted in the new Yugoslav political project”.¹⁹ It is important to note that during Yugoslavia, Jewish identity was not suppressed. Moreover, Jewish communities were given the green light to commemorate their own victims and build their own monuments, even with inscriptions in Hebrew. These initiatives did not come from nor were funded by the Yugoslav state, but the authorities supported rather than sanctioned them.²⁰ This is what Heike Karge calls “mediation of remembrance”²¹: despite the fact that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia controlled official narratives and positive memories that would serve its cause, “there were still remembrance practices that allowed for forms of social exchange and

¹⁴ Ibid, 81

¹⁵ Carol S. Lily, *Power and Persuasion: Ideology and Rhetoric in Communist Yugoslavia, 1944-1953* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001)

¹⁶ Olga Manojlović Pintar and Aleksandar Ignjatović, “Prostori selektovanih memorija: Staro sajmište u Beogradu i sećanje na drugi svetski rat”, u *Kultura sjećanja: 1941. Povijesni lomovi i savladavanje prošlosti*, uredili Sulejman Bosto, Tihomir Cipek i Olivera Milosavljević (Zagreb: Disput, 2008): 95-112, 101

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, 106

¹⁹ Emil Kerenji, “Jewish citizens of socialist Yugoslavia: Politics of Jewish identity in a socialist state, 1944-1974” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), vii-viii.

²⁰ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 84-85

²¹ Heike Karge, “Mediated remembrance: local practices of remembering the Second World War in Tito’s Yugoslavia” in *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 16:1, (2009), 49-62

communication”.²² However, it has to be noted that these monuments were mostly hidden and placed in Jewish cemeteries. As Subotić argues, “it was a monument to the Jews for the Jews. It was not a monument to the Jews for all Yugoslav citizens to see”.²³

During the phase “Heroes, Fighters, and Victims of Fascism,” the Yugoslav state directed its attention towards commemorating civilians by building monuments, memorial parks, and commemorative complexes. However, there was still no place for the uniqueness of the Jewish suffering, i.e., the Holocaust. In this stage, all war victims were categorized as victims of fascism, which was important for two reasons: first, without ethnicity involved in the war crimes, genocides, and the Holocaust, it was not possible to hold any of the founding nations responsible for past misdeeds; and second, all enemies, that is, anti-communists, were dubbed fascists.²⁴ For these reasons, the proposal put forward in 1980 by the Jewish Federation for the Yugoslav post service to issue a stamp “in memory of the tragedy of the Jews in Yugoslavia” was swiftly rejected. The Yugoslav authorities responded that “singling out one constitutive nation or national minority as a victim of genocide would represent a violation of the legacy of the Revolution—namely, the unity and equality of all the peoples of Yugoslavia”.²⁵

“Victims of Semlin as the Last Yugoslavs” refers to the final stage of Holocaust remembrance prior to the fall of communism and dissolution of Yugoslavia in the bloody 1990s. Subotić argues that it was during this phase that a subtle change occurred. The first memorial plaque to commemorate the Semlin victims was installed in 1974, and the second one a decade later, in 1984. While the first plaque was placed on the side of one of the camp buildings, the second monument got a more central place within the site. This change coincided with a shift in the sources of Yugoslavia’s ontological security. As Subotić points out, this second monument is important “because it came at a time of profound Yugoslav socialist anxiety in the aftermath of Tito’s death in 1980, and great fear among the communist leadership that socialist ideas, especially among the youth, were weakening”.²⁶ The authorities did not single out Jews, but again insisted that victims of fascism killed at the site came from all over the country. These

²² Ibid, 50

²³ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 85

²⁴ Ibid, 85-86

²⁵ Ibid, 86

²⁶ Ibid, 87

regular commemorations at the site of the former camp took place at the same time when nationalism started spreading across the country. It was far from the coincidence: “Holocaust remembrance of ‘all Yugoslavs’ - and Jews as suitable examples of ‘all Yugoslav’ people - represented a link to a simpler past when ethnicity did not matter, victims and perpetrators were clearly identified, and Yugoslavia was an internationally respected, successful socialist role model”.²⁷

Holocaust remembrance, however, changed dramatically during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Each of the successor states, including Serbia, appropriated the Holocaust memory after the fall of communism, adjusting it to their own needs and ontological insecurities.²⁸ In the case of Serbia, the Holocaust was extensively used to justify the country’s growing nationalism, mobilization for war, and the need to defend Serbian people outside of Serbia. The most important narrative within this new Holocaust remembrance was “Serbs as Jews”.²⁹ This narrative posits that, throughout history, Serbs have suffered equally or even more than the Jews.³⁰ These Jews however remain “nameless, placeless, and completely decontextualized, and were only relevant to the extent that they could garner up images of horror, suffering, and pain”.³¹ Another, similar, narrative holds that Serbs always helped Jews during World War 2 and that anti-Semitism has never been present in Serbian society. This is what John-Paul Himka calls “victimization narratives” - narratives that prevent members of one nation or group from perceiving their fellow compatriots as perpetrators.³² In addition, they “also hinder the recognition of others’ narratives of victimization”.³³

It is also necessary to address another crucial aspect of Serbia’s post-communist Holocaust remembrance: its relationship with Croatia, as Serbia’s most important significant other, a figure

²⁷ Ibid, 88

²⁸ The concept of memory appropriation has been extensively explained in the Chapter 4 (Theoretical framework).

²⁹ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 89

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² John-Paul Himka, “Obstacles to the Integration of the Holocaust into Post-Communist East European Historical Narratives” in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 50, No. 3/4 (September-December 2008), 359-372

³³ Ibid

that threatens its ontological security.³⁴ Serbia has to portray Croatia as culpable, emphasizing Serbian suffering at the hands of Croats and Ustasha both during the NDH era and the 1990s wars. To achieve that end, Serbian institutions such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, nationalist politicians, tabloid media and Museum of Genocide Victims insist that on a variety of rather problematic and inaccurate claims such as that Jasenovac was a concentration much worse than Auschwitz, or that the Croats were worse than the Germans.³⁵

In this distorted Holocaust remembrance in Serbia, the Staro Sajmište camp sometimes still serves as a focal point. Serbian nationalists often use it to incorrectly attribute the death camp atrocities to Croats, citing its location on NDH territory as evidence.³⁶ In the same vein, Sajmište is often incorrectly linked to the Jasenovac death camp in public speeches and commemorative practices. For example, annual commemorations for the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide are held each April 22 close to the Staro Sajmište, even though there is not historical basis for it. April 22 is significant in the history of Jasenovac, as it marks the day in 1945 when 600 inmates escaped from that death camp. Byford explains it is due to the fact that Serbia's Holocaust remembrance has a special "memorial geography" - instead of being located within Serbia, it is situated on Croatian soil, aligning with Serbia's needs, identity, and image.³⁷

When it comes to the culture of denial in Serbia, there is a substantial body of literature mostly related to the 1990s but worth analyzing. Among the most significant pieces is Jovan Byford's "'Serbs never hated the Jews': the denial of antisemitism in Serbian Orthodox Christian literature". Byford looks at the responses of the Serbian Orthodox Church to criticism that it maintains connections with right-wing groups in Serbia that are, among other things, antisemitic. His work is of utmost importance for understanding denial in Serbian society, particularly in regards to Serbian-Jewish relationship.

³⁴ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 96

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Establishing and functioning of the camp are explained in the subchapter "Staro Sajmište: 1941-1944."

³⁷ Jovan Byford, "When I Say 'The Holocaust,' I Mean 'Jasenovac'", in *East European Jewish Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2017): 51-74

Byford argues there were sporadic incidents within the Serbian Orthodox Church in relation to antisemitism, which the Church successfully managed to suppress. However, because of a growing number of openly antisemitic Christian right-wing groups in Serbia, “since 2000 the question of antisemitism within Serbian Orthodox culture has come under greater public scrutiny”.³⁸ As a consequence, antisemitic violence and vandalism across Serbia, especially in Belgrade, almost became a norm, which is why Christian right was cited “as the greatest threat to the peaceful lives of Serbia’s Jews”.³⁹

Looking at how the Church responded to criticism posed by the media, Jewish community, experts and the general public, Byford argues it used various forms of denial - “stating that there is, and never has been, any antisemitism in Serbia or within Orthodox Christianity”.⁴⁰ Byford analyzed two texts: the February 2002 press release of the Synod, the governing body of the Serbian Orthodox Church, released after public instances of antisemitism by one of its priests; and the 2001 article “Serbs and Jews” published online and in print. Byford argues that in both texts there was outright or emphatic denial: “there simply is no antisemitism among Serbs, and especially not within Orthodox Christianity”.⁴¹ “Serbs and Jews” offers plenty of denial examples, such as the following: “It is clear, clear, clear: Serbs have never hated the Jews, Serbs have never persecuted the Jews, Serbs cannot be accused of racism and Judaeophobia [...] throughout the centuries Serbs always lived in peace with their Jewish neighbors, never persecuted them for their faith and always granted them full human and civil rights in their state”.⁴²

Needless to say, there was no evidence to support these and similar claims; instead, the Church criticism was directed at those who accused it of antisemitism - which is what Stanley Cohen calls “condemnation of the condemners”.⁴³ Here are some examples to illustrate the case: “The statement from the Synod claims, for instance, that allegations of antisemitism are directed at

³⁸ Jovan Byford, “‘Serbs never hated the Jews’: the denial of antisemitism in Serbian Orthodox Christian culture” in *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40 (2), (2006), 159-180, 163

³⁹ Ibid, 164

⁴⁰ Ibid, 159

⁴¹ Ibid, 168

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 97

‘Orthodoxy’, ‘the teachings of St Sava’ and ‘the Orthodox Church’. Nationalist historian Radoš Ljušić [...] argued that concerns about rising antisemitism in Serbia were ‘directed against the whole of the Serbian people’. Bishop Jevtić referred to liberal critics as ‘the accusers of Serbs’ who ‘persistently hate Serbs and the Church’”.⁴⁴ Explaining the Church’s motives for such widespread denial, Byford claims that “generalized statements about Serbian and Orthodox tolerance manage the moral accountability of those who find themselves under criticism by turning public attention away from the ongoing controversy and by confining the problem to a small number of individual extremists on the far right”.⁴⁵ “By helping to generate a consensus about Serbian tolerance, the denial implicitly perpetuates the very same xenophobic and antisemitic elements of Serbian nationalist discourse that it is meant to negate and refute”.⁴⁶

Fast forward to present-day Serbia, many reports note only rare and minor antisemitic incidents. However, there is some latent antisemitism present, mostly in the form of accusations: “Whenever something bad happens, the blame is on the Jews. There is something in the social consciousness [in Serbia] based on dogmas that are feeding antisemitism. This latent antisemitism is floating within society, and political and religious communities should start a widespread discussion in the entire [Serbian] society”.⁴⁷ Monitoring of the media in 2019 and 2020, exploring what ordinary people in Serbia think about Jews, the Holocaust, and World War 2, noted the same: conspiracy theories targeting Zionists, Jews and Israel were prevalent, while Jews were also regularly blamed for global tragedies such as wars and COVID-19.⁴⁸ “Of note is the perceived and much-hailed “love and friendship” between Serbs and Jews. Serbian politicians, such as President Aleksandar Vučić, embrace this narrative and pro-government media are quick to report on it. By focusing on good relations with Israel and Serbian Jews, Serbian politicians aim to show how good their foreign politics are and how well Serbia treats its

⁴⁴ Byford, ““Serbs never hated the Jews””, 173

⁴⁵ Ibid, 159

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ International Republican Institute, *Antisemitic Discourse in the Western Balkans: A Collection of Case Studies*, 2021, <https://www.iri.org/resources/antisemitism-remains-a-key-obstacle-to-democratic-transition-in-western-balkans/>

⁴⁸ Ibid

minorities. For Serbian politicians, good relations with Israel means Serbia is an important player in the international realm”.⁴⁹

Another work worth analyzing is Eric Gordy’s “Guilt, Responsibility and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia”. Gordy seeks to understand what people in Serbia think of the 1990s conflicts and massive atrocities committed by their own country, as well as how they understand social, political and moral implications of the past misdeeds.⁵⁰ Explaining transitional justice processes in Serbia and the overall public stances towards the crimes of the 1990s, Gordy argues there is “a long record of obstruction, relativization, and denial; retrenchment of forces complicit in the operation of a criminal regime; repeated instances of impunity”.⁵¹ He says that the public in Serbia “had been prepared to resist the topic”⁵² of dealing with the past, adding that “in the space of confusion grows the potential for denial.”⁵³ The event that has been most denied is the genocide in Srebrenica, where the Bosnian Serb forces executed more than 7,000 Bosniak boys and men in the course of few days in July 1995. Ordinary citizens, nationalist politicians and the media started denying the crime as it happened, and, unfortunately, still do, almost 30 years later. “Faced with a crime as horrifying as Srebrenica, denial appeared to offer a defense against the threat to national honor and self-perception. So deny they did”.⁵⁴ Gordy presents the main features of the state of denial in Serbia after Milošević: first of all, many state institutions support it, and a substantial portion of the general public believes in it.⁵⁵

What literature related to the Holocaust in Serbia - explored in this thesis - has in common is that, for decades, the memory of Staro Sajmiste and Holocaust in Serbia has been instrumentalized at the political level, and marginalized at the social level. Serbian discourse of remembrance argues that all victims are equally important, but in reality Serbs as victims always have priority. That is why the Holocaust has never been acknowledged as an event per se, but as

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013)

⁵¹ Ibid, xi

⁵² Ibid, 20

⁵³ Ibid, 87

⁵⁴ Ibid, 126

⁵⁵ Ibid, 130

something closely related to Serbian victimhood. This thesis aims to contribute to the overall debate about the Holocaust in Serbia by introducing the concept of denial. Denial has not been used in the academic literature to explain Serbia's stance towards the Staro Sajmište camp and more broadly, towards the Holocaust. In that regard, the concept of denial will be accompanied by the Ontological Security Theory, OST, which is to be explored in the following section in great detail.

3. Methodology

This master thesis will strongly rely on qualitative research, specifically case study research method, that provides an abundance of descriptive information, enabling better understanding of the case in question. The case to be studied in this thesis is the Staro Sajmište concentration camp in Belgrade. The timeline to be examined includes: the murder of Jews in Serbia (December 1941 - May 1942); Sajmište during socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1980s); Sajmište and the rise of Serbian nationalism (late 1980s-2000); and initiatives to properly mark the site (2006-2024). Data sources include: books, handbooks, journalism articles, multimedia content, magazines, laws and regulations, interviews, documents, observations and reports etc. The aim of this kind of methodology is twofold: to describe and explain the phenomenon. Apart from the case study, this master thesis uses other research methods such as interviews, a little bit of content analysis, and a literature research including academic and journalistic articles that explore the relations between the Holocaust remembrance in Serbia and its constructed identity. Of course, the listed research methods come with a number of limitations. While the case study - used as the main research method in this thesis - is good at describing certain phenomena and corresponding contexts, it has a limited generalizability, is difficult to replicate, and can fall victim to subjectivity. In addition, there is a risk of overemphasizing the case's uniqueness.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Memory culture, collective memory and forgetting/oblivion

According to Todor Kuljić, memory culture is a scientific discipline that investigates the impact of cultural patterns of memory and the impact of memory on the formation of identity and on the relationship to history and the past in science and collective memory. Memory culture is related to the terms politics of memory or political use of history. In a nutshell, memory culture studies the ways in which cultures, regimes and classes transmit knowledge about the past, how they invent, process, use, suppress, forget and transform it.⁵⁶

Memory culture as such tries to explain how the past is adapted to serve the interests of ruling groups.⁵⁷ It is important to note that not any past serves the interests of ruling groups and in general needs of a state. Kuljić says it is only the past organised into a coherent and meaningful story that has the power to foster various authorities. That is why the image of the past is most often well organized, consistent and shaped into a homogeneous narrative with a clear polarization of good and evil, victims and executioners, us and others. Another important feature

⁵⁶ Todor Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja: teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti* (Beograd, Čigoja štampa, 2006), 11-13

⁵⁷ Ibid

of the past is the fact it cannot be replayed, it is unrepeatable and thus cannot be fact checked. Kulljić claims that it is past's unverifiability that offers space for its misuse.⁵⁸

Among the key features of politics of memory and memory culture are collective memories. The term was introduced by Maurice Halbwach in 1925 to refer to what he thought was the rudimental feature of social life. In order to explain collective memory - and memory in general - Halbwachs discussed what he called "social frames of reference", which could be explained as the environment and social milieu we belong to.⁵⁹ "According to Maurice Halbwachs, our individual memory answers expectations we assume from our environment; the way that we remember is already framed by the answer which we seek to give in response to this environment".⁶⁰

Jan Assmann argued that something is missing in Halbwach's definition of collective memory: "Halbwach was careful to keep his concept of collective memory apart from the realm of traditions, transmissions, and transferences".⁶¹ In order to differentiate between Halbwach's collective memory and his and Aleida Assmann's cultural memory, Assmann introduced communicative memory, which "includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications".⁶² On the other side, cultural memory is the complete opposite and has what Assmann and Czaplicka call "fixed point [...] fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)".⁶³ In that regard, their proposed cultural memory aims at connecting memory, culture and society and is characterized by the following: relation to the group or concretion of identity (cultural memory helps us maintain knowledge about ourselves and specifics of our own group); its capacity to reconstruct (in a

⁵⁸ Ibid, 38-40

⁵⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

⁶⁰ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Between Pragmatism, Coercion and Fear: Chosen Amnesia after the Rwandan Genocide" in: Aleida Assmann and Linda Short (ed.), *Memory and Political Change*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 2011, p. 74

⁶¹ Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory" in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin, New York: 2008), 109-118, p. 110

⁶² Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" in *New German Critique*, No. 65, *Cultural History/Cultural Studies* (1995), 125-133, p. 126

⁶³ Ibid, 129

certain way, cultural memory connects past and present - it is what we already know that we use in comprehending new, present situations); formation (collective memory helps us form and sustain cultural meanings); organization (who/what is specialized to bear cultural memory); obligation (cultural memory has formative and normative functions, i.e. it educates, civilizes, humanizes members of a group and offers a specific code of conduct); reflexivity (collective memory is practice-reflexive, self-reflexive and reflexive of its own image).⁶⁴

According to Kuljić, collective memory integrates different personal pasts into one common past. It is, however, constituted in the tension between the official politics of memory and private or personal memories. Past within such collective memory is a mobilizing content of ideology, while the hegemonic image of the past is imposed by the ruling groups. There is one official memory and several political, ideological, family, generational and personal memories. Thus, memory has (1) a cognitive role, i.e. it can be an attempt to realistically understand past events, but it is also (2) a means of creating selective group knowledge about the past. In other words, there is a historical and practical past. In collective memory, the practical past prevails.⁶⁵

Another author that has extensively covered the concept of collective memory is Kathrin Bachleitner, who argues that states are “bearers of collective memory”⁶⁶ and that the concept can be best described as “the national interpretation of a country’s ‘history’ or ‘historical legacy.’”⁶⁷ Using the concept coined by Halbwachs, Bachleitner explains that “countries remember [...] within the social frameworks in which countries interact. In IR [international relations], these social frameworks refer to both the domestic and the international environments”.⁶⁸ In order to understand collective memory, one has to understand memory content and memory degree: the former is people’s understanding of a particular historical event which changes over time, while the latter refers to its active/direct and passive/indirect impact on states.⁶⁹ In a bid to explain how collective memory can impact countries, Bachleitner lists four possible forms, or types:

⁶⁴ Ibid, 130-133

⁶⁵ Todor Kuljić, “Kultura sećanja: teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti,” 9-11

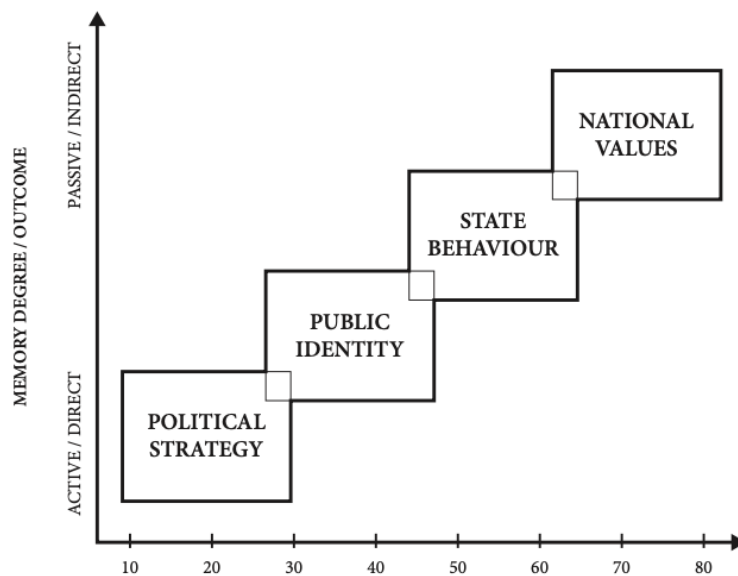
⁶⁶ Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid, 32

collective memory as a political strategy; collective memory shaping public identity; collective memory influencing state behavior; and collective memory reflecting national values.⁷⁰



Forms of collective memory and their impact on states over time according to Kathrin Bachleitner.⁷¹

As can be seen in the graphic, the x-axis refers to memory degree, that is, collective memory's outcome and impact on states. The y-axis refers to years, i.e. it is functioning as a timeline. Everything starts with memory as a political strategy. Bachleitner argues that memory can affect political outcomes only very shortly after an event which becomes a memory content. „For the policy-making process, this means that in the short term, collective memory can present an active opportunity for its formation and manipulation as a political strategy”.⁷² With public identity, “memory has transformed from being open to deliberate manipulation by policymakers to indirectly manipulating political actors’ reasoning.”⁷³ After it becomes a public identity, collective memory slowly but steadily starts influencing state behavior, meaning that from that point on, state actors and policymakers have to follow actions that align with the official state narratives. Once collective memory lies beneath public identity and state behavior, “the resulting

⁷⁰ Ibid, 33-34

⁷¹ This chart was produced by Kathrin Bachleitner and published in Bachleitner, “Collective Memory in International Relations,” p.34

⁷² Bachleitner, “Collective Memory in International Relations,” 33

⁷³ Ibid

policies are intrinsically normative. As such, collective memory defines what a ‘good’ course of action means for a country. With this, memory is placed at the source of a country’s value system”.⁷⁴

It is also important to explore potential relations between states and (collective) memories, or forms of memory politics.⁷⁵ First of all, there is memory erasure, or *damnatio memoriae*, which refers to the situations after regime change, bringing about “U-turns in memory politics and rejections of the past, once treated as constitutive”.⁷⁶ Then there is denial of those memories that contradict a state’s official narrative, i.e. official version of the collective past. There are plenty of examples here: Serbia’s denial that genocide took place in Srebrenica, Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide, or Serbia’s denial of its indirect complicity in the Roma genocide and Holocaust during World War II. These states have hard times admitting their own guilt for a number of reasons; for instance, in the case of Turkey, even “Atatürk’s regime chose not to confront the crimes of 1915 [...]: admitting guilt would have undermined the project of constructing a modern, proud, European Turkish nation, and it would have also perpetuated the hierarchical relationship with the West the new regime was trying to avoid”.⁷⁷

There is also the silencing of undesired memories, a strategy that has been thoroughly examined by Lea David. David argues that the three mechanisms of silencing she put forward “prevent public debate, representation, negotiation and are intended to reduce the tension between the contradicting demands at the international and the domestic levels”.⁷⁸ These mechanisms are: “de-contextualisation of memory contents; creation of social narratives of suffering; and promotion of the Holocaust memory as a screen memory”.⁷⁹ David argues that the ruling elites of post-conflict states need these mechanisms because they find themselves in a difficult situation

⁷⁴ Ibid, 34

⁷⁵ These relations have been thoroughly examined by Filip Ejdus in the essay “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations”, in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, edited by Maria Mälksoo (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023), 31-46.

⁷⁶ Filip Ejdus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations”, in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, edited by Maria Mälksoo (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023), 31-46, 45

⁷⁷ Ayse Zarakol, “Ontological (In) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Japan” in *International Relations* 24 (1), (2010), 3-23, 15

⁷⁸ Lea David, “Between Human Rights and Nationalism: Silencing as a Mechanism of Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Wars’ Serbia” in *Journal of Regional Security*, 10:1, (2015), 37-52, 37

⁷⁹ Ibid, 37

over contested past, as both internal and external factors want their contradictory demands pleased.⁸⁰ As a consequence, they need to adjust a certain image intended for the internationals to the national identity their community wishes.⁸¹

Forgetting is another type of relation that might occur between a state and its past. For Paul Connerton, forgetting is an important concept that can have at least seven different types: repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence.⁸² Forgetting as repressive erasure is a standard feature of totalitarian regimes and it “can be employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring about a historical break.”⁸³ Prescriptive forgetting is also initiated by the state as something which “is believed to be in the interests of all parties to the previous dispute and because it can therefore be acknowledged publicly.”⁸⁴ Forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity refers to getting rid of “memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes.”⁸⁵ Structural amnesia refers to remembering only socially important parts of one’s history and “results from a deficit of information”.⁸⁶ On the other hand, forgetting as annulment refers to the fact that there is an abundance of information which can easily be annulled, or forgotten if it becomes an issue for a collective, be it a state or a society.⁸⁷ Forgetting as humiliated silence is a consequence of collective shame, of infamous events that members of a group would rather forget.⁸⁸

Dmitry Chernobrov lists two forms of forgetting: “the troublesome forgetting by repressing/expelling or the healthy forgetting by forgiving”.⁸⁹ The former refers to citations

⁸⁰ Ibid, 38

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting” in *Memory Studies* 1 (1) (2008), p. 59–71.

⁸³ Ibid, 60

⁸⁴ Ibid, 61

⁸⁵ Ibid, 63

⁸⁶ Ibid, 64

⁸⁷ Ibid, 65

⁸⁸ Ibid, 66

⁸⁹ Dmitry Chernobrov, *Public Perception of International Crisis: Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 125

when “the subject attempts to forget disagreeable wishes, memories, or events and make them non-existent by repression. However, repressed experiences may resurface in some form (for example, triggered by an unintentional reminder) and only deepen the anxiety of the subject”.⁹⁰ Another important concept that has to do with forgetting by repressing/expelling, which is quite prevalent in post-conflict societies, is a taboo. Taboos can range “from the prohibition of certain memories and symbols or the rejection of violent reality (such as the denial of genocide) to the centrally prescribed narratives of events that prohibit alternative interpretations”.⁹¹

The other form of forgetting is forgiving: “helping the subject come to terms with its own troubling past and reconcile with the previously hated or feared objects and the violent or aggressive practices of their containment”.⁹² This is a healthier approach, where actors acknowledge past misdeeds and distance themselves from the past, which “opens the possibility of a new identity narrative and a revised self/other relationship”.⁹³

For Kuljić, forgetting or oblivion is also important - it is the opposite process to remembrance. There are two types of oblivion: cultural and political. Cultural oblivion enables us to forget old values, thus opening space for the creation of the new ones. Political oblivion, on the other hand, occurs with the emergence of the new most powerful social groups and it happens in accordance with their own interests and values.⁹⁴

Jelena Subotić thoroughly examines memory appropriation - another form of memory politics - on the example of how postcommunist states treat the Holocaust remembrance. She argues that in memory appropriation, “the memory of the Holocaust is used to memorialize a different kind of suffering, such as suffering under communism, or suffering from ethnic violence perpetrated by other groups. It is Holocaust remembrance turned inward”.⁹⁵ In general, memory

⁹⁰ Ibid, 125

⁹¹ Ibid, 126

⁹² Ibid, 126-127

⁹³ Ibid, 126

⁹⁴ Kuljic, *Kultura sećanja: teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti* p. 48

⁹⁵ Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 27

appropriation occurs “when memories are twisted, selectively activated and manipulated to sustain a healthy sense of self”.⁹⁶

Subotić lists three strategies within memory appropriation: memory inversion, memory divergence and memory conflation.⁹⁷ Memory inversion occurs when a historical event is completely appropriated for the needs of a specific ethnic group: in Serbia, for instance, Holocaust is not denied - but the memory of it is fully hijacked for the purposes of Serbian nationalism. As Subotić argues, “It is used to invert the suffering and victimization of the Holocaust’s principal victims - the Jews - and instead represent other victims - the ethnic majority - as its primary targets”.⁹⁸ Memory divergence refers to the situations where certain events are detached from some others events, in order to make a nation or a group innocent. According to Subotić, a good example is Croatia, which is trying “to make the Holocaust a uniquely Nazi (that is, German) problem and absolve the local political community from participation in it”.⁹⁹ The third one, memory conflation, is where different memories are combined and presented as one, such as the memories of the Holocaust and Stalinism: “This historical narrative recognizes only one dimension of terror, tallies the victims of the Holocaust and Stalinism together, and obfuscates the understanding of the Holocaust as a distinct historical event with its own trajectory, consequences, and victims. This process has further led to the application of the legal infrastructure developed to prosecute crimes of the Holocaust (the Nuremberg principles) to now prosecute crimes of communism”.¹⁰⁰

4.2 Ontological security

Ontological security refers to the “basic need for predictability of social order, stable relationships with others and continuity and integrity of the self”.¹⁰¹ The term owes its name to a

⁹⁶ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations,” 16

⁹⁷ Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, 46

⁹⁸ Subotić, “Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism,” 46

⁹⁹ Ibid, 46-47

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 47

¹⁰¹ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations,” 33

Scottish psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing who in 1960 differentiated between the ontologically secure and ontologically insecure person. For Laing, an “ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity”.¹⁰² This kind of a person is autonomous and has a stable identity. On the other side, an ontologically insecure person is the one that fails “to achieve a secure sense of his own identity”.¹⁰³ Sociologist Anthony Giddens introduced this concept to sociology, arguing ontological security is a “confidence that most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action”.¹⁰⁴

From psychology and sociology, the term entered the field of International Relations (IR). Broadly speaking, in IR ontological security refers to the fact that states do not need only physical security, but also the security of their identity. It is important to understand that states' ontological security can be in conflict with their physical security. As explained by Jennifer Mitzen: “Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict. That is, states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other's and one's own identity”.¹⁰⁵ Or, as Brent J. Steele put it, states “pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence”.¹⁰⁶ Ontological security is thus usually defined as “integrity with identity”.¹⁰⁷

Important to note is that, for some scholars, like Brent J. Steele and Jennifer Mitzen states are units of analysis.¹⁰⁸ Some other scholars, however, argue that states are not agents as they “do not exist outside of those mnemonic and identity discourses, but are rather constituted by

¹⁰² R.D.Laing, *The Divided Self. An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin, 1965), 39

¹⁰³ Ibid, 108

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 92.

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma” in *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3) (2006), 341-370, p. 342

¹⁰⁶ Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations. Self-identity and the IR state* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2

¹⁰⁷ Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations*, 13

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma” in *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3) (2006), 341-370.

them”.¹⁰⁹ In this analysis, we shall use states as units of analysis in ontological security studies. As such, states need order, predictability, routines and stable relations with other international actors.¹¹⁰ “It is through these routinised relationships with their significant others that states construct their identities”.¹¹¹ States’ stability remains the most desirable condition. However, “crises or critical situations rupture state routines and bring fundamental questions about state self to the front, creating stress, anxiety, and ontological insecurity”.¹¹² Such situations also endanger states’ self-identity and call for responses. States with uncertain identities usually have “extreme response to critical situations”.¹¹³ Subotic claims that “conflict over political memory can be seen as an example of a ‘critical situation that destabilises both the state’s view of self and its relationships with its international others’”.¹¹⁴

Among the most important concepts in ontological security studies is biographical continuity, “or the capacity to keep going a particular narrative of the self”.¹¹⁵ However, in order to sustain their biographical continuity, states need collective memories. Collective memories and their importance for states’ ontological security have been explored in the works of several authors, including Kathrin Bachleitner, Brent J. Steele, Dmitry Chernobrov and Jelena Subotic. Bachleitner argues that “memory [...] is *the* carrier of identity. It ensures identity’s continuation and as such, ultimately, also its security.”¹¹⁶ But not just any memory - it is a collective memory, which “can instead be said to describe a *social process* which transmits group identity through

¹⁰⁹ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations,” 36

¹¹⁰ J.Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier” in *European Journal of International Relations* 4 (2), 226-255 (1998) and B.McSweeney, *Security, identity, and interests: a sociology of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), **quoted in** Jelena Subotic, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe”, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), 296-313

¹¹¹ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological security in world politics: state identity and the security dilemma”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12, 341-370 (2006), **quoted in** Jelena Subotic, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe”, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), 296-313

¹¹² Filip Ejodus, “Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics”, *Journal of international relations and development*, 1-26 (2017) **quoted in** Jelena Subotic, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe”, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), 296-313

¹¹³ Jelena Subotic, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe”, in *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), 296-313, 298

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations,” 34

¹¹⁶ Bachleitner, “Collective Memory in International Relations”, 23

time”.¹¹⁷ For Bachleitner, collective memory does not only constitute a state’s identity and ontological security, but “is necessary in order to form a national identity through time. In creating a ‘shared illusion of national resemblance’, a nation fosters unity, loyalty, and a sense of obligation that ranges from the willingness to pay taxes to the sacrifice of life in soldierly duty”.¹¹⁸

Jelena Subotić also argues that memory - but this time political memory - is of utmost importance for any state as it “helps create and sustain a particular biographical narrative through the use of historical signposts, and careful curating of select events, setback and triumphs, myths, and symbols”.¹¹⁹ She also argues that disagreement over political memory is a good example of a critical situation which can seriously endanger one’s ontological security. That is why “securing a ‘desirable’ memory, one that presents the state and the nation as heroes and not villains of some commonly shared and recognisable international story (of a global war, for example) is necessary for a state’s continuing sense of stability”.¹²⁰

Chernobrov went a step further, combining ontological security with the theory of self-affirmation. He argues that “societies protect *positive*, as well as continuous, visions of themselves in their (mis)recognition of unexpected crises and apply self-affirmation theory to collective identity contexts”.¹²¹ Besides (mis)recognition, Chernobrov introduces the concept of anxiety of the unknown to explain how actors (states, or communities) react when confronting something new, something different, out of the ordinary. Chernobrov claims that in these situations actors need “to allocate the unknown to familiar, even if inaccurate”.¹²² “This urge is ontological, or born from within, as the unknown is the realm of the impure, threatening, and disempowering. Transforming the anxiety of the unknown into the security of the known

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 24

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 25

¹¹⁹ Subotić, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe,” 298

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Chernobrov, *Public Perception of International Crisis: Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation*, 8

¹²² Ibid, 34

(recognisable, even if illusory) affirms the identity of the perceiving subject and enables it to confidently interact with the international other”.¹²³

4.3 Mnemonical security as ontological security

In the previous subchapter, a biographical continuity or a biographical narrative of a state was mentioned. In order to maintain such a narrative, collective memory is needed. But not just any collective memory; what states need is “remembering in a particular manner”.¹²⁴ As Maria Mälksoo writes, the way we understand a state’s collective memory and the processes of collective remembering plays a crucial role in defining the character of that political community, and its ontological security.¹²⁵

Mälksoo also argues there are two important approaches to dealing with political memories: reflective and mnemonic security-oriented approaches. While the former one offers space for different past narratives, the latter is where states are imposing particular interpretations of the past in collective memory, with the aim of protecting a state’s image and responding to its current needs.¹²⁶

Mälksoo introduces “the securitization of ‘national remembrance’”.¹²⁷ However, before we continue with Mälksoo’s concepts, we shall briefly explain the concepts of security, securitization and desecuritization. The concept of securitization was introduced by scholars Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan from the Copenhagen School of security studies. They argued that the most effective approach to security is grounded in speech act philosophy, “assuming that the articulation of security is a crucial form of security action”.¹²⁸ When a state actor utters the word ‘security’, he “moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special

¹²³ Ibid, 34-35

¹²⁴ Maria Mälksoo, “‘Memory must be defended’: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security” in *Security Dialogue*, 46 (3), 221-237, (2015), 224

¹²⁵ Ibid, 225

¹²⁶ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations”, 46

¹²⁷ Mälksoo, “‘Memory must be defended’: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security,” 227

¹²⁸ Holger Stritzel, “Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond” in *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (2007), 357 - 383, 360

right to use whatever means are necessary to block it”.¹²⁹ In that regard, to say that an issue is securitised means that “it is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure”.¹³⁰ So, when Mälksoo says “the securitization of national remembrance” it means that national remembrance as such has become an existential threat in a given state, and that it requires an emergent solution.

However, it is important to understand that an issue may be portrayed as an existential threat, even if it isn't truly one. As the trio¹³¹ says “‘Security’ is thus a self-referential practice”.¹³² When an issue has been securitised, then “the actor has claimed a right to handle the issue through extraordinary means, to break the normal political rules of the game (e.g., in the form of secrecy, levying taxes or conscription, placing limitations on otherwise inviolable rights, or focusing society’s energy and resources on a specific task)”.¹³³

This is, however, not the whole picture. What is described above is still not securitization, but only what the trio calls “a securitizing move”.¹³⁴ For a securitization to be fully successful, it needs to have three components: “existential threats, emergency action, and effects on interunit relations by breaking free of rules. The distinguishing feature of securitization is a specific rhetorical structure (survival, priority of action “because if the problem is not handled now it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure”)”.¹³⁵ In addition, an important part of securitization is the audience - such as members of a nation or group - to whom the existential threat is presented. They must recognize the threat and react accordingly; without this acknowledgment and response, securitization does not occur.

Desecuritization, which is the opposite process of securitization, was also introduced by Wæver and the Copenhagen School. Broadly speaking, it refers to “the shifting of issues out of

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 1997), 23-24

¹³¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap De Wilde

¹³² Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, “Security: A New Framework for Analysis,” 24

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid, 25

¹³⁵ Ibid, 26

emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere”.¹³⁶ For Wæver, it is better for a state to aim for desecuritization than for securitization. What is crucial is to acknowledge the responsibility that lies in the hands of policymakers, statesmen, and other actors when discussing both securitization and desecuritization: ”It is a *choice* to phrase things in security (or desecurity) terms, not an objective feature of the issue or the relationship itself. That choice has to be justified by the appropriateness and the consequences of successfully securitizing (or desecuritizing) the issue at hand”.¹³⁷

To get back to Mälksoo’s mnemonic securitization: it refers to “making certain historical remembrances secure by delegitimizing or outright criminalizing others”.¹³⁸ Mälksoo further argues that national remembrance might even lead to a classical security dilemma: one state’s effort to secure its own preferable social memory of a certain historical event can clash with the ontological security of a neighboring state. Thus, different interpretations of the same historical event can create interstate tension, because one state’s sense of identity might be perceived as a threat by other states or actors.¹³⁹

In order to cement their preferred version of history, political actors can go further and legally institutionalize certain remembrances. For Mälksoo, “Ordering historical remembrance by means of law constitutes a legal way of closing off a particular notion of identity”.¹⁴⁰ Mälksoo says that this kind of mnemonic securitization is negatively affecting freedom of speech and academic freedoms: “As a means of sanctioning a legitimate relationship to the past by regulating certain remembrances as outside the accepted boundaries of political bargaining, the laws criminalizing certain historical positions amount to institutionalized securitization”.¹⁴¹ These laws are what M.C.Williams calls “laws of fear”¹⁴² arguing they could easily become “a crucial battleground in

¹³⁶ Ibid, 4

¹³⁷ Ibid, 211

¹³⁸ Mälksoo, “‘Memory must be defended’: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security,” 221

¹³⁹ Ibid, 225

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 227

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Michael C. Williams, “Securitization and the liberalism of fear” in *Security Dialogue* 42(4-5), 453-463 (2011), 459

the politics of securitization”.¹⁴³ This kind of securitization of national memory involves suppressing internal societal tensions, debates, and power struggles to support a unified national identity. In this kind of an approach, there is ‘our’ and ‘their’ memory and identity, and this division is what hinders both international and internal dialogue, among other things.¹⁴⁴

Securitization and desecuritization are two extremes of one spectrum, whose other parts have been explored in the chapter Memory Politics. As Ejodus argues, “Closer to the securitisation end of the continuum is legislation of memories and adoption of ‘memory laws’, which criminalise unlicensed interpretations of the past”.¹⁴⁵ On the other side is desecuritization of memory, which is “a healthier approach to dealing with the past”,¹⁴⁶ and is “defined by the existence of pluralism of collective memories without giving any of them a privileged ontological status”.¹⁴⁷

It is legitimate to ask: which part of the spectrum would be the best option for any state? According to Maria Mälksoo, what is needed is desecuritization - and not depoliticisation of memory - which offers enough space for various, including competing, narratives to coexist. Mälksoo argues that depoliticization of memory entails “repoliticization of issues of social remembrance on the basis of a careful definition of what is really meant by the (benign) politics of memory”.¹⁴⁸

Both securitization and desecuritization heavily depend on the self-other relationship, though this relationship doesn't necessarily have to be one of animosity. In order to move beyond the politics of mnemonical security, states need “to break free from the habitual routines of self-definition, to be open to reconceptualize oneself in the interests of a healthier ontological and physical self–other relationship, to be more willing to embrace self-reflexivity, to learn and, possibly, change”.¹⁴⁹ What Mälksoo suggests instead of mnemonic securitization is “agonistic mnemonic

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Mälksoo, “Memory must be defended: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security,” 228

¹⁴⁵ Ejodus, “Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations,” 14

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 13

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Mälksoo, “Memory must be defended: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security,” 230

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

pluralism”.¹⁵⁰ It calls for different interpretations of the common past: “From the ontological security perspective, reflexivity about oneself is a surer step in the direction of achieving a sense of self-consummation and accomplishment than uncritical attempts at consolidating a single authoritative vision of the past for a political collective”.¹⁵¹ However, this might be easier said than done. In order for political actors to give up on mnemonical security, they’d need to focus on new stories to tell and to abandon old routines and harmful narratives about their significant other. As Mäklsoo concludes, states need to have the “ability to *renew* oneself, not just *survive* as a certain sort of being”¹⁵² and advance “self-interrogative reflexive processes”.¹⁵³

4.4 The concept of denial

According to APA Dictionary of Psychology, denial is “a defense mechanism in which unpleasant thoughts, feelings, wishes, or events are ignored or excluded from conscious awareness. It may take such forms as refusal to acknowledge the reality of a terminal illness, financial problem, substance use or other addiction, or partner’s infidelity. Denial is an unconscious process that functions to resolve emotional conflict or reduce anxiety”.¹⁵⁴

According to some authors, it was Sigmund and his daughter Anna Freud who made the term popular, adding it to the list of ego defense mechanisms.¹⁵⁵ In psychology, defense mechanisms are used “to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise because we feel threatened, or because our id or superego becomes too demanding. Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e., anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual”.¹⁵⁶ In philosophy and sociology, “denial involves the emotionally

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 232

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 233

¹⁵² Ibid, 231

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ “APA Dictionary of Psychology,” American Psychological Association, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/denial>

¹⁵⁵ Adrian Bardon refers to Sigmund and Anna Freud in his book *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self- Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

¹⁵⁶ “Defense Mechanisms In Psychology Explained,” SimplyPsychology, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/defense-mechanisms.html>

motivated rejection (or embrace) of a factual claim in the face of strong evidence to the contrary”.¹⁵⁷ There are many examples of denial: a person who denies his or her partner is cheating despite growing evidence, or a person who denies being an alcoholic despite a history of heavy drinking etc. People can also be in denial about facts that concern them individually, but also about matters that are important to them as members of a particular group. For instance, many Serbs deny war crimes committed by Serbian army and police during the 1990s. This example confirms that such beliefs “are not purely self-generated [and that] powerful political or economic elites, through their paid agents or media surrogates, may be motivated to deliberately misinform the public on various issues”.¹⁵⁸

Denial depends on several factors, including motivated cognition, which is “a form of information processing that promotes individuals’ interests in forming and maintaining beliefs that signify their loyalty to important affinity groups”.¹⁵⁹ Motivated cognition strongly relies upon rationalization of beliefs, which serves to maintain and defend beliefs; while the former is unconscious, the latter is a conscious process.¹⁶⁰ Another important feature of denial are emotions: to be in denial means to exhibit “a kind of emotionally self-protective self-deception”.¹⁶¹ In a nutshell, when a person is in denial, they are confronted with important facts that contradict their beliefs about a certain matter, which then provokes a reaction.

Denial does not stop there. As Bardon argues, “a person in a state of denial is, by definition, motivated to stay in denial: the whole point of denial is that it allows us to maintain beliefs that are emotionally satisfying”.¹⁶² In order to do so, confirmation bias is adopted, meaning that we “seek out only confirming evidence for our beliefs and expectations, rather than impartially considering all the evidence from neutrally selected sources”.¹⁶³ In such circumstances people also resort to selective exposure, that is, they “want to maintain their self-identity and self-image.

¹⁵⁷ Adrian Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self- Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 14

¹⁵⁹ Dan M. Kahan, “Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection,” in *Judgement and Decision Making*, Vol 8, No. 4 (July 2013), 407-424, p. 407

¹⁶⁰ Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self- Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion*, 16

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self- Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion*, 40

¹⁶³ Ibid

They're not going to read something that challenges their values, their self-worth, their identity, their belief system".¹⁶⁴

Cognitive dissonance, a theory proposed by Leon Festinger, an American social psychologist, is essential in understanding how denial works. Festinger argues that "cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction".¹⁶⁵ His main hypotheses are as follows:

1. "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance."¹⁶⁶

In brief, when we are exposed to the information that contradicts our beliefs, we experience cognitive dissonance, which we then need to reduce as much as possible. Cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger, includes emotional components and thus can lead to feelings of anxiety and, finally, to denial. "This discomfort spurs an unconscious drive to resolve the dissonance by discounting or otherwise dismissing information that contradicts existing beliefs".¹⁶⁷ However, denial may and may not occur - in some instances, cognitive dissonance might lead to a behavioral change; it all depends on how much we are emotionally involved with the matter behind the belief.¹⁶⁸

Some authors, such as Amir Lupovici, argue that while cognitive dissonance is effective at explaining discordance on an individual level, it cannot account for dissonance on a collective

¹⁶⁴ The Washington Post, "Here's how scientific misinformation, such as climate doubt, spreads through social media," *The Washington Post*, 04.01.2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/01/04/heres-how-scientific-misinformation-such-as-climate-doubt-spreads-through-social-media/>

¹⁶⁵ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 3

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

¹⁶⁷ Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion*, 19

¹⁶⁸ Festinger, "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance"

level. The latter is best captured through the concept of ontological dissonance, which refers to instances when state identities are experiencing threats, so a state needs to make a selection among several important values it holds.¹⁶⁹ In such situations, states will resort to what Lupovici calls avoidance and which includes a variety of measures, or actions, a state can take in order to ease discomfort: they can self-restrict access to information and/or distance themselves from the source of the threat; they can also create ambiguities and/or ignore existing information and refrain from seeking new information that would decrease uncertainty, or seek only supportive and consistent information. However, it is important to underline that avoidance does not fully resolve the dissonance but only decreases threats and eases discomfort.¹⁷⁰

The concept of denial was extensively explored in the work of Stanley Cohen, who argues that denial consists of four elements: “cognition (not acknowledging the facts); emotion (not feeling, not being disturbed); morality (not recognizing wrongness or responsibility); and action (not taking active steps in response to knowledge)”.¹⁷¹ The elementary forms of denial, according to Cohen, are “individual, personal, psychological and private - or shared, social, collective and organized”.¹⁷² Cohen argues that the latter are initiated and orchestrated by states, in order to cover up massive atrocities, among other things: “The entire rhetoric of government responses to allegations about atrocities consists of denial”.¹⁷³

Cohen argues that there are three types of denial, depending on what is being denied. In the first form of denial - literal, factual or blatant denial - a person denies “the fact or knowledge of the fact”.¹⁷⁴ On a collective level, literal denial is best depicted in the phrases such as: they are lying to us; nothing happened here; no one told us about that; it could not have happened without our knowledge etc.¹⁷⁵ “These assertions refuse to acknowledge the facts - for whatever reason, in good or bad faith, and whether these claims are true (genuine ignorance), blatantly untrue

¹⁶⁹ Amir Lupovici, “Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel’s unilateral steps towards the Palestinians” in *Review of International Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 04 (October 2012) , 809-833

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 818

¹⁷¹ Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 9

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid, 10

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 7

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

(deliberate lies) or unconscious defence mechanisms”.¹⁷⁶ The second form of denial is interpretative denial, where the fact is not fully denied, but the event is given a completely different meaning. Probably the most illustrative example of this is when authorities argue that something was not ethnic cleansing but humane resettlement/relocation¹⁷⁷ or that people left on their own without being under pressure to do so. The final, implicatory denial, which is also called rationalization, refers to the occasions when implications of events are denied: they see that sometimes bad is happening, but deny they have the responsibility to do something about it.¹⁷⁸

Cohen further argues that collective denial, or denial of one entire group, assumes “that an entire society can forget, repress or dissociate itself from its discreditable past record. This may happen either through official state policy - the deliberate cover-up, the rewriting of history - or through cultural slippage in which information disappears”.¹⁷⁹ Such shared narratives enable personal denials of past atrocities.

However, sometimes denial activates without state intervention. As Cohen claims, “Whole societies have an astonishing ability to deny the past - not really forgetting, but maintaining a public culture that seems to have forgotten”.¹⁸⁰

Another Cohen’s concept worth mentioning is bystanders, whom he divides into three categories: immediate (who are either direct witnesses, or who heard of atrocities from first-hand sources); external (those who are informed about atrocities from mass media, humanitarian organizations and similar sources); and bystander states (other governmental or international

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ The term “human relocation” was used during the Yugoslav wars, most notably in the Croatian war, to refer to situations where ethnic Serbs from Croatia and ethnic Croats from Serbia swapped their homes to survive the conflict. However, this was a euphemism for what actually took place: a forced population exchange in the midst of war. This specific event was explored in the documentary “Your House was My Home” by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

¹⁷⁸ Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 8

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 133

¹⁸⁰ Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 138

organizations; the term was coined to refer to the fact that the Allied forces did not do much to stop the Holocaust because they did not believe massive killings were actually taking place).¹⁸¹

Denial as such has several critical aspects, and one of them is “its forceful and categorical expression”.¹⁸² Good examples are words or terms such as *no, never, any, always*, i.e. which “enhance the authority of a description by presenting it as factual and true, purely by virtue of its apparent certainty, pervasiveness and widespread acceptance”.¹⁸³ These “extreme case formulations help to forestall possible counterclaims and are often used to initiate a challenge to alternative positions”.¹⁸⁴ When speakers only claim that something is true without presenting evidence but only saying that there is solid evidence to support the claim, then we have what Van Dijk calls apparent denial.¹⁸⁵ However, “the strongest form of denial is *reversal*: ‘We are not guilty of negative action, *they* are’ and ‘We are not the racists, *they* are the real racists’”.¹⁸⁶ Van Dijk also argues that there are other strategies that are connected to denial, but cannot be referred to as classical examples of denial: justification - when “the act is not denied, but it is denied that it was negative, and explicitly asserted that it was justified”.¹⁸⁷ Another strategy is to make an excuse - a misdeed is acknowledged, but excused as “at least part of the blame may be put on special circumstances, or rather on others”.¹⁸⁸

4.4.1 Confronting denial: acknowledgement and overcoming the past

Kuljić argues towards permanently overcoming the past, a concept that consists of silence, amnesia, denial, guilt, relativization, shame, embarrassment, trauma, shadows of the past. However, Kuljić warns that culture of remembrance/memory culture is always accompanied by the culture of forgetting/oblivion, adding that, at times, oblivion might even be a lot more

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 15-18

¹⁸² Jovan Byford, “‘Serbs never hated the Jews’: the denial of antisemitism in Serbian Orthodox Christian culture”, 170

¹⁸³ Ibid, 169

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

¹⁸⁵ Teun A. van Dijk, “Discourse and the denial of racism” in *Discourse and Society*, vol. 3 (1992), 98

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 94

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 93

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

functional than remembering.¹⁸⁹ “Overcoming the past should not lead to reconciliation with crimes and forgiveness, but rather to a process of learning how to live with the reality that these crimes are part of our history and group identity, and that nothing can truly reconcile us with those acts”.¹⁹⁰ Kuljić further argues that overcoming the past should not “create a homogeneous agreement [among community members] and a new community of penitents”.¹⁹¹ He offers a good example from Germany, where the Holocaust is still an important topic in society and argues that this contested topic “should be held open because of the Germans’ continuous refusal to face the past”.¹⁹² Thus, the process of overcoming the past never stops because a distorted past is a defense mechanism of various groups within a state: “it is not a final but a permanent process, a constant reminder, not a definitively agreed upon past”.¹⁹³ Moreover, “disagreement with the persistent highlighting of one’s own nation’s crimes is a constitutive part of the process of confronting the past, and not a mere negation of that process [...] public disagreements are not a sign of the weakening of the past, but an indication that the dark past, along with the bright one, is gradually and painstakingly, but unstoppably, entering the content of the national identity”.¹⁹⁴

Finally, Kuljić argues towards memory pluralization, as the opposite of what we currently have, and that is monopoly of memory imposed and maintained by ruling elites. Historical narratives of one group should encompass less famous episodes, those of guilt and crimes. In a nutshell, “the alternative to the ethnocentric dogma is a non-uniform, polycentric and multi-perspective history”.¹⁹⁵

For Stanley Cohen, the opposite form of denial is acknowledgement. After atrocities, conflicts, mass murders, it is of utmost importance for the entire group, as well as for each and every individual, to come to terms with the past, which “is to know (and admit to knowing) exactly

¹⁸⁹ Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja: teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti*, 340-343

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 340-341 (translated by the author of the thesis)

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 342 (translated by the author of the thesis)

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 354

what happened”.¹⁹⁶ Acknowledgement of the past however and the shape it will take strongly rely upon “the nature of the previous regime, its residual power, how the transition happened, and the character of the new society”.¹⁹⁷ Current regime is almost equally significant, as it gets to decide how to proceed with the past: will it encourage oblivion, denial; or will it distance itself from the former regime, telling exactly what happened “as a way of increasing its legitimacy”.¹⁹⁸

Acknowledgement as such can have three forms: complete, partial and over acknowledgment. A complete acknowledgement is clear enough - it is the one where all past misdeeds and their consequences are admitted. This type, however, is seldom applied by entire states and governments; it is usually outsiders or groups within a society that can fully acknowledge the past. Partial acknowledgement is, as the word suggests, when only some parts of the infamous past are accepted and admitted. This is the form of acknowledgement applied by states and governments, and has several forms. The first one is spatial isolation, which is when authorities argue that something happened only once, so it is an isolated incident. The second one is temporal isolation, when authorities argue that something happened back in the past and is no longer relevant as it has not repeated. The last one is self-correction, when authorities say they know about past atrocities/bad decisions and promise to correct it.¹⁹⁹

Cohen also explains why it is important for victims and their families to have their suffering acknowledged, even when everyone in society knows what happened to them. He argues that there are three main reasons. First and foremost, Cohen says, “there is the value - old-fashioned as this sounds - of truth in itself. After generations of denials, lies, cover-ups and evasions, there is a powerful, almost obsessive, desire to know exactly what happened. For torture victims, the demand for truth may be more urgently felt than the demand for justice”.²⁰⁰ Then there is the fact that victims and their families “have to overcome a double denial: to prove what happened and disprove that this was justified because they had done terrible things. A final justification for

¹⁹⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 222

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 223

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 113-115

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 225

truth-telling lies in the sentiment ‘never again’: the eternal hope that exposure of the past will be enough to prevent its repetition in the future”.²⁰¹

According to Cohen, there are ten methods or modes of acknowledgement: truth commissions; criminal trials; mass disqualifications; compensation; naming and shaming; criminalizing denial of the past; commemoration and memorialization; expiation, apology and exorcism; reconciliation; reconstruction.²⁰²

5. World War 2 in Serbia and the Semlin Judenlager concentration camp

5.1 Beginning of the war and the quisling administration

The Second World War in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia commenced on April 6, 1941 with the bombing of Belgrade. The country officially surrendered to the Nazis on April 17 and was soon split among several countries: Hungary (the region of Bačka), Bulgaria (area to the south of the towns of Leskovac, Vranje and Pirot), Italy (parts of Kosovo) and The Independent State of Croatia and NDH (the region of Srem up to the most easterly point, the left bank of the River Sava in Belgrade). The indigenous German Volksdeutscher community was in charge of the Banat region in the north, while the rest of Serbia - with Belgrade at the center - was under direct German administration.²⁰³

At the head of the occupational system in Serbia was the Military Commander. The system also included the Command Headquarters, Administrative Headquarters, and a Special Operative

²⁰¹ Ibid, 226

²⁰² Ibid, 227-240

²⁰³ “Holocaust in Serbia.”

Group of the Security Police and Security Service, which included the notorious Gestapo.²⁰⁴ However, “the instatement of German authority wasn’t sufficient for governing the occupied territory efficiently”²⁰⁵ which is why the Serbian commissary government was formed with Milan Aćimović as its head. The Germans knew that domestic authorities were more acceptable than the Nazis, and they were also needed because of the language, culture, customs etc.²⁰⁶

Aćimović’s government however “did not prove stable and strong enough to destroy the forces of the People’s Liberation Movement, nor to win the sympathy of the citizens”.²⁰⁷ A couple of months later, on August 29, 1941, the Government of National Salvation was formed, with army general Milan Nedić as its head. His stances towards the Nazi Germany and Serbia’s role in the new world order were clear: “the Serbian people have a calling to be the guardian and gendarme in the Balkans for the center of Europe, i.e. for the Reich and its European plans”.²⁰⁸

In general, Nedić thought highly of German National Socialism, dubbing it an ideal social order. Institutions formed by his government were modeled upon those of Nazi Germany, while the official propaganda machine used the key terminology of Goebbels’ propaganda. Additionally, Nedić believed and tried to convince the general public that the war for Serbia ended in April 1941. He referred to the de facto wartime as peace, claiming it was a period when Serbia was preparing to be part of the new world order with the German Reich at the forefront.²⁰⁹

In this setting, it is not hard to imagine why minorities such as Jews and Roma were not welcome in Serbia, and why new laws and regulations were imposed to get rid of them. Legal discrimination of Jews and Roma is explored in the next sub-chapter.

²⁰⁴ Milovan Pisarri, *The Suffering of the Roma in Serbia during the Holocaust* (Belgrade: Forum for Applied History, 2014), 36-37.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 37.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 58.

²⁰⁸ *Nemačka obaveštajna služba (German Secret Service)*, volume VIII, Državni sekretarijat za unutrašnje poslove FNRJ, Uprava državne bezbednosti (State secretariat for internal affairs of FPRY, State Security Administration), Belgrade 1956; doc. No. 145, Nedić’s perceptions of the role of Serbia (note by Hans Rexeisen, SS captain, after a conversation with Nedić on June 17, 1943).

²⁰⁹ Olivera Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina. Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941-1944* (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2006), 18.

5.2 Preparing the ground - legal discrimination of Jews and Roma in Serbia

The Yugoslav authorities in 1940 passed two anti-Semitic regulations: one banned Jews from conducting commercial activities related to items intended for human consumption, and the other, known as *numerus clausus*, aimed to limit the number of Jewish students allowed to study at universities.²¹⁰

Soon after their arrival in Serbia, the Germans ordered that all Jews register at specially designated places, warning that failure to comply would result in death.²¹¹ “It was then that the Holocaust began for them: they received yellow badges with the word “Jude” on them and were assigned to forced labour, whilst their property became the subject of the occupier’s economic interests”.²¹²

The worst was yet to come. By the end of May 1941, several regulations had been enacted against Jews in Serbia: they were banned from visiting public places and using public transport; they could no longer own electrical appliances, and their shops became government property; they were prohibited from using public hospitals and had to establish their own healthcare institutions. The Germans maintained control over the Jews in Serbia by utilizing the Serbian police to enforce regulations and laws, and by employing representatives of the Jewish community, known as the Judenrat.²¹³

Almost at the same time, Germans published new regulations targeting the Roma population in Serbia. However, the most important regulation was published on May 30, 1941, by the Military Commander, consisting of 22 articles - 17 of which relate to Jews. Regulations defined Jews and banned them from working as public servants, lawyers, doctors, dentists, vets, and pharmacists. Jews aged 14 to 60 of both genders were subjected to forced labor. They were not allowed to own or be employed by educational or entertainment institutions and had to report their property

²¹⁰ Jovan Bajford, *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja [Staro Sajmiste: A site remembered, forgotten, contested]* (Beograd: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2011), 32.

²¹¹ Pisarri, *The Suffering of the Roma in Serbia during the Holocaust*, 41.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid, 42.

and economic enterprises. When it comes to the Roma, three regulations equated their status to that of Jews, requiring them to wear a yellow armband with the word Gypsy and to be registered on Gypsy lists.²¹⁴

These and other regulations passed throughout the war confirm the role of the Serbian government and its overall apparatus in the Holocaust.²¹⁵ “German authorities issued these orders and from then on Serbian authorities executed them. Amongst their subsequent duties Serbian authorities were required to keep Jews and Roma legally distant from other Serbian citizens: it was a role they accepted and executed seriously, thus becoming an integral and necessary part of the racial persecution of the Jewish and Roma populations”.²¹⁶

Apart from the laws and regulations that stripped Jews and Roma of their property and rights, powerful weaponry was used in the Serbian media, orchestrated by Nedić’s propaganda machine. Serbian media regularly reported that the war was caused by Jewish conspiracy or that it was a result of Jewish decade-long aspirations to rule the world and prevent the realization of the just demands of the great German Reich, among other things. These media even quoted Adolf Hitler and supported the National Socialist ideas of expelling Jews and saving Europe. Media and the government were not as harsh on the Roma as they were on the Jews, but they did refer to them as non-Aryans and as a group that does not deserve to live.²¹⁷

5.3 Staro Sajmište: 1941–1944

The first initiative to build a fair in Belgrade began in 1923, but it wasn't until the spring of 1937 that the foundation stone was laid. That is also when the pavilions, which would soon host interned Jews and Roma, were constructed. The fair was actively being built until 1940, when

²¹⁴ Ibid, 43-47.

²¹⁵ Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina. Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941-1944*, 69, 76-79

²¹⁶ Pisarri, *The Suffering of the Roma in Serbia during the Holocaust*, 47.

²¹⁷ Milosavljevic, *Potisnuta istina. Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941-1944*, 26-27.

the war stopped the construction.²¹⁸ From that point on, it began serving completely different purposes.

However, before we move on to the 1941-1944 period, it is important to note that the situation at the fair reflected global politics and Yugoslavia's position within it. Prior to the war, Yugoslavia turned towards Germany and Italy, both of which had Nazi and Fascist governments. "The governments of both countries used their national pavilions to promote the principles of the Nazi and Fascist regimes and demonstrate their economic dominance. The German Pavilion displayed Nazi flags outside and was decorated with swastikas and other National Socialist symbols inside".²¹⁹

In the fall of 1941 about 20,000 people in Serbia were shot, including 6,000 Jews previously interned at the Topovske Šupe camp.²²⁰ The Germans were looking for a suitable place for Jewish women, children and elderly and, in the absence of time and better options, decided to use the fairground pavilions. It was named Semlin Judenlager, due to the fact that it was placed in the suburb of Zemun (Semlin), what was back then the territory of The Independent State of Croatia.²²¹

For Serbian revisionists, who gained more attention in the late 1980s, the fact that the Semlin Judenlager was formally on NDH territory is crucial. They argue that, for this reason, the killings that occurred in the camp cannot, cannot by any means be attributed to Serbia and the Nedić government. But the truth is somewhat different. Only formal approval from the Zagreb authorities was needed to set up the camp, which was quickly secured through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin. The NDH government stipulated two conditions, both of which were met: there were to be no Serbian guards or policemen in the camp, and the camp was to be

²¹⁸ Bajford, *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja* [*Staro Sajmiste: A site remembered, forgotten, contested*], 23-26.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 28.

²²⁰ Ibid, 34.

²²¹ Ibid, 34-35

financed and supplied from Belgrade and not from NDH. Thus, the Semlin Judenlager was run by the Gestapo and SS officers were in charge of it.²²²

According to several accounts, conditions at the camp were harsh: during the winter of 1941/1942, temperatures were extremely cold, and the pavilions were unheated. In addition, inmates were starving as there was not enough food and drink for everyone. Semlin Judenlager received its first inmates in December 1941, marking the commencement of the second phase of the Holocaust in Serbia (the first phase involved the annihilation of the male Jewish population in the country). Almost 7,000 Jewish women and children were interned in the camp, 500 of which died of hunger and cruel conditions.²²³ In the spring of 1942, more concretely between March and May, Jews interned in the camp were killed in a mobile gas van and subsequently buried in the suburb of Jajinci.²²⁴

Meanwhile, interned Roma lived in even worse conditions than the Jews and some 60 of them died of diseases and starvation. The others were freed after they had managed to prove they had a permanent address in Belgrade, which was requested by the Germans.²²⁵ After the work of the Sauer gas van, it was announced that Belgrade was Judenrain, or cleansed of Jews.²²⁶

Between May 1942 and July 1944, Sajmište operated as Anhaltelager - a labour camp for political prisoners, captured Partisans, and forced laborers. Most of these detainees were later deported to labor and concentration camps across Europe.²²⁷ A total of 31, 972 inmates were held in the detention camp. The vast majority were Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia, but there were also Croats, Bosniaks, Greeks, Albanians and Jews. A third of all internees died at the camp and were buried in mass graves across Belgrade.²²⁸

²²² Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 70.

²²³ "Holocaust in Serbia."

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ "Semlin Judenlager 1941-1942"

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ Bajford, *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja* [*Staro Sajmiste: A site remembered, forgotten, contested*], 44.

²²⁸ Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom sajmištu*

The importance of the Semlin Judenlager and its position within the Holocaust in Europe has been noted by a number of scholars: Browning argues that "the gas-van murder of the Semlin Jews was one of the very first chapters of the Final Solution itself".²²⁹ Moreover, it is important to acknowledge a huge difference between Judenlager and Anhaltelager. As Byford rightly argues "the prisoners of Anhaltelager were not victims of systematic destruction, which refers to organized and planned actions aimed at the total elimination of a people, including all women and children, in line with the genocidal racial philosophy of the Nazi regime. In this sense, the Jewish camp at Sajmište occupies a unique place in the history of the Second World War in Serbia".²³⁰

5.4 Post-war period and memorialisation initiatives

Anhaltelager was closed down in July 1944, and Serbia was liberated a couple of months later, in October 1944. Soon afterwards, at the end of November, a special commission was established to investigate crimes committed at Sajmište. This commission was part of a broader state-wide initiative called the State Commission for Determining Crimes of the Occupiers and Their Helpers. This body was of utmost importance in the first post-war years: it was tasked with collecting evidence, punishing perpetrators, and gathering statistical data on all victims and material damage.²³¹

The investigation into the Sajmište crimes ended in January 1946, and the findings were published in a document called Report No.87 of the State Commission for Determining Crimes of the Occupiers and Their Helpers - the first official paper to document the crimes committed at Sajmište. It described the site as a place where the occupiers imprisoned innocent victims from all over Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece, and where they committed large-scale crimes in order to exterminate "our people". Jews and Roma, the first and systematic victims of the Holocaust,

²²⁹ Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*, 68.

²³⁰ Bajford, *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja* [*Staro Sajmiste: A site remembered, forgotten, contested*], 48.

²³¹ Ibid, 54-55

were not explicitly mentioned. In addition, the vast majority of the information in the report focused on Anhaltelager, with only half a page dedicated to Judenlager.²³²

In the subsequent years, the tragic history of the former death and labor camp was rarely mentioned. Novi Beograd, where Sajmište is located, was soon under construction, and Sajmište became the center of this new development. Between 1948 and 1960, the site hosted a variety of activities, including youth brigades, engineers, and workers building Novi Beograd. It also became a venue for cultural manifestations, theater and film shows, newsrooms, libraries, ambulances, canteens, and later on a sort of an artistic colony housing famous artists and their first ateliers and studios.²³³

According to Olga Manojlović Pintar and Aleksandar Ignjatović, interest in the former concentration camp reappeared at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when Serbian national identity was being restituted.²³⁴ In this restitution process, Serbian identity strongly relied on myths of a suffering nation that was easily compared to other martyr nations, such as the Jews and the Armenians.²³⁵ The Belgrade City Assembly declared Sajmište a cultural property in 1987 and soon placed a small memorial plaque that did not single out Jews and/or Roma but rather referred to victims without mentioning their ethnicities.

The huge monument commemorating the mass suffering and resistance of all Yugoslav peoples was finally built and unveiled in 1995 - but at the site physically disconnected from where the camp is located. As Manojlović Pintar and Ignjatović argue, “there is not a single publicly presented piece of information that would connect the monument to the idea of the Holocaust and the suffering of almost the entire Jewish population in Belgrade”.²³⁶

Around that time - during the 1990s and the Yugoslav wars—the Serbian nationalist regime proposed the idea of establishing a Serbian version of Yad Vashem at Sajmište, where all Serbian victims would be commemorated and honored. But the idea did not last for too long.

²³² Ibid, 58-60

²³³ Ibid, 69-71.

²³⁴ Olga Manojlović Pintar, Aleksandar Ignjatović, “Prostori selektovanih memorija: Staro sajmište u Beogradu i sećanje na drugi svetski rat”, in *Kultura sjećanja: 1941. Povijesni lomovi i savladavanje prošlosti*, edited by Sulejman Bosto, Tihomir Cipek i Olivera Milosavljević (Zagreb: Disput, 2008)

²³⁵ Ibid, 108

²³⁶ Ibid, 109.

“Following the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2000, former camp area no longer represented the place of “reduced” history (which was the case in socialist times), nor the place of “fabricated” history (what used to be in Milošević era), but empty space “cleansed” from any history”.²³⁷ From that point on, the site was used for different activities, including amusement and commercial activities.

According to Radović, it was not until the so-called Kosheen affair that the Sajmište was brought back to the public attention.²³⁸ “Such increased focus led to eventual recognition of embarrassing commercial activities taking place in remaining camp facilities in Belgrade, and subsequent responsive echo in Serbia.”²³⁹

More than a decade passed between the Kosheen affair and the actual establishment of the Memorial Centre in 2022. During those years there had been several promises to build the memorial complex but they failed because of the unresolved property issues, among other reasons.²⁴⁰ One of the initiatives was proposed by the then independent media outlet B92 - Museum of Tolerance, while the former Serbian President Boris Tadić and some Belgrade city officials also pledged for a memorial. Meanwhile, those unfulfilled promises caused avalanches of criticism from local and international bodies and civil society organizations.

But possibly the biggest criticism was drawn when the first Draft Law on the Memorial Centre “Staro Sajmište” was leaked in February 2017. Many activists and experts argued the law was yet another attempt to rewrite history.²⁴¹ According to Izabela Kisić of the Helsinki Committee in Serbia, the law “is not in accordance with historical facts, in that it relativizes the suffering of the Jewish community during the World War II, because it is not stated that they were the

²³⁷ Radovic, “Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall.”

²³⁸ In November 2007, British band Kosheen was supposed to play at a Staro Sajmiste Poseydon Hall. The concert was canceled following pressure from the local and international media as well as the Simon Wiesenthal Center which called on the Serbian authorities to stop the concert.

²³⁹ Radovic, “Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall”

²⁴⁰ Ivana Nikolić, “Belgrade Again Promises Nazi Death Camp Memorial”, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 08.04.2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/04/08/belgrade-s-nazi-deat-camp-memorial-certain-authorities-claim/>

²⁴¹ Maja Živanović, “Serbian Draft Holocaust Legislation Sparks Criticism” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 01.03.2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/01/law-on-staro-sajmiste-provoke-criticism-in-serbia-02-23-2017/>

primary victims and that the camp was set up as an attempt to destroy the Jewish community in Serbia”.²⁴² Moreover, the critics argued the law was “silent about the anti-Jewish and racist regulations of Nedic’s government, which was also a function of the Holocaust”.²⁴³

Almost two years later, in September 2019, the Ministry of Culture said that the expert public had positively evaluated the amended draft law. The law was soon to be passed in the Parliament.

5.5 Staro Sajmište today - Memorial Centre

On February 24, 2020, the Serbian parliament voted to establish the Memorial Centre “Staro Sajmište”, passing a law of the same name. The camp was closed in July 1944, and the long-awaited restoration works began seventy-eight years later, in July 2022. Before we move on to the current functioning of the Memorial Centre, we shall take a look at the official ceremony to mark the beginning of the work, attended by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, politicians, ministers, representatives of Jewish and victims’ associations, as well as Serbian Patriarch Porfirije. This is very important, as the messages conveyed there speak volumes about Serbia’s unchanged stance towards the memorialization of the site.

Vučić’s speech at the ceremony followed the usual nationalistic and ethno-centered narratives and rhetoric: he failed to mention that the camp was initially set up to annihilate the Jewish population in Serbia and that its first victims were Jewish and Roma women, children, and the elderly. Vučić did not acknowledge the specifics of this site but instead lumped all the victims together, insisting on the joint suffering of all. A good example is as follows: “There is so much we can learn from the Jewish people. Unfortunately, we have to add those six million Jews

²⁴² Ibid

²⁴³ Ibid

[killed in the Holocaust] to the millions of Serbs, Roma, who were killed in the killing fields here”.²⁴⁴

Vučić also said that “we are liberating the camp after 78 years and starting to restore the memory of the camp by starting to reconstruct the central tower, its iconic symbol”.²⁴⁵ Again, he portrayed Serbs as victims as opposed to Croats and the NDH, thus omitting two important facts: that Serbian collaborators played a role in sending Jews to certain deaths in occupied Belgrade; and that his own Serbian Progressive Party, SNS, in January 2018 opened an office at the site of a former camp, drawing criticism from experts and historians. Responding to the criticism, the then president of the SNS local branch in the Sajmište district of Belgrade, Aleksandar Ćirić, said he saw “nothing wrong in having the offices in that building” and that criticism comes from “those who want to dispute our work”.²⁴⁶

This usual ethno-centric line was followed by the reporter of the Serbian national public broadcaster, RTS, who said that Staro Sajmište “was the most horrific suffering of Jews, Serbs, and Roma in World War II,” emphasizing the importance of decently portraying “the dark fate of more than 17,000 Serbs, Jews, and Roma.” Additionally, the journalist interviewed victims and survivors of the Jasenovac concentration camp who were also present at the official ceremony. Connecting Staro Sajmište and Jasenovac is a common tactic among Serbian national elites to further emphasize Serbian victimhood.

Vučić however does not seem to be the only one who “liberated” the former death camp and who talked about all the victims being equal. In an interview with *Politika* daily in December 2022, the acting director of the Memorial Centre, Krinka Vidaković Petrov, said the aim of the exhibition “The Camp at Staro Sajmište” was to “liberate the Sajmište camp from disastrous

²⁴⁴ RTS, “Rekonstrukcija na Starom sajmištu; Vučić: Relativizacija prošlosti ne može biti politika sadašnjosti,” *RTS*, 27.07.2022, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/4901883/rekonstrukcija-na-starom-sajmistu-vucic-relativizacija-proslosti-ne-moze-biti-politika-sadasnjosti.html>

²⁴⁵ Ibid

²⁴⁶ Filip Rudic, “Serbia Ruling Party: Concentration Camp Office ‘Not Wrong,’” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 26.01.2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/26/serbian-progressives-nothing-wrong-with-concentration-camp-office-01-26-2018/>

oblivion, but also to pay respect to all inmates and victims, regardless of their nationality, religion, gender, or ideological commitment”.²⁴⁷

In the interview for Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in August 2023, the executive director of the Memorial Centre “Staro Sajmište” Asja Drača Muntean said that the Memorial Centre would process two phases of the camp: Judenlager and Anhaltelager and treat all the victims equally. She also denied that it would focus on some aspects of what happened at Staro Sajmište and ignore others: “We want to deal with historical facts, with the things that took place here”.²⁴⁸

However, it still remains to be seen how the Memorial Centre will present the history of the camp as it is still not open to visitors. It currently occupies two buildings: the central tower which will serve as an exhibition centre, and a nearby building that houses offices. Since its establishment, the Memorial Centre received ordinary visitors only once, in July 2024, when it organized the first public tour under the name “(Staro) Sajmište: Then/Now”. According to the staff, the second public tour will probably take place in September this year, while the center will officially be open for visitors once the reconstructed tower gets a use permit.

While it was high time to establish the memorial centre, many argue that—as much as it can sound wrong - victims cannot be equalized. In order to properly memorialize the site, the Memorial Centre will have to recognize the Holocaust as a historical event per se as well as its position within the Serbian public memory.

One of the loudest critics of the current setting of the Memorial Centre is Jovan Byford, a prominent Holocaust expert. In an opinion piece for Serbian news magazine Vreme in January 2023, Byford criticized the aforementioned exhibition - “The Camp at Staro Sajmište”. It displays reproductions of World War II-era photographs mounted on panels and premiered in the

²⁴⁷ Gordana Popović, “Staro Sajmište zaboravljeno zarad bratstva i jedinstva,” *Politika*, 28.12.2022, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/530622/staro-sajmiste-memorijalni-centar>

²⁴⁸ Ivana Nikolić, “From Nazi Camp to Memorial Centre: In Serbia, the Transition Isn’t Easy,” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 14.08.2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/14/from-nazi-camp-to-memorial-centre-in-serbia-the-transition-isnt-easy/>

Serbian National Museum in December 2022. Byford argued the exhibition was modest and “resembled a boring school history lesson, from which visitors can learn the basic facts about the camp, but they will not learn anything about its essence. Especially not about the Holocaust, or about Sajmište’s unique role in the tragic history of European Jews”.²⁴⁹ According to Byford, the exhibition did not clearly point out that “among the detainees only Jews – mostly elderly, women and children – were victims of systematic destruction in the gas truck”.²⁵⁰ For this and other reasons Byford remains pessimistic that the newly established Centre would adequately present what happened at the site during the Holocaust: “This construction of the history of the Sajmište is, of course, not accidental. It is a way to emphasize the suffering of the Serbs through comparison with the Holocaust”.²⁵¹

6. Denial and ontological (in)security versus proper memorialisation

Thus far, this thesis has provided a comprehensive overview of the main theories and theoretical concepts, along with a brief history of the former concentration camp at Staro Sajmište in Belgrade. It has discussed how the site had been (mis)treated and (mis)used for decades before the memorial center was finally established in 2022. In this chapter, we shall focus on explaining why denial has played a crucial role in Serbia’s reluctance to properly memorialize the site and why acknowledgment and permanently overcoming the past are essential parts of the process. In the analysis, I will focus on the period from the late 1980s to the establishment of the Memorial Centre.

²⁴⁹ Jovan Byford, “Instrumentalizacija kulture sećanja,” *Vreme*, 11.01.2023, <https://vreme.com/vreme/instrumentalizacija-kulture-secanja/>

²⁵⁰ Ibid

²⁵¹ Ibid

In the *Introduction* of this thesis we have argued that what can account for the decade-long reluctance to adequately memorialize Staro Sajmiste is denial - as a strong psychological defense mechanism that works both on individual and collective levels. Denial as such is closely related to the concepts of ontological security and securitization, in the sense that denying past atrocities or misdeeds is of utmost importance for the ontological security of a certain state. As memory is a central feature of ontological security, securitizing certain remembrance helps political elites and ruling parties mobilize people to fulfill their own interests.²⁵²

In the case of Staro Sajmište and World War 2 in general, the type of remembrance that has been securitized since the 1990s (and the beginning of the wars) is that of Serbs as victims - victims of Nazi Germany and the NDH/Croatia, seen as their most significant other. In this context, other victims, such as Jews and Roma, can be added to the pool of victims but cannot be given primacy. We have seen that in public speeches, state initiatives to memorialize the site, and overall in the public discourse surrounding the matter. If they were given the primacy they deserve and which is historically accurate, Serbian national memories would no longer fit into the desired frames of “the nation as victorious over evil [...] and the nation as a victim of evil”.²⁵³ Thus, a current memory of the Holocaust in Serbia “is an example of a type of memory that is important for states to maintain and promote in order to belong to the international society of liberal European states”.²⁵⁴ We have seen several examples in the public speeches of Serbian officials that highlight the importance of maintaining good relations with Israel as a way for Serbia to align itself with the international community. Important to note however is that Serbia is not unique in this case. We have seen that Yugoslavia was also reluctant to acknowledge the uniqueness of Jewish and Roma suffering, but not for the same reasons. In the case of Yugoslavia, it was important to neglect, deny and forget crimes committed by constituent nations in order to preserve the ideals of brotherhood and unity.

Various forms of denial are encountered in almost every public mention of Staro Sajmište and the Holocaust by Serbian authorities, right wing politicians and so-called experts. One can argue

²⁵² Subotic, “Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe,” 298

²⁵³ Aleida Assmann, “Transnational memories”, *European Review* 22, 546-556 (2014), **quoted in** Jelena Subotic, *Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe*, 298

²⁵⁴ Subotic, *Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe*, 298

that in the first post-war years there was a complete denial of what happened at Sajmište, including Serbia's complicitness in the Holocaust on its very soil. In the post war years civilian victims did not matter, and the focus was solely on heroes and fighters. Likewise, there was no mention of the uniqueness of Jewish and Roma suffering during WW2. Those first years are probably best described on the Yugoslav Labour Action's leaflets: "We will forget the days of war, the horrors of Semlin, and build on what is now swampy, sandy, and empty space".²⁵⁵ While in the years to come Jewish community in Serbia was allowed to build monuments to commemorate its own people, the authorities still denied the uniqueness of their suffering. They were allowed to build monuments and hold commemorative practices - but far away from the general public. A textbook example of denial happened in 1980, after the Yugoslav authorities rejected the Jewish Federation of Yugoslavia's proposal to issue a stamp in memory of the tragedy of the Jews in Yugoslavia, arguing that "singling out one constitutive nation or national minority as a victim of genocide would represent a violation of the legacy of the Revolution—namely, the unity and equality of all the peoples of Yugoslavia".²⁵⁶

Since the revival of interest in Staro Sajmište at the end of the 1980s, we have witnessed denim but also a partial acknowledgment of the crimes and Serbia's involvement in them. Since that period, Serbian ruling elites have insisted on equal suffering of Serbs, Jews and Roma - and not only at Sajmište, but also in other notorious death camps. They have consistently been reluctant to acknowledge the Holocaust as an event *per se*, that deserves a special place in both European history and Serbian history. Ever since the end of the war, "the correct and full explanation of Serbian role in the Holocaust is denied, omitted, ignored, manipulated with or justified (such as when it is argued that Nedić saved Serbs and should thus be forgiven all other sins)".²⁵⁷ Serbian officials and nationalist elites exploit what Subotić introduced as "Serbs as Jews" narrative, which, in a nutshell, argues that Serbs and Jews have always been friends, and that what bonds them is their equal suffering throughout history.²⁵⁸ There are numerous examples of this

²⁵⁵ Olga Manojlović Pintar and Aleksandar Ignjatović, "Prostori selektovanih memorija: Staro sajmište u Beogradu i sećanje na drugi svetski rat", u *Kultura sjećanja: 1941. Povijesni lomovi i savladavanje prošlosti*, uredili Sulejman Bosto, Tihomir Cipek i Olivera Milosavljević (Zagreb: Disput, 2008): 95-112, 106

²⁵⁶ Subotić, "Yellow Star, Red Star," 86

²⁵⁷ Ivana Nikolic, "Culture of Denial and War Memorialisation: The Case of Staro Sajmiste Concentration Camp" (MA thesis, University of Belgrade, 2020), 62

²⁵⁸ Subotić, "Yellow Star, Red Star," 89

narrative in practice. One example is a speech given by the then-Minister of Labor, Aleksandar Vulin, in 2017: “Each wound of the Jewish people is the wound of the Serbian people, their joy is our joy, the struggle of the Jewish people for freedom and independence is the struggle of the Serbian people for freedom and independence [because] the Serbian and the Jewish people are the people of freedom and dignity”.²⁵⁹ He added that Serbs never accepted Belgrade as a city with no Jews, referring to the fact that Belgrade was among the first cities to be declared Judenrein, or free of Jews.²⁶⁰ This is another form of denial, apparent denial, when speakers do not provide evidence for their claims but call on common sense and the usage of words such as *ever, never, any* etc.²⁶¹

Another instance of denial and lack of acknowledgement can be found in the court rehabilitation processes in Serbia, which were made possible by the laws adopted after 2004 (most notably Law on Rehabilitation). Thanks to these laws, a number of war criminals had their names cleared, causing a massive outrage across Serbia. While Milan Nedić was not rehabilitated, his rehabilitation process heard steadfast defense of him when a historian Bojan Dimitrijević testified that Nedić and his apparatus never persecuted Jews and did not know about the happenings at Sajmište. He even argued that “attempts to implicate Serbia in the Holocaust have been going on for 25 years and that is scandalous”.²⁶² Dimitrijević excused Nedić and his government by claiming that they only registered Jews acting under the German orders.

Thus, the narrative “Serbs as Jews” is maintained through the denial of past atrocities. Fully acknowledging these atrocities - including the unique suffering of Jews and Roma in the Sajmište camp - would jeopardize Serbia's ontological security and its image on the international stage. “This would have other, possibly much graver, implications for the nationalistic circles in

²⁵⁹ B92, “Vulin: Srbi nikad nisu prihvatili ‘BG grad bez Jevreja’”, B92, 10.05.2017, accessed August 16, 2024 https://www.b92.net/o/vesti/vesti?nav_id=1259044

²⁶⁰ “Semlin Judenlager 1941-1942,” Semlin Judenlager in Serbian public memory, accessed 29.07.2024, [https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/semlin-judenlager.php](https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semnin/en/semnin-judenlager.php)

²⁶¹ Van Dijk, “Discourse and the denial of racism,” 98

²⁶² V.C.S, “Nedic nije progonio Jevreje”, Vecernje Novosti, 23.05.2016, accessed August 16, 2024 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:606766-Nedic-nije-progonio-Jevreje>

Serbia. The narrative of Serbs as heroes and victims - never perpetrators - in more recent Yugoslav wars of the 1990s would also be lost or put in threat”.²⁶³

For all these reasons, adequate memorialization of the Staro Sajmiste is impossible until there is a complete acknowledgement of the past atrocities on the Serbian soil.

7. Conclusion and recommendations for additional research

In order to explain the improper memorialization of the Staro Sajmiste concentration camp and the lack of acknowledgment of the unique suffering of Jews and Roma during World War 2 in Serbia, this thesis explores the interplay between the concepts of denial and ontological security. While denial has been widely used in academic literature to explain stances towards mass atrocities, such as genocide and Holocaust denial, it has not been used to explain a country's reluctance to properly memorialize a site of immense suffering and acknowledge that someone else - rather than its own people - were primary victims. In that regard, the thesis has shown that

²⁶³ Ivana Nikolic, “Culture of Denial and War Memorialisation: The Case of Staro Sajmiste Concentration Camp”, 63

denial, which is in the service of stable and secure identity, is what hinders proper memorialization and full acknowledgement in the case of Staro Sajmiste. It also argues that coming to terms with the inglorious past in Serbia is hard because it could easily endanger the country's identity, stability, security and relationships with significant others (Croatia). Showing, or rather admitting some of the following: that Semlin Judenlager was established to annihilate Jews and Roma and not Serbs; that it soon became among the most important Holocaust sites in Europe; that Serbian administration with ordinary people working in it, pro-Nazi militias and anti-Semitic media indirectly aided and abetted the Holocaust in Serbia; that thousands of people vanished in a gas van right outside of Belgrade etc would negatively affect Serbia from the inside and from the outside, and would diminish its official narratives - backbones of its identity.

All this gives us little hope that the current Memorial Centre will be brave and free enough to tell the story as it happened. "Serbia will most likely use the future museums to foster its narratives of a victim and a victor, of the nation that suffered at least as much as the Jews, and that has always been on the right side of history. Disclosing inglorious past and traumas is too risky so it will be kept under the carpet - for good."²⁶⁴

Once the Memorial Centre in Belgrade is up and running, additional research should be conducted into the narratives, exhibitions and commemorative practices that it offers to visitors. Future research should address some of the following questions: what implications does the Memorial Centre have for the general public; what has changed in the public remembrance of the Holocaust in Serbia; has it truly presented the history as it happened and what are the consequences.

²⁶⁴ Ivana Nikolic, "What If Others Found Out This Alternative History: The Staro Sajmiste Concentration Camp and Serbia's Ontological Security" (essay for the course *Critical Security Studies*, MA in Peace, Security and Development, University of Belgrade, 2023), 10

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