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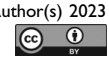
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Difficult Heritage in Southeastern Europe: Local and Transnational Entanglements in Memorializing Political Prisons after Socialism

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Abstract

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, various governments supported the creation of memorial museums of political violence during state socialism. While much scholarly attention has been given to Hungary's House of Terror and the Baltic museums of occupations, this article examines the contrasting situation in Southeastern Europe, where state actors were generally absent and which witnessed relatively belated and overwhelmingly bottom-up processes. The article analyses the particularity of political prisons as 'difficult heritage'. It scrutinizes the commonalities and entanglements between the memorialization of political prisons in three Southeastern European countries marked by distinctive trajectories both during and after communism: Albania (Spaç), Romania (Sighet and Piteşti), and Croatia (Goli Otok). The article shows how in the absence of state-level policies to address transitional justice, activism surrounding difficult heritage memorialization has aimed to fill the gap. It also argues that the relationship between site memorialization in Southeastern Europe and the wider European models is doubly constitutive: first, the memorialization of Sighet in 1990s Romania borrowed approaches from Western European Holocaust memorialization, then shaped a European wide set of best practices; second, a wave of new memorial initiatives after 2010 in Southeastern Europe was connected to the Europeanization of memory and transnational engagements.

Keywords

communism, dictatorship, difficult heritage, memory, prison, Southeastern Europe

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I

In September 2019, Mirian Bllaci, then program manager of the NGO *Cultural Heritage without Borders Albania*, presented the plans for the transformation of the Spaç prison into a memorial site. He spoke in front of an international audience of professionals working in sites of memory throughout Southeastern Europe (SEE), as well as Germany and France, as part of an annual meeting of the network called Memory Lab.[1] Decrying a lack of dealing with the communist past in Albania, including a neglect of former political prisons, Bllaci emphasized that the safeguarding of the deteriorated prison would be a duty to spark a debate in the country almost 30 years after the end of the Hoxha regime. Such a site, Bllaci argued, was key to showcase the experience of authoritarianism and thus to promote the values of democracy. This was not any kind of heritage, but a difficult heritage that could spark dealing with the past and debates about the future. Participants from other Southeastern European countries mused about the lack of memorialization of political prisons and labor camps in their countries, such as the Yugoslav political prison of Goli Otok in Croatia, overshadowed by other memory concerns. The relatively late or even absent processes of memorialization of communist-era political prisons in Southeastern European countries, as well as the underwhelming state support, can be put in contrast with the experience of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), such as Hungary, the Baltic countries, and the former German Democratic Republic.[2] An extensive literature has showed how in these latter countries the state supported and collaborated with memory activists for the creation of memory museums and sites of memory related to political violence during state socialism.[3] In contrast, in Southeastern European post-socialist states,

1 Created in 2010, and originally supported by a Franco-German initiative, the Trans-European Exchange Platform on History and Remembrance Memory Lab became a forum for memory activists and heritage professionals from Southeastern Europe and Western Europe to exchange ideas and debates on perspectives and practices of dealing with the past. It connects institutions, organizations, and persons working on memory sites and remembrance education especially in the Western Balkans and in Western Europe (http://memorylab-europe.eu/about/mission, retrieved 12 December 2021). Every year, the network meet in another country in either Southeastern Europe or Western Europe, joining practitioners and sites in a European dialogue.

2 While Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is generally used to depict the European region that before 1989 was ruled by communist regimes, Southeastern Europe (SEE) is generally used in reference to the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as Greece and occasionally Turkey and Moldova. In this article, I will refer to the countries in SEE that were ruled by communist regimes after 1945, which then are also part of the broader CEE.

3 The involvement of the state depended on the government in power, but in general post-socialist countries in CEE witnessed at certain point anti-communist memory politics during the three decades after the fall of regimes, for a variety of reasons. See M. H. Bernhard and J. Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford 2014). There is an extensive literature on such memorialization, some of which also examines the dynamics of state implication. See C. Iordachi and P. Apor, *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Re-Visualizing the Recent Past* (London 2021); M. Zombory, 'The Birth of the Memory of Communism: Memorial Museums in Europe', *Nationalities Papers*, 45, 6 (2017), 1028–46; S. Jones, 'Staging Battlefields: Media, Authenticity and Politics in the Museum of Communism (Prague), The House of Terror (Budapest) and Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen (Berlin)', *Journal of War & Culture Studies,* 4, 1 (2011), 97–111; S. Jones, 'Uneasy Heritage: Remembering Everyday Life in Post-Socialist Memorials and Museums', in *Encounters with Popular Pasts* (Cham 2015), 219–34; A. Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (Brunswick NJ 2018).

until the mid-2010s, there were generally no state-run initiatives related to such sites. The memorialization of political prisons came late, and it was usually spearheaded by private groups and civil society actors like Bllaci's organization.[4] While one of the CEE's earliest memorializations of a communist political prison, Romania's Sighet, was located in Southeastern Europe, it was also bottom-up-driven.[5] Moreover, other former political prisons in Romania saw a beginning of processes of memorialization only in the 2010s, mirroring the trends in other countries in Southeastern Europe, despite their otherwise differentiated experiences both of socialism and post-socialism. The particularity of the relatively belated and overwhelmingly bottom-up processes in Southeastern European countries has not yet been explored.

This article examines the comparatively tardy memorialization of communist-era political prisons in Southeastern Europe, which became what Sharon MacDonald described as 'difficult heritage'[6] for the post-socialist states. In these political prisons and forced labor camps, opponents of the socialist regime or perceived dissidents from within the communist parties were detained and at times subjected to human rights abuses, particularly in the early period of the regime. The central question of this article is what accounts for the bottom-up nature of the comparatively belated memorialization of political prisons in Southeastern Europe. It interrogates how and why the approaches to political prisons changed in SEE from relative neglect to an increase in bottom-up memorialization in the last decade. The article analyses the commonalities and entanglements between the memorialization of difficult heritage in Albania, Romania, and Croatia, three Southeastern European countries marked not only by divergent socialist paths[7] but also by different

4 An initial preponderant role of bottom-up initiatives was also common in the other CEE countries, but state actors became involved relatively early, which makes the SEE cases distinctive. See C. Iordachi and P. Apor, *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Re-Visualizing the Recent Past* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2021); Zombory, 'The Birth of the Memory of Communism'; S. Jones, 'Staging Battlefields: Media, Authenticity and Politics in the Museum of Communism (Prague), The House of Terror (Budapest) and Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen (Berlin)', *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 4, 1 (2011), 97–111; S. Jones, 'Uneasy Heritage: Remembering Everyday Life in Post-Socialist Memorials and Museums', in M. Robinson and H. Silverman (eds), *Encounters with Popular Pasts* (Cham 2015), 219–34; A. Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ 2018).

5 J. Mark, 'What Remains? Anti-Communism, Forensic Archaeology, and the Retelling of the National Past in Lithuania and Romania', *Past and Present,* 206, suppl_5 (2010), 276–300; M. Zombory, 'The Birth of the Memory of Communism'; S. Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration? Politics, Networks, and Social Actors in Memories of Dictatorship' in *The Changing Place of Europe in Global Memory Cultures* (Cham, 2017), 63–86; C. Pohrib, 'The Afterlives of Communist Things: Archiving Feeling in Post-Communist Romania', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19, 6 (December 2016), 724–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415597926.

6 S. Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (Abingdon 2010).

7 In this article, I will use 'communist' and 'socialist' as emic categories, that is, the category that my informants in the countries mostly used, which often reflects the general usage in the country, that is, a dominant use of 'communism' for my informants in Romania and Albania, with both communism and socialism used in Yugoslavia, notwithstanding the self-definition of the regime actors ("people´s", then socialist republics, communist parties, etc.) and analytical frames from historiography and political science.

experiences of transition.[8] To do so, it scrutinizes the role of actors who led the process of memorialization and the circulations of practices that they facilitated.

Work on transitional justice and dealing with the past in CEE showed that countries used a wide repertoire of practices to engage with the past, from justice-centered approaches such as court trials, lustration, restitutions of property, rehabilitation, and reparations to truth approaches such as commissions, history textbooks, and memorial sites.[9] The state was key for most of these; it was only in the realm of cultural production, remembrance ceremonies, and memorial sites where other actors could take center stage, especially in the absence of the state.[10] Nevertheless, dealing with the past was complicated by the existence of disputed and competitive memory threads and political contexts.[11] Moreover, CEE went through a Europeanization of memory, the process of aligning national practices with a European memory regime that by the 1990s was based on the centrality of the Holocaust, and encouraged dealing with the past.[12] Work by several authors including Jelena Subotić and Ljiljiana Radonić showed how CEE states have actually used the repertoire of Holocaust remembrance in shaping the memory practices surrounding communism.[13] Furthermore, through the

8 The initial installation of communist regimes featured the use of political prisons and labour camps all throughout the region. In later decades, Romania and Albania experienced more repressive regimes – in Romania, with a relaxation of the regime in the 1960s and the 1970s (V. Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, vol. 11 (Oakland, CA 2003). In contrast, Croatia, as part of Yugoslavia, was not part of the Soviet Block after 1948 and witnessed the most liberal form of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In all three countries, the exit from communism was more turbulent than the general Central and Eastern European story, while the level of violence differed. Romania witnessed the most violent exit in 1989, officially with 689 deaths. In Albania, while the actual transition was peaceful, tensions escalated to the brink of civil war in 1997. For Croatia, the end of communism is connected to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that occurred. In Yugoslavia, as Dejan Jović put it, there was no 1989, but 1991 – implying not a direct transition to democracy, but to turbulent nationalism and wars (D. Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State That Withered Away* (West Lafayette, IN 2009)). In the transition years, there was a similarity of the existence of a party that was seen as the successor of the former communist party (the FSN/PDSR/PSD in Romania, the Socialist Party in Albania, and the SDP in Croatia) and a party/a set of parties opposed to the successor party. Nevertheless, while in Romania they ended up mostly in an opposition that was based on recreated historical parties and tended to be more liberal; in Croatia, the party opposed to the SDP, the HDZ, was mostly in control and had a nationalist platform. In Albania, the Democratic party was ruling at the beginning of the transition, and then in alternation with the Socialist Party.

9 L. Stan and N. Nedelsky, *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience* (Cambridge 2015); L. Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge 2012); Bernhard and Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism*.

10 Stan and Nedelsky, *Post-Communist Transitional Justice*; G. Badescu, 'Entangled Islands of Memory: Actors and Circulations of Site Memorialisation Practice Between the Latin American Southern Cone and Central and Eastern Europe', *Global Society,* 33, 3 (2019), 382–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2019.1598946.

11 Bernhard and Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism*; T. Sindbæk Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa, *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Volume 24)* (New York 2016).

12 A. Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions* (Abingdon 2014).

13 L. David, 'Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory: The Serbian Case', in *History and Politics in the Western Balkans: Changes at the Turn of the Millenium*, ed. S. M. Jovanović and V. Stančetić (Cluj-Napoca, Romania 2013), 64–88; J. Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca 2019); L. Radonić, 'The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Anali Hrvatskog Politološkog Društva*, 15 (2018), 131–54.

lobby of CEE actors,[14] the European memory regime changed to include communist crimes into the European memory canon, reshaped as a two totalitarianism model of fascism and communism.[15] The dual model of European memory is more present, however, in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.[16] Moreover, the focus on the victimization of the nation both during and beyond communism also became an engine of anti-European feelings, particularly in Hungary and Poland.[17] As such, Europeanization in the last decade would imply an alignment with this new – albeit contested – European memory regime based on a dual model of remembrance of fascism and communism.[18]

Within the array of practices of dealing with the past, the emergence of memorial museums in CEE showed the support of the state in portraying traumatic pasts alongside actors from civil society.[19] Memorial museums refer to usually custom-built museums focusing on traumatic experiences not located on the sites of actual violence. Places of atrocities, from concentration camps to Latin American torture sites, are generally memorialized more as sites of memory rather than museums.[20] However, in CEE, these museums are also housed in previous sites of violence, including political prisons. For instance, the House of Terror in Budapest is located on a site of interrogation and torture used both by the Arrow Cross (the Hungarian fascists) and communist regimes, while the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius is situated in the former prison of the Soviet secret service. Their creation was led or supported by the state from the start, while memorial museums in Tallinn and Riga saw state support only later on.[21] However, there are no state-supported memorial museums of communism in Southeastern Europe. Comparative work on memorial museums in CEE by authors like Ljiljiana Radonić, Maté Zombory, and Amy Sodaro showed the importance of domestic politics and local narratives in shaping the content of such sites, either through embracing Europeanizing practices or highlighting crimes of communism to the detriment of the Holocaust, such as in the Hungarian and the initial Baltic

14 L. Neumayer, *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War* (Abingdon 2018); Z. Dujisin, 'A History of Post-Communist Remembrance: From Memory Politics to the Emergence of a Field of Anticommunism', *Theory and Society*, 50, 1 (January 2021), 65–96, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09401-5.

15 G. Mink and L Neumayer, *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games* (Cham 2013), Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity*.

16 A. Assmann, 'Europe's Divided Memory', in U. Blacker, A. Etkind, and J. Fedor (eds), *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, (Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 25–41; L. Radonić, 'Post-Communist Invocation of Europe: Memorial Museums' Narratives and the Europeanization of Memory', *National Identities*, 19, 2 (April 3, 2017), 269–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1264377.

17 P. Vermeersch, 'Victimhood as Victory: The Role of Memory Politics in the Process of de-Europeanisation in East-Central Europe', *Global Discourse*, 9, 1 (2019), 113–30.

18 A. Milosević and T. Trost, *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans* (Cham 2020).

19 Radonić, 'Post-Communist Invocation of Europe'; Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*.

20 For discussions on such typologies, see P. H. Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford 2007); Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*; Jens Andermann, 'Placing Latin American Memory: Sites and the Politics of Mourning', *Memory Studies*, 8, 1 (2015), 3–8.

21 Radonić, 'Post-Communist Invocation of Europe'.

exhibits.[22] Nevertheless, the specific fate of political prisons and particularly those in SEE has not been examined in a transnational way.

While the dominant approach in work on dealing with the past in CEE was that of single-country analysis or comparisons, the present article seeks not only to examine three country contexts but also to trace entanglements and circulations between them. Attention to transnational circulations has marked recent research in both history and memory studies. the latter calling for an examination of remembrance processes beyond the national container and conceptualizing a transnational memory-turn, as well as traveling memory, multidirectional memory, and entangled memory.[23] Previous work examined how European memory practices circulated to the CEE, including the SEE, showing both mimetism as well as local reframings and even rejection of Western memory tropes.[24] This article discusses the role of 'concepts and debates from elsewhere'[25] in dealing with difficult heritage either from Western Europe, from within the post-socialist region, and from beyond. By examining individual actors and memory and heritage networks, it interrogates the circumscribing of these practices in the Europeanization of memory. Moreover, a contribution of the article is that it traces circulations between Southeastern European countries with distinctive trajectories before and during communism.

Memorializing political prisons of a past regime can serve as a rather direct way to showcase that a regime was authoritarian, as it incarcerated its opponents and critics. Moreover, the violation of human rights of prisoners, notwithstanding their political orientation, is something that in the current human rights-oriented regime is seen as morally abhorrent.[26] To understand their paths to memorialization, this article follows a place biography approach, examining the tracing how a site got transformed in time and identifying the actors that had a role in the process, their intentions, and visions. The sites associated with the difficult heritage of political repression in the region

22 Radonić, 'Post-Communist Invocation of Europe'; Radonić, 'The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina'; Zombory, 'The Birth of the Memory of Communism'; Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*.

23 C. De Cesari and A. Rigney, *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, vol. 19 (Berlin 2014); L. Bond and J. Rapson, *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory between and beyond Borders*, vol. 15 (New York 2014), L. Bond, S. Craps, and P. Vermeulen, *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (New York 2016); G. Feindt et al., 'Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies', *History and Theory,* 53, 1 (2014), 24–44, https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10693; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto 2009); J. Wüstenberg and A. Sierp, *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*, vol. 4 (New York 2020).

24 Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration?'; T. Sindbæk Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa, *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception* (Leiden 2017); S. Jones, 'Cross-Border Collaboration and the Construction of Memory Narratives in Europe', in T. Sindbæk Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds), *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception* (Leiden 2017), 25–55, A. Milošević and H. Touquet, 'Unintended Consequences: The EU Memory Framework and the Politics of Memory in Serbia and Croatia', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 18, 3 (July 3, 2018), 381–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1489614; A. Milosević and T. Trost, *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans* (Cham 2020); S., *Towards a Collaborative Memory: German Memory Work in a Transnational Context*, vol. 9 (New York 2022).

25 Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 7.

26 L. David, *The Past Can't Heal Us* (Cambridge 2020).

broadly witnessed a similar scenario: while before 1945 some had been used as prisons and others were constituted ad hoc, they were used as political prisons in the late 1940s and the first part of the 1950s. Most were converted then to common prisons, and starting with the mid-1970s, they were abandoned as newer facilities were constructed. While Goli Otok in Croatia, Sighet in Romania and Spaç in Albania were abandoned before the end of the regimes, others were reconverted. For instance, Piteşti in Romania was refurbished to host offices once the city saw the construction of a new prison. After the end of socialist regimes, a number of prisons which were used for political detention during early communism remained, or returned in use.[27] With the exception of Sighet, memorialized in the 1990s, the others saw processes of memorialization beginning in the mid-2010s, which the article will trace with regard to the actors and the societal context in which they were operating.

The article scrutinizes the trajectory of political prisons considered emblematic of the difficult heritage of past regime violence: Sighet and Piteşti in Romania, Spaç in Albania, and Goli Otok in Croatia. It is based on oral history interviews with survivors who took part in memorialization efforts, as well as interviews with other actors involved in memorialization, including the leadership of institutions, historians, NGOs and human rights activists, architects, and curators. Moreover, the author took part in several network meetings of memory and heritage practitioners from the region. Furthermore, it examines the coverage of such sites in the local and national media from 1990 onward.[28]

In the first part, the article discusses the national and European dimension of memorializing 'communist crimes', introducing how the communist past was treated in Albania, Croatia, and Romania and discussing in more detail the participation of CEE countries in the configuration of the European memory regime of dual totalitarianisms. Subsequently, the article examines the early beginnings of Romania's Sighet memorialization, then the late contingent memorialization of another Romanian prison – Piteşti. A discussion of Albanian Spaç and Goli Otok in Croatia follows.

The article shows how in the absence of state-level policies to address transitional justice, activism surrounding the creation of sites of memory and difficult heritage has aimed to fill the gap, yet at different speeds which reflect the countries' political

27 For instance Aiud, Gherla, Jilava prisons in Romania and Burrel in Albania.

28 The author conducted fieldwork in Croatia in 2017 and 2019, in Albania in 2019 (with follow-up interviews during the pandemic), and in Romania in 2017 and 2018. I visited Sighet in 2008 and 2018, Goli Otok in 2017, Piteşti in 2017 and 2018, and Spaç in 2019, both on my own and using guides, in order to capture both the experience and the narrative – in the case of Spaç, the guide was a former inmate. I traced the actors involved in the memorialization efforts through an examination of the media coverage and then snowballing, interviewing them in various locations. Interviews were conducted with the directors and program managers of the NGOs and foundations working on the memorialization of the sites (ChWB, Documenta, Memorialul Pitesti), as well as time witnesses who are involved in memorialization efforts, including also the members of Ante Zemljar association in Croatia, who accounted in their oral history interviews both the time spent in these prisons and their memory activities today. I interviewed the architects and curators involved in the Piteşti memorial in both Bucharest and Barcelona. I coordinated also a project with 12 anthropology students who conducted research on the perceptions of the Pitesti prison in the city. I attended the Memory Lab meetings and other network meetings like IC MEMO. I examined the local press in Pitesti and Rijeka and national press articles in Romania, Croatia, and Albania (the last one using translation) for coverage of these memorial projects.

transformation, as well as competing regimes of memory. It reflects that while one particular site in Romania – Sighet – took part in the construction of the Europeanization of memory in the first decades since the fall of communism, similar sites in all three countries have experienced relatively late processes of memorialization through memory activists who not only have to be locally situated, but have to be understood in an entangled network of memory and difficult heritage activists. Finally, it argues that the relationship between site memorialization in Southeastern Europe and the wider European models is doubly constitutive: first, the memorialization of Sighet in 1990s Romania borrowed approaches from Western European Holocaust memorialization, then shaped a European wide set of best practices; second, a wave of new memorial initiatives after 2010 in Southeastern Europe was connected to a Europeanization of memory.

II

Up until the 1980s, despite the differences in the nature of the regime, the control over the past was similar in the three discussed contexts. In Romania and Albania, a historiography bridging socialist and national struggle built a narrative of a centuries-old liberation struggle by the people, led in the twentieth century by the eventually victorious communist party. In Yugoslavia, despite other liberal aspects of the regime, the official narrative about the past war – a glorious liberation war fought by the Partisans, doubled by a people's revolution – was restrictive.[29] Variations from the canon, including the discussion of Goli Otok, were not permitted. However, as opposed to the other contexts, where the approach to the recent past remained unchanged until 1989, Yugoslavia witnessed in the 1980s a revival of alternative views of the past. This included an emergence of historical work and memoirs about Goli Otok, which arguably contributed to a deterioration of perceptions of socialism around some circles.[30]

Since the 1990s, the reexamination of the communist past has varied. Albania witnessed mostly timid work on the communist period, both in terms of historical research and memorialization.[31] In Croatia, the 1990s wars and the new focus on building national narratives about the past led to a relative marginalization of the communist period, as well as of the interest in Goli Otok. In contrast to the other two countries examined, Romania's dealing with the communist past has been extensively examined by historians and political scientists. The Iliescu regimes (1990–6; 2000–4) were described as 'politics of amnesia' by Vladimir Tismăneanu[32] – later lead author of the Băsescu-era report on

29 H. Karge, *Steinerne Erinnerung: Versteinerte Erinnerung?: Kriegsgedenken Im Sozialistischen Jugoslawien* (Wiesbaden 2010).
30 M. Previšić, 'Researching the Goli Otok Camp', in *Researching Yugoslavia and Its Aftermath* (Cham 2021), 23–46.
31 Enriketa Pandelejmoni, 'Dealing with the Communist Past in Albania' (Unbunkering the past: How is Albania dealing with its (communist) history, Tirana, 2019).
32 V. Tismaneanu, 'Democracy and Memory: Romania Confronts Its Communist Past', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617, 1 (2008), 166–80.

communism, 'politics of oblivion',[33] with communism glossed over and becoming a 'black hole of history'.[34] This alternated with a narrative of an unfinished revolution during the Democratic Convention (1996–2000).[35] The mid-2000s saw the installation in the public discourse of a fervent anti-communism focused on crimes,[36] yet with limited transitional justice mechanisms actually implemented.[37]

In January 2006, 2 years after eight CEE states joined the EU and 1 year before Romania and Bulgaria's entry, the EU Parliamentary Assembly published Resolution 148. This highlighted the 'need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes'.[38] It encouraged member states to 'reassess the history of communism and their own past, […], clearly distance themselves for the crimes committed […] and condemn them without any ambiguity'.[39] Some CEE states had already been quick to condemn communism – for instance, the Czech Republic passed such an act in July 1993. In Southeastern Europe, however, it was only later in 2006 that a first country, Romania, launched a presidential commission to investigate communist crimes. President Traian Băsescu officially condemned communism in December 2006, weeks before the country joined the European Union. In his address to the Romanian Parliament, he stated that 'the regime exterminated people by assassination and deportation of hundreds of thousands of people', invoking the 660-page report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, comprised by a team of historians led by US-based political scientist Vladimir Tismăneanu.[40] While there were critiques of

33 A. Cioflâncă, 'Politics of Oblivion in Postcommunist Romania', *Romanian Journal of Political Sciences*, 02 (2002), 85–93.

34 S. Bădică, 'The Black Hole Paradigm. Exhibiting Communism in Post-Communist Romania', *History of Communism in Europe*, 1 (2010), 83–101.

35 J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central–Eastern Europe* (New Haven, CT 2010).

36 B.C. Iacob, 'Liberal Anti-communism and historical commissions in Romania and Moldova', *Revue detudes comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2-3, 2 (November 16, 2020), 89–120.

37 L. Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge 2012); V. Tismaneanu and M. Stan, *Romania Confronts Its Communist Past: Democracy, Memory, and Moral Justice* (Cambridge 2018); R. Grosescu and R. Ursachi, *Justiţia penală de tranziţie: de la Nürnberg la postcomunismul românesc* (Iaşi 2009); M. Ciobanu, *Repression, Resistance and Collaboration in Stalinist Romania 1944–1964: Post-Communist Remembering* (Abingdon 2020).

38 (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) PACE, 'Need for International Condemnation of Crimes of Totalitarian Communist Regimes', *Resolution*, 2006, 1481.

39 Ibid. For background on EU resolutions, the actors who mobilized them, as well as critiques, see M. Mälksoo, 'Criminalizing Communism: Transnational Mnemopolitics in Europe', *International Political Sociology*, 8, 1 (2014): 82–99, https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12041; L. Neumayer, 'Advocating for the Cause of the "Victims of Communism" in the European Political Space: Memory Entrepreneurs in Interstitial Fields', *Nationalities Papers*, 45, 6 (2017), 992–1012, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1364230; Neumayer, *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War*; Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration?'

40 Romania's former president, Ion Iliescu, who led the country for a number of terms between 1990–6 and 2000–4, mentioned in the report as a leading figure of the communist party, criticized the initiative as McCarthyism and politicizing history through the demonization of the left in the country. (Romanian Leader Condemns Communist Rule https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/19/world/europe/19romania.html)

this report as politicized history, there were also critiques which said it was too little, too late, with the report being made just on the eve of the EU accession.[41]

Such acts of condemning communism emerged into a broader context of a politics of regret of states about dictatorial pasts in Europe and elsewhere that has been shaped since the 1980s in Germany and South America.[42] Moreover, they occurred in the context of discussions on what makes European memory,[43] as well as local dynamics and political claims. Nevertheless, such declarations officialized discourses of criminalization of the communist past that have been already mobilized through a series of practices since the fall of the regime: public sphere intellectual debates, films, and documentaries, but also the memorialization of former sites of political violence associated with the regime. Băsescu's declaration echoed what the Memorial of Victims of Communism from Sighet in Romania has been displaying for years: communism was depicted there as a criminal regime that obliterated the country interwar political elite, damaged the peasantry, harmed ethnic minorities, and installed a climate of fear and persecution.

On 2 April 2009, the European Parliament adopted a new resolution on 'European Conscience and Totalitarianism', in which it promoted a European identity based on respect for human rights. It acknowledged the need to address the 'double legacy of dictatorship' for countries in CEE. While emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust – the primary pillar of European memory[44] – it condemned the 'crimes against humanity and massive human rights violations committed by the totalitarian Communist regimes'.[45] The reactions to the dual model of remembrance were mixed. Some, particularly in CEE, welcomed these decisions, as they felt their experience was acknowledged. Others criticized this by contesting the term 'totalitarianism' or calling this a problematic equation of crimes of Nazism and Fascism with those of communism. Responding to both, German historian Bernhard Faulenbach discussed the juxtaposition of Germany's dealing with both its Nazi past and the experience of the German Democratic Republic: 'the NS crimes […] cannot be relativized by dealing with the crimes of

41 See M. Ciobanu, 'Criminalising the Past and Reconstructing Collective Memory: The Romanian Truth Commission', *Europe-Asia Studies,* 61, 2 (2009), 313–36; A. Hogea, 'Coming to Terms with the Communist Past in Romania: An Analysis of the Political and Media Discourse Concerning the Tismăneanu Report', *Studies of Transition States and Societies,* 2, 2 (2010), 16–30; M.S. Rusu, 'Transitional Politics of Memory: Political Strategies of Managing the Past in Post-Communist Romania', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69, 8 (2017), 1257–79.

42 J.K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York 2007); E. Jelin, J. Rein, and M. Godoy-Anativia, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis, MN 2003).

43 A. Assmann, 'Europe: A Community of Memory?', *Ghi Bulletin*, 40, 1 (2007), 12–25; A. Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions* (Routledge 2014); J. Wüstenberg, 'The Struggle for European Memory—New Contributions to an Emerging Field', *Comparative European Politics*, 14, 3 (2016), 376–89.

44 A. Assmann, 'Europe's Divided Memory', in U. Blacker, A. Etkind, and J. Fedor (eds), *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (New York 2013), 25–41.

45 European Parliament, *Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism* (Brussels 2009).

Stalinism', and vice versa, 'Stalinist crimes […] should not be trivialized by referring to the Nazi crimes'.[46]

The resolution on 'European Conscience and Totalitarianism' also called for the establishment of a Platform of European Memory and Conscience, which was eventually created on 23 August 2011, providing the framework for networking and cooperation between museums, memorials, and public history institutes from the entire continent.[47] Within this platform, one goal was setting 'European standards' in educating about the past and also in making sense of difficult heritage.[48] One active member of the platform was Romania's Sighet memorial, which was also one of CEE's pioneer sites of memory connected to the communist-era difficult heritage.

III

In Romania, the memorialization of the Sighet political prison in the early 1990s as difficult heritage of dictatorship reflected both the bottom-up nature of dealing with the past and its European entanglements. While in 1990s Romania, no transitional justice measures were officially taken;[49] several intellectual figures advocated for a deeper engagement with the past, calling for societal debates and trials. With the aim of finding ways for society to engage with this difficult past, in the absence of state measures of both reparations for victims and indictment for perpetrators, poet and former dissident Ana Blandiana and writer Romulus Rusan focused on creating a memorial center for the crimes of communism.[50] As Ana Blandiana stated, 'When justice does not succeed in being a form of memory, memory itself can be a form of justice'.[51] Working with a built heritage site to transform it into a center for memory and education seemed like the way for civil society to fill a void. Blandiana made the connection between the difficult heritage of the regime and the possibilities to deal with the past through a site of memory through her visits to concentration camps, particularly Auschwitz.[52] This led to the belief that sites where things have happened are best suited for reparative measures; the difficult heritage of the regime can be thus reclaimed for symbolic justice measures. What has been called a core of European remembrance – the memorialization of sites of

46 Deutscher Bundestag, 'Schlussbericht Der Enquete-Kommission» Überwindung Der Folgen Der SED-Diktatur Im Prozess Der Deutschen Einheit «', *Drucksache,* 13, 1100 (1998): 240.
47 Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration?'
48 Ibid.
49 In the aftermath of the fall of the Ceausescu regime, the National Salvation Front (FSN), a political organization which was formed in December 1989 and took first stage in the country's transformation, decided in early 1990 to run for office. This saw the opposition of a segment of society who wanted a clean slate and a new political class that was unrelated to the old regime, as well as radical measures such as lustration in a country that had the largest communist party membership. FSN won the elections in May 1990. From a memorial perspective, the FSN concentrated on the 1989 Revolution as a heroic event that marked the new start of democracy and received commemorative attention of the fallen heroes, as opposed to digging further in the past.
50 Ana Blandiana's poetry in the 1980s, while widely popular, had critical undertones that allegedly led to the withdrawal of several volumes.
51 A. Blandiana, 'Memoria ca formă de justiție', Dilema, 518 (2003), 10.
52 Zombory, 'The Birth of the Memory of Communism'.

the Holocaust[53] – thus became a major influence in thinking how to deal with the difficult heritage of the communist dictatorship.

The embeddedness of the site on a European scale is also manifested through its initial support. Ana Blandiana initially presented the project for a memorial to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe at a conference on human rights.[54] She received a favorable reaction, in contrast to the rejection encountered by the state authorities in Romania. As Sara Jones notes, the European memory culture was then seen as a salvation against the amnesiac practices of the Romanian state.[55]

By 1993, the NGO Civic Alliance Foundation, led by Blandiana, focused on Sighet as a site for a possible museum dedicated to the victims of communism. While far from Bucharest, the site was unique among the wide network of early communist political prisons through the high profile of its inmates, as it was used in the early years of the communist regimes to detain high-rank government members, as well as members of the academy, military officers, and priests. Some were key figures of the interwar period and shone in the parallel histories that were circulated through families within Romania during communism. Iuliu Maniu, for instance, was a key figure of the union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918 and later led the Romanian National Peasant party. Between 1948 and 1955, 54 detainees died in prison.

The prison has, however, a longer history. Built in the typical structure of late nineteenth century Austro-Hungarian prisons in 1897, it functioned as a prison of the Dual Monarchy and from 1919 to 1941 as a Romanian prison. Following the annexation of Northern Transylvania to Hungary, it was run between 1941 and 1944 by the Hungarian state, when it was also used as a transportation center for Transylvanian Jews to be sent to Auschwitz.[56] Under the new Romanian communist regime, in August 1948, the prison received the first political prisoners, the so-called Vişovan Group, which comprised young peasants, students, and even schoolchildren from the Maramureş region. In 1955, following the Geneva Accords, some political prisoners were released, while others were relocated to other prisons.[57] Sighet became a common prison. It was eventually closed in 1977, with the building left to deteriorate.

The Civic Alliance Foundation purchased the building in 1993 with donations from a British Romanian émigré. After extensive reconstruction work, based on prisoner memoirs, the museum opened to the public in June 1997.[58] In this first iteration, the museum focused on the prisoners at Sighet, while touching on victims of communism broadly. However, after 2000, the NGO decided to change the exhibit to one which

53 A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten Der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur Und Geschichtspolitik* (München 2011).

54 According to a text written on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Memorial, Memorialul Victimelor Comunismului şi al Rezistenţei, *Jubileul de 20 de ani al Memorialului Sighet – un sumar al evenimentelor*. Available at: https://www.memorialsighet.ro/jubileul-de-20-de-ani-al-memorialului-sighet-un-sumar-al-evenimentelor-2/ (accessed 15 May 2022).

55 Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration?', 80.

56 Mark, 'What Remains?', 283.

57 C.F. Dobre, 'Teaching Communism at the Museum: A Comparative Study of Museums Dedicated to Communism in Eastern and Central Europe', 2013.

58 Mark, 'What Remains?', 282.

examined communism in Romania as a whole. Dating since then, the current exhibit discusses communism in Eastern Europe, from Stalinist terror to forms of resistance such as the Prague Spring, and then discusses Romanian communism chronologically. The central lens focuses on abuses of the regime, ranging from the way in which the communist party seized power through election falsification to repressive measures in prisons, collectivization, and the fate of ethnic minorities, grouped in 87 thematic displays. The museum is solely dedicated to the communist past – it does not acknowledge that the prison has been used as a transportation center for Jews transported to Auschwitz during the Second World War Hungarian rule and German occupation. While later museums that tackle communism do it through highly interactive and media-savvy displays – for instance, the House of Terror in Budapest[59] – the Sighet exhibit remained dominated by text and embedded images, functioning like a textbook spread through the various prison cells. It also embodied its founders' vision for a place where evidence of the system's criminality would be exhibited. In the absence of a state process of dealing with the past, the museum played the role of a replacement tribunal where according to James Mark, 'a cultural trial' of communism could take place.[60]

In 1998, the Council of Europe declared the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance, which includes the Sighet museum as well as the Bucharest-based International Centre for Studies into Communism,[61] as one of the most significant sites of commemoration in Europe. The list, which included Auschwitz and the Peace Memorial in Caen, brought Sighet to the European memorial mainstream. The memorial itself is proudly proclaiming its Europeanness – emphasizing on its website and materials that its origins are linked with the Council of Europe. Moreover, the launch of the small exhibition representing the museum in the country's capital was timed on 9 May 2013, Europe Day.[62] While itself it was influenced by these European 'best practices', it would soon become one, influencing at its turn later takes on political prisons in Europe, including Southeastern Europe. Sighet thus plays an inflexion role in the Europeanization of memory and difficult heritage in Southeastern Europe.

While Sighet reached international renown, it remained a singular case in Romania. The Council of Europe brought the site under its patronage in 1995, while only in 1997 the Romanian state recognized it as a national historical site. By the end of the 2000s, no other former political prison in the country was reclaimed as a site of memory, thus mirroring the wider regional situation.

IV

One such political prison that was not turned into a site of memory in the first two decades after 1989 was the one in Piteşti, otherwise known in Romania for the so-called Piteşti experiment. This program of re-education through torture and psychological

59 Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*; Badescu, 'Entangled Islands of Memory'.
60 Mark, 'What Remains?'.
61 The centre was created in 1993 also by the Civic Alliance Foundation.
62 Jones, 'Memory Competition or Memory Collaboration?', 81.

abuse, called by conservative French historian François Furet 'one of the most terrible experiences of dehumanization that contemporary times have witnessed', became a cause célèbre nationally to highlight the crimes and abuses of the communist regime, yet the site's memorialization occurred decades after 1989 and was largely a private, bottom-up affair.

The Piteşti Prison was built between 1937 and 1941 and was considered at the time a state-of-the-art penitentiary, the most modern detention center in Romania. It comprised 96 rooms which were able to receive 700–800 people. It was used originally for common law prisoners, but in 1942, the Romanian state interned here around 130 fascist students belonging to the Iron Guard movement who took part in the Legionary uprising of 1941. After the communist takeover, the penitentiary became exclusively a political prison, including various factions opposing the communist regime.

After the 1948 decision to separate political prisons according to social categories, Piteşti became reserved for university students.[63] The students who were detained in Piteşti included a variety of political creeds. A large number were arrested for nurturing Iron Guard sympathies – with the initiators of the experiment coming from this group,[64] but others were members of interwar political parties banned by the regime, such as the Peasant National Party and the National Liberal Party, as well as Zionist members of the Romanian Jewish community.[65]

The method used in Piteşti was focused on the transformation of 'victims' into 'perpetrators'. This comprised of a number of steps, which included gaining trust of newcomers in the prison and finding out their beliefs and creeds, followed by 'unmasking' – subjecting the person to violence (e.g. beating), torture, and humiliation (e.g. eating own feces, performing religious rituals that were using the feces and urine), until the person would confess that they repent their whole system of beliefs and show contempt for their family and political creeds. After unmasking came 're-education', which encouraged the embracing of Marxism and, at the same time, becoming an abuser of other fellow prisoners entering the same cycle.[66] It is estimated that around 800 students – all male – underwent this treatment at Piteşti.[67]

Reports show that the secret police approved of this practice until 1952 when the experiment was closed, allegedly as news about it started to leak outside the country. There was a trial in which its initiator, Eugen Ţurcanu, and some of the prison staff were condemned and executed, after which the Piteşti affair became a taboo of the

63 A. Mureşan, *Piteşti: Cronica Unei Sinucideri Asistate* (Bucharest 2007); M. Ciobanu, 'Piteşti: A Project in Reeducation and Its Post-1989 Interpretation in Romania', *Nationalities Papers*, 43, 4 (2015), 615–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.984288.

64 The 'experiment' started at the initiative of the two students interned in the Suceava prison who nurtured Iron Guard sympathies and who believed that they could convince the Communist authorities that they can convert to be ardent communists and also 're-educate' others. The two, Eugen Ţurcanu and Alexandru Bogdanovici, were transferred to Piteşti where the prison authorities approved of the method and started implementing it, with Turcanu as a lead tortionary (Mureşan, *Piteşti)*.

65 A. Cioroianu, *Pe Umerii Lui Marx. O Introducere În Istoria Comunismului Românesc* (Bucureşti 2005), 316–17.

66 Mureşan, *Piteşti*; V. Ierunca, *Pitesti: Laboratoire Concentrationnaire, 1949-1952* (Paris 1996).

67 Mureşan, *Piteşti*.

regime. As for the prison, it returned to be a common penitentiary in 1952 but was closed in 1977 and converted to a state construction company.

In post-socialist Romania, Piteşti prison has become the poster image of political violence conducted by the communist regime in its early years. Émigré's Virgil Ierunca's book in France on Piteşti and the Romanian book on what he called a 'Piteşti phenomenon', along with national TV series 'The Memorial of Pain', helped popularize the experiment among those interested in the crimes of the past regime.[68] Subsequently, 'the Piteşti experiment' has been the subject of documentaries, books, and special subchapters in history textbooks, all highlighting what was described as the dehumanizing nature of the endeavor.[69] As such, Piteşti has been often used as an epitome in the criminalization of communism.[70]

While discussions about the experiment took place in the wider public sphere, the site itself, tucked away behind blocks of flats, did not receive much attention. A memorial was built on the main avenue, about a hundred meters away from the actual prison, in a form replicating a prison wall, which was interpreted by many passersby as the remains of the prison.[71] However, the actual prison building still existed, functioning since 1977 as office space. In 1990, the office space found within the former prison was privatized. The space was divided into three different parts, of which two were completely remodeled. The contemporary site of memory is located only in one of the three parts.

According to the director of the memorial site, Maria Axinte, the memorialization that took place in this private office space happened through a series of 'accidents'.[72] Axinte, the daughter of the local businessman who bought the space, used to come as a high school student to visit the office of her father's firm. As a late teenager, she found a book discussing various acts of political violence within the Romanian communist regime, which mentioned the Piteşti experiment. She then realized that this was in fact taking place somewhere in the space that her father's firm occupied. According to Axinte, this realization had a profound impact on her, and she became determined to transform the place into a site of memory. This led to her enrolling in 2010 in an arts program in London where she was interested in curatorial practice. Moreover, she managed to convince her father to relocate his firm elsewhere, allegedly with the family believing that the site was 'cursed', after experiencing a series of tragedies, including the death of a son. With the firm relocated, Axinte led a process of converting the space into a site of memory starting

68 Ierunca, *Pitesti*; V. Ierunca and F. Furet, *Fenomenul Piteşti* (Bucureşti 1990).

69 Ierunca, *Pitesti*; Ciobanu, 'Piteşti'; Ierunca and Furet, *Fenomenul Piteşti*; Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania*; B. O'Neill, 'Of Camps, Gulags and Extraordinary Renditions: Infrastructural Violence in Romania', *Ethnography*, 13, 4 (2012), 466–86.

70 C. Petrescu and D. Petrescu, 'The Piteşti Syndrome: A Romanian Vergangenheitsbewältigung?', in S. Troebst (ed), *Postdiktatorische Geschichtskulturen im Süden und Osten Europas. Bestandsaufnahme und Forschungsperspektiven* (Göttingen 2010), 502–618; Ciobanu, 'Piteşti'.

71 According to architect Catalina Bulborea, author of the historic study of Pitesti Prison, interviewed in August 2019: 'that monument creates the impression that it would be a piece of the prison wall of the prison. And the world looks, sees, and (…) gives the impression that, this is what remained of the prison, and that, therefore, the prison did not'.

72 Guided tours and interviews with Maria Axinte, April 2017 and December 2018.

in 2011, inviting architects to collaborate to develop a vision of the site, named the Prison Memorial Piteşti.[73] The memorial was opened in 2014.

While the initiative was privately led, several actors were involved in the memorialization of the site. In 2009, the Ministry of Culture listed the part of the building owned by Axinte's family as a 'historical monument', the Romanian state's name for listed buildings of historical or architectural value. A historical study conducted in this process showed that the firm occupied mostly the administrative sections of the prison, as well as the room called '4- Hospital', with most of the former cells to be found in the two other properties, that were not to be included. The architects' work included the minimal transformation of the space by keeping the bare walls, while placing some panels and lighting schemes to explain the historical research. As the wall paint refers to the office period after 1977 and not to the times of the late 1940s, this was not a concern about 'authenticity' but one of enduring decay and peeling walls. Nevertheless, it feeds into an esthetic resembling the Latin American model of bare walls, where preserving unaltered the materiality of walls in order to keep them both 'authentic' for the experience, as also usable for forensic research, has dominated since the 2000s.[74] While not having the same intentionality, it has a similar impact on visitors in Piteşti, who attribute authenticity to the site and describe, according to interviews, affective tropes of the impact of materiality and the presence in the space.[75]

One intervention that completely transformed spatial characteristics was in the space called 'Room 4-Hospital'. Intended as a form of catharsis, the redesign included the addition of an iconostasis and transformation into a chapel. Axinte explained the rationale as most of these people put under the experiment were actually religious, and this would be a way to relieve their suffering by offering a return of the space to religiosity, of creating a sort of catharsis and purification of a place marked by violence and abuse. Nevertheless, other interviews highlighted the connection of this act with the personal tragedy of the family, as the chapel was introduced after the death of the son, allegedly a turn toward religion of the family.[76] More broadly, the use of religious imagery in Piteşti echoes a trope existing since the 1990s in Romania: the 'prison saints'. This framing appeared in books and memoirs that presented the inmates as innocent victims of abuse as well as symbols of religious repression and endurance, their suffering being likened to martyrdom.[77] Moreover, the prison saint imagery was mobilized to rehabilitate the members of the Iron Guard.[78] One work that popularized the image was the book 'The prison saint',

73 Interview and guided visit with Maria Axinte, April 2017.

74 G. Badescu, 'Transnational Place-Making after Political Violence: Agencies and Practices of Site Memorialization in the Latin American Southern Cone', in A. Sierp and J. Wüstenberg (eds), *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics: A Framework for Analyzing Practice* (New York; Oxford 2019), 155–78.

75 Interviews, Maria Axinte, April 2017, December 2018, arch. Constantin Goagea, January 2022.

76 Interviews conducted in May and June 2017 with 12 residents of the neighborhood by a team of MA students at [institution to be inserted after peer review] coordinated by the author; interview, arch. Constantin Goagea, January 2021.

77 M. Ciobanu, 'Criminals, Martyrs or Saints? Romania's Prison Saints Debate Revisited', in *Cultures of History Forum* (2018).

78 I. Biliuță, 'Constructing Fascist Hagiographies: The Genealogy of the Prison Saints Movement in Contemporary Romania', *Contemporary European History*, 31, 3 (2022), 435–55.

from which Axinte ascribes her interest in the victims of communism. In 2011, she gave the name 'Prison saints' to the organization that eventually created the memorial.[79] The book was in fact written about Valeriu Gafencu, a controversial Iron Guard member. Moreover, the creation of the chapel in the prison complex made the memorial a site of pilgrimage for Iron Guard sympathizers today. The attraction of the site of memory for the new far right became a source of contention surrounding Piteşti.[80]

The site of memory became also the setting for more academic and pedagogical encounters. Since 2013, the Piteşti Memorial collaborated with the Bucharest-based Centre of Study of Contemporary History (CSIC) and the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, to organize a summer school which has become an annual event on bringing together students, historians, and memory activists interested in the study of 'communist crimes'. CSIC was founded in 2011 by Alin Mureşan, a historian who conducted in-depth research on the Piteşti experiment.[81] The memorial worked with CSIC and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, associated with Germany's Christian Democrats to organize the summer school, called, tellingly for its framing, 'The Pitesti Phenomenon'.

The memorialization of the Piteşti prison reveals the split between lieux de mémoire (the Piteşti experiment as a climax of regime cruelty) and the memorialization of actual sites and places where things have occurred. The importance of individual agency in the post-communist urban space dominated by new property relations reveals the rather contingent memorialization of this site, where the state was absent in dealing with one of the key tropes of the memory of communist crimes. The international exposure of the key memorial actor and the links she forged abroad – as of 2022, she was a visiting fellow at the Berlin Wall Foundation – also show the bypassing of the national and transnational dimensions of memorialization. Nevertheless, the impact and use by nationally bounded political groups and movements also show how difficult heritage can be politicized from a place of documenting human rights abuses to a place of glorifying the far-right ideologies of some of the detainees.

V

During a 2017 meeting of ICOMOS – the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a professional association of heritage specialists, advising UNESCO on World Heritage sites – a group of Albanian and foreign heritage experts expressed the value of heritage sites connected to a difficult memory like Spaç prison in a context where dealing with the past was otherwise minimal:

79 Fundatia Leaders, (2018) *Maria Axinte, o Tânără de 26 de Ani Spune Poveștile Deținuților Politici*. Available at https://leaders.ro/newsfeed/maria-axinte-o-tanara-de-26-de-ani-spune-povestile-detinutilor-politici/ (accessed 14 May 2023).

80 Ciobanu, 'Piteşti'.

81 Mureşan, *Piteşti*. While employed (until 2020) by the IICCMER, the state Institute for Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Romanian Exile, and was the Director of the institute from 2015 to 2018, he stated that the institute later attempted censorship through administrative coercion. He created CSIC in 2012 as a way to continue parallel research and also obtain funding through European schemes as its own entity. (Centrul de Studii în Istorie Contemporană (CSIC)), *Istoric*. Avaliable at https://istoriecontemporana.ro/despre-noi/istoric/ (accessed 23 January 2023).

> For decades, Albania had not taken the steps that many other transition countries have gone through: opening the secret police files; initiating a truth and reconciliation commission; undertaking a concerted effort to find and identify the bodies of those who had forcibly disappeared; or reinterpreting the art and artefacts of Albanian Communism through a reflexive gaze. Within this context, sites of memory, such as Spaç Prison, have taken on a particularly important role in shaping the discussion over memory and heritage-making for Albania's recent past.[82]

The slow process of dealing with the communist past in Albania has been rooted both in its idiosyncratic situation in communist times and in inspirations and circulations of models from elsewhere. Unlike other countries in CEE, the Stalinist model of the early Albanian communist dictatorship endured for decades, with harsh political repressions against those depicted as enemies of the people and including occasional purges within the Communist party. Albania held an extensive system of 23 political prisons and 48 internment camps. Some, like Spaç, survived well in the 1970s. Isolated and autarkic, having broken successively with the Soviet Union and China, Albania under Enver Hoxha, with a ban on religious practice installed in 1967, a notorious secret service – the Sigurimi – and a very rigid border, was depicted as the harshest dictatorship in postwar Europe, at times alongside Romania.[83] The transition to democracy occurred in the aftermath of the 1989 transformations in CEE, with the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania invoked by several interviewees as a trigger of political change by an anxious elite. The transition was comparatively turbulent, involving a near descent into civil war in 1997.[84]

The emerging scholarship on transitional justice in Albania, as well as Albanian memory activists, has repeatedly described Albania as a country with a very limited engagement with its violent past, also because of the continuities between the old political class and the contemporary one.[85] Research on the communist period is limited to a few historians.[86] Historical education in schools has addressed the communist period in a brief manner, depicted as a period of modernization, without discussing prisons and political persecution.[87] The continuities of power and the legacy of the secret police have

82 J. Eaton et al., 'Heritage-Making and Democratic Ideals in Albania: Spaç Prison as a Site of Dialogue', 2018.

83 R.C. Austin and J. Ellison, 'Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania', *East European Politics and Societies*, 22, 2 (2008): 373–401; A. Elbasani and A. Lipinski, 'Transitional Justice in Albania: Historical Burden, Weak Civil Society, and Conflicting Interests', in O. Simić and Z. Volčič (eds), *Transitional Justice and Civil Society in the Balkans* (New York 2013), 105–21; I. Kalemaj, 'Transitional Justice and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: Romania and Albania', *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 12, 1 (2021), 81–103.

84 I. Jusufi, 'Albania's Transformation since 1997: Successes and Failures', *Croatian International Relations Review* 23, 77 (2017).

85 Austin and Ellison, 'Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania'; Elbasani and Lipinski, 'Transitional Justice in Albania'; Kalemaj, 'Transitional Justice and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe'; Memory Lab 2019, as well as interviews.

86 Enriketa Pandelejmoni, 'Dealing with the Communist Past in Albania' (Unbunkering the past: How is Albania dealing with its (communist) history, Tirana, 2019).

87 Jonila Godole, 'Roundtable: Dealing with the Communist Past in Albania: The Role of State Actors, Civil Society and the International Community' (Unbunkering the past: How is Albania dealing with its (communist) history, Tirana, 2019); Florenca Stafa Halili, 'Teaching about 1989 in Albania' (Seminar for history educators 'Reshaping the Image of Democratic Revolutions 1989', Thessaloniki, Greece, 2021).

been described as main reasons for such feeble engagement. According to civil society representatives, there is a perception in Albania that if all secret police files would be opened, the country would explode into another civil war.[88] After decades of non-engagement, however, the Albanian state opened in the 2010s a series of institutions that deal with research and memorialization of the period. Romania came again as a main reference. The new Albanian institutions replicated the Romanian ones, for instance, in dealing with secret police archives, Albanian authority for Information on the former State Security documents (established by law 45/2015), as well as the creation of the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences.[89] This inspiration has to do with the perceived similarity between Albanian and Romanian communism[90] but also personal trajectories. For instance, Etleva Demollari, the current director of Tirana's recent Museum of Secret Surveillance, also known as the House of Leaves, lived in Bucharest for several years and highlights the Romanian examples of dealing with the past.[91]

In contrast to the initiatives in Romania since the 1990s, the difficult heritage of political violence in Albania was less central in processes of dealing with the past in the first two decades after the fall of the regime. The opening in 2017 of the state-funded Museum of Secret Surveillance, in the former headquarters of the Sigurimi in the very center of Tirana, and led by Demollari, was a first act of such memorialization. Its creation was a result of Prime Minister Edi Rama's state visit to Berlin in November 2014. After his return, Rama stated the need to create a type of memorial space to echo German sites of memory such as the Stasi Museum and Checkpoint Charlie, which he visited.[92] While foreign embassies had made it a common point to ask the Albanian state to implement dealing with the past measures, this decision was also connected to Rama's aspiration to make Tirana the 'communist capital of Europe', capitalizing on the collective housing stock and the bunkers and promoting it for tourist money. Communism in the Albanian version was thus used as an experience to bring out tourists fascinated by the country's closed regime idiosyncrasies rather than as an object of dealing with the past. The choice of the Sigurimi headquarters catered to this. Like the House of Terror in Budapest, the House of Leaves both temporarily hosted Gestapo during the Second World War and then was the Central Directorate of the Secret Service from 1944 to 1991. The museum exhibit focuses on the methods of surveillance used by Sigurimi and their impact on everyday life. The House of Leaves received the 2020 European Museum of the Year Award from the Council of Europe. Despite its success also as a new tourist magnet,[93] the choice of a museum of surveillance

88 Claudia Vollmer, 'Roundtable: Dealing with the Communist Past in Albania: The Role of State Actors, Civil Society and the International Community' (Unbunkering the past: How is Albania dealing with its (communist) history, Tirana, 2019).
89 Personal communication, Enriketa Pandelejmoni, Etleva Demollari.
90 Pandelejmoni, 'Dealing with the Communist Past in Albania'.
91 Interview Etleva Demollari, 2019.
92 https://www.oranews.tv/berlin-rama-edhe-ne-nje-muze-per-tragjedine-e-komunizmit-si-checkpoint-charlie
93 Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA), (2019) 'House of Leaves', a Magnet for Foreign Tourists in the Capital. Available at: http://en.ata.gov.al/2019/07/27/house-of-leaves-a-magnet-for-foreign-tourists-in-the-capital-albania-a-fascinating-city/ (accessed 14 May 2023).

methods as a first state-sponsored memorial space was, however, criticized by interviewed heritage and memory activists as focusing just on perpetrators. At the opening of the museum in 2017, heritage activist Mirian Bllaci asked Edi Rama what the perspectives of sites dedicated to victims of this violence were. Indeed, outside of Tirana, the condition of the several former prisons and internment camps, most closed by 1990, has been deteriorating. Many have been facing rapid degradation and destruction.

Only Spaç was listed for protection as a monument (second category) in November 2007. Spaç, known as 'Re-Education Unit 303', was established in 1968, when most countries in the Soviet Block, as well as Yugoslavia, had dismantled their earlier political prisons and camps. It functioned as a combined prison and labor camp in the pyrite and copper mines of the Northern Albanian mountains. It was closed in 1990, after which it was left abandoned, and went through gradual ruination. Political prisons in Albania were either abandoned and ruined or remained in use. Some, like Burrel, were closed in the early 1990s – when there was a plan to memorialize it – but then put again to use in the latter 1990s. Spaç, while abandoned, still had its buildings in a better state than others by the mid-2000s. The area continued to see lucrative mining business, with TETE Albania & Mining operating the second largest copper mine in Albania close to the prison and interested in acquiring also the Spaç site itself. In September 2007, the site had been the object of a concession plan to the mining company by the government. This is the context of its listing as a protected monument, connected to the political context. At the time, former political prisoners were asking for financial compensation for their treatment. The lack of reparations led to violent protests of former political prisoners, including the self-immolation of one. The government, through the Ministry of Culture, saw the listing of Spaç as a gesture of symbolic reparation and appeasement. The reaction of the Ministry of Culture thus emerged also as a show of the government's interest to commemorate the difficult past, stepping back from the possibly lucrative concession scenario, therefore with the aim to placate the protesters and the civil society.

Once the site was listed, the Ministry of Culture was supposed to also plan its management and the creation of a museum. Nevertheless, the site did not see any state funds and continued to fall into disrepair. One reason was the lack of clear jurisprudence over the area connected to ownership. While public property, the ownership was split between state institutions. The buildings have been owned by a state company created in 1992 to manage the liquidation and privatization of mining in Albania. The terrain is public, yet there was no clarity on which public institution administers it. In contrast with the House of Leaves, which was passed from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Culture, Spaç remained in a limbo – with the state actors not advancing the plans for its memorialization. A civil society actor, Cultural Heritage without Borders Albania (CHwB Albania), stepped in and took the initiative here.

In 2014, the Tirana-based NGO initiated a program called Dialogues for Spaç, bringing a variety of stakeholders together to develop a vision for the site. CHwB Albania is an independent offshoot of the Swedish Cultural Heritage without Borders.[94] According to

94 Swedish CHwB was founded in 1995 with the motto 'We restore and build relations' and a mission 'to promote cultural heritage as both a right in itself and a resource'.

its Albanian vice-executive director, CHwB works not only with heritage matters but also with building community.[95] He described building trust between sectors of the society as the most important challenge of post-dictatorship memory-making processes. Thus, difficult heritage becomes according to him a way to engage stakeholders and create dialog and negotiation. The main motivation for CHwB was thus to use heritage not only as a way to preserve memory but as a trigger of a democratic process. 'Breaking the culture of silence' of communist Albania was seen as a key goal of this process. Dialogs for Spaç consisted of a series of workshops with stakeholders, including former prison inmates, central and local institutions responsible for the site, lecturers, students, journalists, and artists. The program was funded by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Government of Sweden, illustrating the influence in the broader region of Scandinavian organizations, with Norwegian funds in EU member states and Swedish in other Balkan countries in particular being instrumental.[96]

Yet, dialog was not enough when the building was collapsing. In 2017, the NGO secured funds for emergency structural interventions to prevent further collapse. As such, the NGO stepped in to provide what the state did not, echoing situations from the broader region. With the general withdrawal of the state from public services, NGOs have become usual venues for delivering societal services in Southeastern European contexts while reduced to particular locales and beneficiary groups. The absence of the state in this case of dealing with the difficult heritage of dictatorship can be thus seen either as an echo of these general patterns or as a deliberate attempt to avoid involvement in contested memory issues.[97]

The shaping of Spaç as a site of memory – as opposed to a museum with exhibits – relied on the placement of explanatory panels and particularly on the guided tours conducted by former prison inmates. The tours and visits of Spaç occurred before 2020 for interested parties, including to some extent also local schools. Nevertheless, the general interest in such memory tours was limited – as memory practitioners in Albania have argued, the sites of former political prisons remained marginal by virtue of their isolation. In its 2018 incarnation, the site had multiple signaling through panels outlining its history for the occasional visitors who made the trek to these mountains. However, organized tours with time witnesses were a key of the experience in Spaç in the pre-pandemic time. The witnesses focused on their daily experiences in what they described as the last Gulag in Europe.[98] In the setup of the panels, as well as the tours led by NGO volunteers, there is another element that plays an additional, central role: the revolt that took place on 21–23 May 1973, promoted as a key element of Albanian collective memory. Prisoners managed to take control of the camp for 3 days, but the revolt was eventually suppressed, and its leaders were executed. Both the explicative panels on site and the memory tour content

95 Interview Mirian Bllaci, September 2018.

96 NGO workers in Croatia and Romania, both EU member states, have decried the lack of domestic funding available to them in those countries after they joined the EU and the reliance on such non-EU schemes like the Norwegian funds.

97 I did not have access to the view from the state authorities on the lack of involvement in the memorialization of Spaç prison.

98 Visit with time witness Zenel Drangu, September 2019.

emphasize it being a first instance of people proclaiming their aspiration for Europe.[99] The revolt is thus seen as prescient, a call for a united Europe from the heart of a dictatorship, thus sustaining the narrative of Albanian aspirations for membership in the European Union. Memorializing the prison thus becomes not only a case of dealing with the past but also claiming a future.

As a result of the yearlong consultation of stakeholders, in 2018, CHwB Albania developed a first comprehensive memorialization concept for Spaç. According to this document, 'this dialog and human rights-based approach recognizes that the conservation, interpretation and adaptive reuse of a site are all reliant on how the site becomes "heritage"'.[100] In November 2019, a 6.4 earthquake in Albania changed the priorities in the country. Numerous projects on reconstruction and resilience took precedence, and Spaç was put on hold. Simultaneously, funding from embassies, traditionally an important source for heritage projects, was also redirected to earthquake relief. However, in July 2023, CHwB Albania started the process of drafting a management plan for the prison.[101] In any case, in contrast to the state-funded House of Leaves, the memorialization of Spaç is a result of the engagement and advocacy of actors from civil society.

VI

Goli Otok is an island off the Adriatic coast in Croatia that was the site of a camp opened on 7 July 1949 after the expulsion of Yugoslavia from Cominform, referred in the historiography of Yugoslavia as the Tito-Stalin split.[102] One main goal of the camp was to reeducate the communists deemed of being Stalinist and, once they were rehabilitated, to return them to society.[103] While in the first months of the camp, a verbal renunciation of Stalin was enough to be set free; after the conflict with the Soviets escalated, the secret police introduced sustained violence as a basis for 'political re-education'.[104] In order to be set free, prisoners had to denounce and use violence against other inmates, similarly to Piteşti.[105] Those who did not do so were subjected to torture.[106] When they were

99 The panel makes the claim that prison inmates 'called anticommunist slogans from the terrace, cheered in favor of western democracy and for the first time in history, they voiced the dream for Albania in the EU'. As in 1973, there was no EU, and the European Communities at the time had just accepted the UK, Ireland, and Denmark; the claim seems erroneous. It may indicate a call for a 'return to Europe' though, which existed among the opposition in the socialist countries.

100 J. Eaton et al., 'Heritage-Making and Democratic Ideals in Albania: Spaç Prison as a Site of Dialogue', 2018.

101 Mirian Bllaci, personal communication, September 2023.

102 Goli Otok means literally 'naked island', due to the lack of vegetation on the island, which is windswept during the winter and parched in the summer, thus a comparatively harsh environment. It was dedicated to men, while nearby Sveti Grgur had a similar function for women.

103 M. Previšić, 'The Goli Otok Camp: Torture Justified by External Threats?' in L. Olson and S. Molloy (eds), *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Torture* (Leiden; Boston 2019), 115–28.

104 N.M. Naimark, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA; London 2019), 85; M. Previšić, *Povijest Golog otoka* (Zaprešić 2019), 472–77.

105 A. Antić, 'The Pedagogy of Workers' Self-Management: Terror, Therapy, and Reform Communism in Yugoslavia after the Tito-Stalin Split', *Journal of Social History*, 50, 1 (2016), 179–203.

106 M. Previšić, 'Researching the Goli Otok Camp', in *Researching Yugoslavia and Its Aftermath* (Cham 2021), 23–46.

considered redeemed, they had to sign a document that they would stay silent with what happened in the camp and were then released. While similar to Piteşti in the goals of political re-education, the use of denunciation and torture, the key difference was the initial political convictions of the prisoners. In Piteşti, they were students who were seen as opponents of the regime, with a high concentration of Iron Guard supporters; however, in Goli Otok, the subjects of re-education were communists who were accused of being traitors of the official line. As in the case of Spaç, prisoners were seen as a peril for the country, for which they needed to be detained and, in this case, reeducated.

After Yugoslavia normalized its relationship with the Soviet Union in 1956, the camp was closed, and the island became a youth detention center, which finally was closed in 1988. Throughout its existence, according to Martin Previšić, 16,000 people had been detained on Goli Otok.[107] Until the 1980s, Goli Otok remained a taboo, but after Tito's death, the final decade of Yugoslav socialism witnessed the emergence in the public sphere of a series of novels and accounts, as well as historians' work, which brought it to the forefront of the critique of communism as a sort of dark, original sin.[108]

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Goli Otok remained rather marginal, for a number of reasons related to the specificity of the post-Yugoslav memory politics context. First, the 1990s were tumultuous on their own, with the wars associated with the Yugoslav dissolution.[109] Second, the new states often focused their memory endeavors in the commemoration of these recent wars, alongside rehabilitation of Second World War figures that were criminalized during communism. Through the prism of the recent wars and the emphasis on the recuperation of memories that were silenced during communism, the Second World War came back to attention particularly in connection to ethnicized crimes of various groups – against Serbs by the Croatian far-right Ustasha, against Serb Chetniks or Croatian Ustasha by the communist partisans.[110] In the case of Croatia, the right-wing party and supporters focused on the Bleiburg massacre of civilians and soldiers killed by the Partisans and portrayed as a 'Holocaust of Croatian martyrs'.[111]

107 M. Previšić, 'Broj Kažnjenika Na Golom Otoku i Drugim Logorima Za Informbirovce u Vrijeme Sukoba Sa SSSR-Om (1948.-1956.)', *Historijski Zbornik*, 66, 1 (2013), 192.

108 For an examination of the historiography of Goli Otok, and particularly the 1980s, see Previšić, 'Researching the Goli Otok Camp', 26–30.

109 The Yugoslav dissolution involved a short war in Slovenia and longer wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as sanctions and NATO bombing in the rump Yugoslavia (Serbia with Kosovo and Montenegro).

110 J. Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia: Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution* (Abingdon 2019); V. Pavlaković and D. Pauković, *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities: Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia* (London 2019).

111 After Germany's surrender in May 1945, the forces of the Independent State of Croatia, led by the Ustasha – Croatian fascists – sought to surrender to the British at Bleiburg, Austria, to avoid the Yugoslav partisans. However, they were handed over to the partisans, leading to their extradition and subsequent killing of approximately 70,000 out of 200,000 soldiers. Among them, around 50,000 were likely ethnic Croats. See D. B. MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts?: Serbian and Croatian Victim Centered Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester 2002); P. Kolstø, 'Bleiburg: The Creation of a National Martyrology', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62, 7 (2010), 1153–74.

Another reason was that the memory activists working in the former Yugoslavia worked primarily with the 1990s and the challenges for reconciliation, and then on the Second World War, thus not engaging with the communist period. In fact, the investigation and memorialization of communist crimes in the 1990s and 2000s became almost exclusively a pursuit of right-wing groups, which sought to sustain their description of Yugoslav communism as totalitarian and violent.[112] Nevertheless, as the victims of violence on Goli Otok were communists themselves, for the right wing, the site was not a place of mourning and a victim-centered memory, but one example of regime cruelty that did not need to be memorialized for its victims. For the left, Goli Otok was also a rather uncomfortable memory, as it contradicted the image of a benevolent regime as opposed to the cruelty of nationalist crimes of the Second World War and the 1990s.

Finally, the nation-building processes occurring in the successor states were at odds with the transnational, Yugoslav nature of Goli Otok, where members of all nationalities of socialist Yugoslavia were represented. As each successor state dealt with a nationalized version of history and memory, Goli Otok as a Yugoslav experience, while as a site found firmly in Croatia, was not an object of memorialization in the republics, despite the existence of victims' organizations in other republics, such as Serbia.[113] One notable exception was the proposed permanent exhibit on the history of Yugoslavia at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, where the exhibition, largely emerging from a collaboration of historians from Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, included ample space on Goli Otok in its treatment of Yugoslavia's early communist years.

The memorialization of Goli Otok, consequently, was reduced in an initial phase to a series of local actors in Croatia. Despite its occasional use in the 1990s and 2000s to illustrate a negative image of Tito's Yugoslavia, Goli Otok as a site itself did not become a memorial. After 1992, the island was left abandoned and was used by shepherds from nearby islands for sheep and goat grazing. Interlocutors in Croatia reported how the site, at every visit, showed evidence of looting and deterioration. In the early 1990s, an entrepreneur opened a restaurant called 'Pržun' (prison, in the local dialect), with visitors brought by boat and having the opportunity to take photos in prison outfits. In the public debates, only a few actors mobilized the discussion for the memorialization of the site. The Association of Goli Otok survivors 'Ante Zemljar' argued for the construction of a memorial park which would harbor educational activities. In the nearby city of Rijeka, a group centered around cultural activist Damir Čargonja Čarli advocated the transformation of the island into an international School for Peace and Art. The idea was supported by Croatian president Stjepan Mesić but never realized. Even closer to the island, the municipalities of Rab and Lopar disputed who should administer it and presented plans based on tourism and lamb grazing for the area's celebrated mutton. In 2014, the State Property Management Office of Croatia (DUUDI) announced that it

112 J. Subotić, 'The Mythologizing of Communist Violence', in L. Stan and N. Nedelsky (eds), *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience* (Cambridge 2015), 188–210.

113 See for instance J. Đureinović, 'To Each Their Own: Politics of Memory, Narratives about Victims of Communism and Perspectives on Bleiburg in Contemporary Serbia', *Politička Misao*, 55, 2 (2018), 89–110.

planned to open the Goli Otok island for lucrative renting or selling.[114] The scenario that DUUDI would turn the island into a luxury tourist destination prompted the Ante Zemljar association and Documenta, a leading NGO specialized in dealing with the past in Croatia, to protest against the commercialization and ask for the memorialization of the site.

With the involvement of Documenta, the rather local debate surrounding the memorialization of Goli Otok entered a second phase, corresponding to the Europeanization of memory in the former Yugoslavia.[115] As an organization, Documenta itself mirrors this process, as particularly after Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, it relied more on EU funding, which reflected an emphasis on the dual authoritarianism memory model advocated by CEE countries. Documenta was previously focused on the crimes of the 1990s, highlighting crimes against the Serbian minority by Croat forces – thus a voice of difference in a Croatian memory landscape focused on the trope of Serbian aggression and a double narrative of Croat victimhood and heroism.[116] Documenta's turn to Goli Otok is connected to two transnational trends: the Europeanization of memory (and memorialization funding) in the post-Yugoslav space and the local agency of its director and staff.[117]

In Croatia, previous work on the Europeanization of memory shows its failure at the state level, inadvertently fueling the rise of nationalist sentiments and using the anti-totalitarianism memory regime to erase the history of socialist Yugoslavia.[118] Nevertheless, in terms of sites, the discussion in civil society evoked European expectations. The Europeanization of memory involves the process of creating both sites of memory of the Holocaust (the 'first' European memory trope), as well as for communist crimes (thus mirroring the other former communist countries that accessed the European Union). For both, the memorialization of sites was circumscribed to local memory debates, highlighting local victimhood.[119] Bleiburg has been seen in the Croatian public sphere as a possible memory site. Nevertheless, it has been highly contested, from the nature of victims to its geography – it lies outside of Croatia, in Austria – to its contemporary memorialization tarnished by associations with far-right groups, which made it unsuitable, despite mixed engagements at the governmental level on

114 S. Lukić, *Država Prodaje Goli Otok. Novi vlasnici gradit će veliki turistički kompleks* (2014). Available at: http://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/drzava-prodaje-goli-otok-novi-vlasnici-gradit-ce-veliki-turisticki-kompleks/683317/ (accessed 20 July 2017).

115 Milosević and Trost, *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans*, 2020.

116 Pavlaković and Pauković, *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities*.

117 Interviews Dea Marić, July 2017, Vesna Teršelič, February 2018.

118 See A. Zaremba, 'Constructing a Usable Past: Changing Memory Politics in Jasenovac Memorial Museum', in A. Milošević and T. Trošt (eds), *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans* (Cham 2021), 97–120, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54700-4_5; Pavlaković and Pauković, *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities*; T. McConnell, 'Erasing Yugoslavia, Ignoring Europe: The Perils of the Europeanisation Process in Contemporary Croatian Memory Politics', in A. Milošević and T. Trošt (eds), *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans* (Cham 2021), 49–73, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54700-4_3; L. Radonic, 'Slovak and Croatian Invocation of Europe: The Museum of the Slovak National Uprising and the Jasenovac Memorial Museum', *Nationalities Papers,* 42, 3 (2014), 489–507.

119 Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star*; Milosević and Trost, *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans*.

Bleiburg as a place of commemoration.[120] Goli Otok could then serve the role of such a place. However, it was not the state that initiated or even supported its memorialization.

Documenta's involvement was connected to the commitment of team members individually and as a team to the cause of victims of political violence and particularly those who were silenced by structures of power in post-1990s nation-building Croatia. The staff interviewed evoked a commitment to human rights and memory as repair. The director of Documenta, moreover, invoked her 1990s trip to Latin America, after a burnout from peace activism, as an inspiration for dealing with sites of memory of authoritarianism.

Yet, Documenta's projects on Goli Otok began only later, after a decade of focusing on the 1990s wars. The timing was also connected with the availability of funding through European schemes and transnational collaborations. After Croatia's joining the EU in 2013, Documenta led a number of transnational projects bringing together organizations from several former Yugoslav states as well as Western Europe. To give just one example, the 2016 International Volunteer Camp 'Landscape of Memories' on both the island Rab and Goli Otok was organized by a consortium including Documenta and other groups focusing on memory and human rights from ex-Yugoslav republics,[121] as well as Italy (as Rab was the site of a fascist concentration camp).[122] As such, the camps and prisons of both fascism and communism were brought together in the same program, echoing other EU-sponsored projects, notably through the Europe for Citizens scheme.[123]

Despite the continuous projects and appeals of Documenta and Ante Zemljar to have the Croatian government intervene and fund a recuperation of the rapidly deteriorating ruins, as of 2022, there was no actual state program for the site. In a symbolic gesture, on the EU-sanctioned Day of Remembrance for Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes on 23 August 2022, Documenta made another call for the government to intervene and implement a conservation project to stop the accelerated degradation of the prison buildings. On this occasion, they presented a virtual guide and educational materials connected to Goli Otok. Their collaborators in the project were the Zagreb and Sarajevo offices of the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) foundation for social democracy. The director of the Zagreb office, Sonja Schirmbeck, declared on the occasion that Goli Otok was important for both Croatia and Europe. First, dealing with Goli Otok means confronting a difficult past that is more ambivalent than the 1940s and 1990s. Second, Goli Otok has a European dimension, as the European left

120 Kolstø, 'Bleiburg'; A. Ljubojević, 'Contested Narratives of Bleiburg in the Context of WW II Remembrance in Croatia', in J. Jensen (ed), *Memory Politics and Populism in Southeastern Europe* (London 2021), 110–26; V. Pavlaković, D. Brentin, and D. Pauković, 'The Controversial Commemoration: Transnational Approaches to Remembering Bleiburg', *Politička Misao: Časopis Za Politologiju*, 55, 2 (2018), 7–32; L. Radonić, 'Commemorating Bleiburg–Croatia's Struggle with Historical Revisionism', in *Cultures of History Forum*, (2019).

121 Center for Cultural Decontamination Belgrade, Centre for Civic Education Podgorica, Peace Action Prilep, Associazione Quarantasettezeroquattro Gorizia, Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor, Volunteers' Centre Zagreb, Association Goli otok 'Ante Zemljar'.

122 See J. Dalston, 'History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps', *The Historical Journal*, 40, 1 (1997), 169–83.

123 Interview Dea Marić, July 2017.

needs to also critically deal with the crimes of past communist politics.[124] As such, it was not only that Europeanization of memory politics created the expectation to make a site of memory on Goli Otok, but also Goli Otok, as the other sites mentioned, has a potential to reshape European memory.

VII

Four processes come to light. First, dealing with the difficult heritage of political prisons in Southeastern Europe included mostly attempts by non-state actors and mostly in the last decade. In the 1990s, the Sighet Memorial developed as one of the first such sites of memory in the broader CEE region, and its memorialization had much to do with the inspiration of the Holocaust commemorative sites. After two decades of stagnation of memorialization efforts, with occasional plans confined to the local, the 2010s witnessed the emergence of non-state initiatives to memorialize such sites, by local NGOs and victims groups, often enmeshed in international collaborations and funding. Since Romania's joining the EU in 2007 and Croatia's in 2013, this has also been related to the Europeanization of memory and the availability of EU funding. The new European memory model was actually connected to the influence of CEE countries, including Romanian memory actors, to create a European politics of memory that acknowledges the communist dictatorships as a new pillar. Albania's rather mimetic response came from the initiative of a few actors, state and non-state, which did not have the same resources, yet Tirana is the only capital city of the three that has such a memorial space.

Until the 2010s, the lack of critical engagement with this difficult heritage, while broadly common to all three countries, was connected to the specific context of each: the awkward role of Goli Otok for both the right and the left in Croatia: the continuities with the communist past in the political structures and actors in Romania and Albania. The difficult heritage of prisons was used by actors for political goals: either for a dealing with the past in the absence of state initiatives and promoting anti-communist politics, like the Civic Alliance in Romania, to contribute to democratization, as stated by the Cultural Heritage without borders in Albania, but also by far-right politics, such as Piteşti in Romania.

Second, the article showed how entanglements of actors and traveling concepts generated transformations in dealing with the past. Some were intentional: Blandiana's travels in Europe to understand the memorialization of the Holocaust were made in order to shape sites of the memory of communism. Others were contingent, from the 1990s travels of Croatian Documenta's director to Latin America, Albania's PM's impressions from Berlin, and the years spent by the director of the Albanian House of Leaves in Romania, all spearheading particular approaches on the past. Interestingly, while Romania was lauded as an inspiration in its restorative justice programs in Albania, the House of Leaves does not have a match in the Romanian capital itself, where sites of

124 Hina, *Documenta: Goli Otok Se Mora Zaštititi, Zgrade Propadaju* (2022). Available at: https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/documenta-goli-otok-se-mora-zastititi-zgrade-propadaju/2389314.aspx (accessed 14 May 2023).

memory of communists from a criminalization perspective are missing – with the exception of the small Sighet in Bucharest exhibit.

Third, the connection between memorialization of sites in Southeastern Europe and the process of Europeanization of memory are doubly mutually constitutive. Initially, the memorialization of Sighet in 1990s Romania was inspired by Western European Holocaust memorialization and later contributed to the creation of a new set of best practices regarding the remembrance of communism. Secondly, a surge of fresh memorial initiatives in Southeastern Europe after 2010 became intertwined with the Europeanization of a memory model which CEE actors, including Sighet, helped reshape. Europeanization occurred through an embracement of the expectation to memorialize such sites, which came from memory entrepreneurs such as NGOs and intellectuals. Moreover, the dual model of authoritarianism sanctioned by the EU after the lobby of CEU countries had an impact on Croatian actors like Documenta, turning to sites like Goli Otok, while originally dealing with the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Funding from the EU, Norway, and other actors such as foreign political foundations, also contributed to the development of sites of memory associated with difficult heritage.

Fourth, the specificity of the post-socialist context is also visible in relation to the theme of privatization. In Croatia, with a tourist-dependent economy, the scenarios for Goli Otok often invoked tourism rather than memorialization. Memorialization efforts in both Goli Otok and Spaç were connected to reacting to privatization rumors. However, in Romania, Piteşti was memorialized while privatized by the new owners.

Through this analysis, heritage-making and memorialization of sites emerge as an interplay of local, national, regional, and international actors. The tortuous memorialization of difficult heritage in Southeastern Europe showed not only the importance of local actors but also the entanglements of trajectories and the transnational dimension of such acts. Southeastern Europe also shows the friction between outside expectations to commemorate and memorialize and the idiosyncrasies of the national and local scales. However, as the German representative of FES stated in Zagreb, such sites also challenge the European memories as they are. Rather than reflecting a European memory, they reveal the plural, rather than unitary, nature of memories.

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