

Karin Hofmeisterová, “The Serbian Orthodox Church’s Engagement in Memory Politics of Post-2000 Serbia: Memory of Suffering and Resistance” (Ph.D. diss., Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic) September 2022

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Content and aim of the dissertation

The candidate, Karin Hofmeisterová, has written a very ambitious and sophisticated dissertation examining the memory politics of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in post-2000 Serbia. She establishes the SPC as one of the many memory actors active in Serbia, where it competes with both political structures as well as organizations and individuals from the non-governmental sector. While recognizing the SPC’s role in identity construction of Serbs very broadly in the historic sense, this dissertation focuses on mnemonic engagement with the Second World War, an event that provides both narratives of victimization as well as heroic resistance. Whereas these narratives were generated by the political establishment and ideological organizations such as Partisan veteran groups prior to the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, Hofmeisterová argues that the SPC became increasingly active in constructing the WW2 narratives, particularly after Slobodan Milošević’s fall from power in 2000. By analyzing the socio-political trends in Serbia over the past two decades, she notes there has been a convergence between the SPC and the Serbian political elites, providing the Church a more visible role in commemorative practices and other memory work, but also limiting its autonomy due to the dominant position of Aleksandar Vučić’s SNS party. Drawing on a broad range of memory studies literature and a historical overview of the SPC, Hofmeisterová successfully situates the SPC and individuals in the Church within the multidimensional Serbian memoryscape in order to deconstruct its role in contemporary memory debates in Serbia and the broader region.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, along with an Introduction and conclusion. The Introduction is quite detailed, and provides an excellent overview of the dissertation’s goals, methodology, and key findings. This was perhaps one of the best sections due to its conciseness, clarity, and amount of information. Chapter 1 functioned as both a historical background of Serbia and the SPC as well as religion more broadly. This was also a pleasure to read and displayed the candidate’s in-depth knowledge of the subject material. She also effectively combined a chronological narrative with many theories, drawn from such diverse disciplines as history, the sociology of religion, and memory studies. Chapter 2 applied the concepts introduced in the previous chapter and applied it to the SPC, reflecting on the Church as a mnemonic actor and elaborating the concept of frames. Chapters 3 and 4 showcase the bulk of her empirical research, analyzing the SPC’s memory engagement with the Second World War through the frames of both Serbian victimhood and heroism, respectively. She relies on numerous sources in supporting her arguments, including (digital) documents, media representations, interviews, and field notes from participatory observation at sites associated with the topic. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes her arguments and offers some final reflections on memory politics in contemporary Serbia.

Theory and Methodology

Hofmeisterová's methodology is based on a "multi-sited ethnography with reconstructive and context-generating contemporary history," as well as elements of the sociology of religion as well as memory and religious studies. This is well-suited for the subject of the dissertation, and she showcases her knowledge of the various disciplines in the first half of the work. She approaches the SPC as a collectivist religion, which often functions as a creator of collective identity and not simply as a spiritual guide. The Serbian memoryscape is analyzed through post-socialist, post-conflict, and post-secular lenses, with a focus on several key sites of memory associated with the Second World War (Jasenovac, Staro Sajmište, Jajinci, Ravna Gora, and others) in the region. The literature review is generally very impressive, and while she refers to fundamental memory studies scholarship (Halbwachs, Bodnar, Gillis, J. Assmann, Olick, A. Assmann, and others) and recent Serbian texts on memory politics (Đureinović, Milošević, Subotić, Majnolović Pintar, Pisarri, etc.), I think there is a lack of sources dealing with the neighboring countries (Croatia and BiH) where the SPC has been very active (see comments in **Critical Essay** below).

Hofmeisterová applies the concepts of "frames and features" in order to critically evaluate the SPC's mnemonic work related to the Second World War, and her two empirical chapters are each divided into sections that deal with liturgical remembrance, beyond liturgical remembrance and ethnographic examples of these mnemonic practices. The structure of the dissertation effectively presents the candidate's arguments and is consistent throughout the entire work. Hofmeisterová demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the relevant theories that were then used as a lens to successfully analyze the particularities of one of Serbia's most important mnemonic actors, which she rightfully perceives as a "mnemonic warrior" in the typology identified by Bernhard and Kubik.

Hofmeisterová notes that there were several key challenges during her research, including the complex nature of the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as gaining access to interlocutors, especially as a woman and a foreigner. Although this impacted her ability to draw upon more interviews, she was able to access many other sources that enabled her to complete the research and present a realistic picture of the SPC's mnemonic practices.

Formal, linguistic and factual processing

The dissertation's formal attributes are exemplary, from the structure and format to the language. Hofmeisterová writes in a very clear and direct manner while remaining sophisticated and academically precise. Overall, the dissertation was a pleasure to read. The citations, factual validity and other logistical details fulfil all of the requirements, and there are no errors or typos that I noticed beyond a misspelling of social sciences (p. 56, fn 23: typo for social science, written SPCial).

Evaluator's comments / critical essay

As mentioned in previous sections, I believe this is an excellent dissertation on a relevant and important subject and can be seen as a valuable contribution both to the literature on

collective memory in Southeastern Europe as well as a study of the SPC's role in Serbian society. Hofmeisterová offers an impressive synthesis of religious history, reflections on the public sphere and late modernism, and the complex interplay of mnemonic actors in creating historical narratives, identity politics, and international relations in a country such as Serbia. Moreover, she engages extensively with the role of Churches in modern and post-modern times, as well as specifically focusing on the details of the SPC and its history. I have tried to emphasize many of the strong points of the dissertation in the previous comments and can only summarize that is this an excellent dissertation and will no doubt be successfully defended by the candidate. There are, however, some weaknesses which probably won't be able to be fixed prior to the defense but will certainly be necessary if the dissertation will be published as a book. The first issue is my sense that the first half of the study relies heavily on secondary sources and broad descriptions of the background (which of course is to be expected to some degree), but there is a lack of integration of the empirical material that is essentially restricted to Chapters 3 and 4. Perhaps this is just my preference, but it felt as if the actual focus of the dissertation, specifically the sites of memory where the SPC was most active, are not really introduced until the later chapters. For example, it is only on p. 156 that it is noted that the Jasenovac concentration camp is located in Croatia, a country with its own complex memory politics. Perhaps short "bios" of each of the key sites of memory (Jasenovac, Ravna Gora, Staro Sajmište) with just brief overviews of the important controversies could be introduced earlier, already incorporating some of the primary source material, and then discussed in detail later within the methodology the candidate uses.

A second, and perhaps more problematic, weakness is a gap in sources related to memory politics in neighbouring countries, such as BiH but really Croatia. It is of course understandable that this dissertation is about Serbia, but when the sites of memory are taken into account, this work includes places such as Jasenovac and Jadovno as well as events such as Operation Storm, all of which are related to and located in Croatia. The candidate notes that she is focusing on "autocephalous vision of ecclesiastic territoriality, which transcends contemporary political borders", but if the political landscape of Serbia is so extensively described (the role of Vučić and the SNS as well as other political actors are detailed throughout the dissertation) it seems that to overlook all of the mnemonic actors dealing with Jasenovac and other sites of Serbian suffering in Croatia is major gap in the research. Jasenovac has been the subject of political debates on the highest level, the various religious communities in Croatia have had numerous discussions about commemorative practices, there are many NGOs active in mnemonic activism, the media regularly covers it, and the Jasenovac Memorial Park is an important actor that has to negotiate between all of them including of course the SPC. Again, the candidate was focusing on Serbia, and the amount of material was already extensive, but I would have expected some mention of key Croatian actors that constantly interact or respond to the SPC and Serbian politics, at least in terms of secondary sources. Moreover, the project *Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia (2014-2018)* applied the concept of framing to commemorative events in Croatia, featuring both a website and edited volume in English published by Routledge (2019). I don't expect a PhD candidate to cite every work written on the subject, but not comparatively referencing a research project that had a similar approach in a way replicates the approach of the SPC itself in dealing with a place like Jasenovac, i.e. not engaging in a discussion outside of its own sphere. Bishop Jovan, one of the two main interlocutors, is based and works in Croatia, which is also not explicitly mentioned. Although he is obviously part of the SPC and

thus legitimately part of the Serbian memoryscape, he inevitably has to deal with the Croatian memoryscape of the Second World War and all of its mnemonic actors. I don't expect the candidate to do similar field work in Croatia, but a more rigorous and systematic analysis of other former Yugoslav memoryscapes would strengthen her arguments and explain the regional political context within which the SPC is operating. More broadly, there could have also been discussions of the mnemonic practices of other Churches in the region (the Catholic Church in Croatia and Poland, the Islamic Community in BiH, the Orthodox Church in Russia) to offer a comparative study, especially regarding overlapping issues.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER CLARIFICATION DURING THE DEFENSE

How did religious communities in other post-socialist (and especially post-Yugoslav) societies align with or challenge dominant historical narratives? Is the SPC a particularly active mnemonic actor in comparison to the Catholic Church or Islamic Community in neighboring states? What is the level of interaction on the key mnemonic issues, such as Jasenovac, and do they impact the SPC's narrative?

How do mnemonic actors in Croatia (political, NGO, religious community, media, cultural institutions) impact the SPC's activism regarding the Second World War, particularly on sites located outside of Serbia? Does the SPC in Croatia behave differently than the clergy in Serbia and beyond? Do national memory politics affect the transnational SPC or are they only responding to political actors within Serbia?

Milorad Dodik of Republika Srpska (BiH) has embraced many of Vučić's methods and narratives and works closely with Serbian mnemonic actors. How is the SPC involved in mnemonic activism in RS compared to Croatia and Serbia? What is the SPC's position on the creation of a new memory site in Donja Gradina, which appears to be a rival memorial site that won't be under the influence of Croatian memory politics?

RECOMMENDATIONS / NON - RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEFENSE - important

I highly recommend that the dissertation be approved for defense. Regarding the next step, such as revising the dissertation for a book manuscript, I think that the primary task will be to include more comparative analysis, especially regarding Croatian memory politics, since a significant portion of the case studies are related to sites currently located in Croatia. These issues can be addressed at the defense. Nevertheless, this study is a well-written, conceptually sophisticated, and organizationally solid dissertation that demonstrates the candidate's ability to carry out research and complete a serious academic text that contributes to the existing literature.