

The battle of Košare as a place of memory – From silence to the production of a heroic myth

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In addition to the various newly erected monuments that keep appearing almost every day, someone who had not been in Serbia and Belgrade for the past ten years might notice another one in the park across from the “Dr. Dragiša Mišović” hospital — the *Monument to the Heroes of Košare*. Noticing the wreaths and flowers, one might look up what kind of monument it is on the internet. The first thing they would probably come across is a *Wikipedia* article stating that it is the central monument to the battles at Košare, inaugurated in 2020, and that “the monument contains three sculptures representing Serbian soldiers in different historical periods. There is a Serbian medieval knight, a Serbian soldier from the period of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, and a member of the Yugoslav Army (YA). None of them carry weapons, but only shields, which emphasizes the defensive nature of the wars, i.e., that they merely defended their country”.

If they continued their research, they would find out from the media that the monument is dedicated to members of the YA who died in 1999 in Kosovo during the NATO bombing. The struggles that are most often referred to in public discourse as the *Battle of Košare*, were military conflicts that took place from April 9 to June 10, 1999, on the Yugoslav-Albanian border, around the Košare watchtower on the slopes of the Prokletije Mountains, not far from Đakovica and Dečan. The fighting at Košare began with an attack on April 9, 1999, when members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), supported by the Army of Albania and NATO aviation, crossed the state border in the area of the guard post and attacked the 53rd Border Battalion of

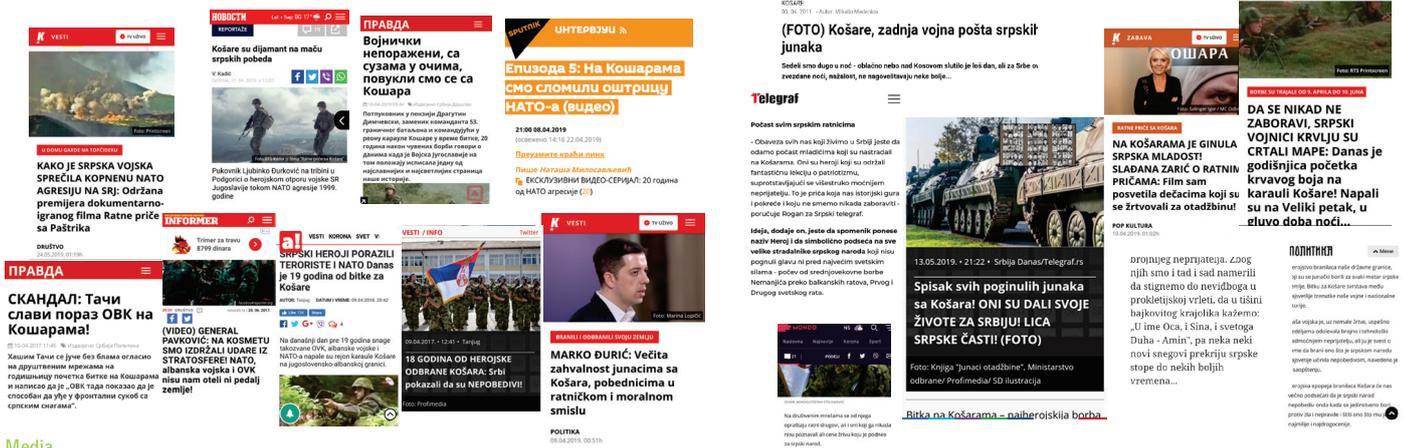


Monument to the Heroes of Košare – Belgrade. Photo: Ivica Đorđević. Source: CPI Archive



Monument to the Heroes of Košare – Belgrade. Photo: Ivica Đorđević. Source: CPI Archive

the YA. The 125th YA Motorized Brigade, 63rd Parachute Brigade, part of the 72nd Special Brigade, Military Police, part of the 549th Motorized Brigade, other parts of the Pristina Corps, reserve units, and local and foreign volunteers also took part in the fighting. According to Major General Dragan Živanović, commander of the 125th Motorized Brigade of the YA, 108 members of the YA were killed in the Košare



Media

area: 18 officers and non-commissioned officers, 50 regular soldiers, 13 reservists, and 24 volunteers. Official KLA losses were around 200. The majority of the killed YA members were young men aged 18 to 20 who were serving their compulsory military service, mostly from working-class and rural families. The fighting at Košare officially ended on June 14, 1999, when the Yugoslav Army withdrew from both Košare and Kosovo based on the Kumanovo Agreement, which ended the three-month bombing campaign of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Perhaps the unknown passer-by from the beginning of this text would wonder how it is possible that they had never heard of this, as stated in various media, “most heroic story from the war in Kosovo” which is “one of the brightest moments of our military and national history” when participants in the battles at Košare “broke the NATO blade” and “prevented the land invasion of Serbia”.

However, the “epic story” of Košare is not a story about the personal (lack of) knowledge of random or less random passers-by, but the origin of broader processes that have been taking place in parallel at the level of state memory policies since the 1990s, shaping a new phase of the official interpretation of the past and the formation of the central narrative about the wars of the 1990s after 2012. As a 2021 study by the Center for Public History, “The *Battle of Košare* as a Place of Memory - Media representation of the battles at Košare in 1999” shows, the abbreviated and reworked version of which is presented in this text, until 2011, war events at Košare were almost absent from public discourse. After 2016, they became one of the most important moments of state memory politics. It is only since 2016 that the mainstream media, notably the outlets that receive significant

funding from the state budget, have started to recognize Košare as a topic of social importance. It can also be noticed that a lot of texts in different media outlets are repeated, sometimes in full, and sometimes with minimal changes in the form of different wording, modification of titles, subtitles, or separate parts and photographs. Such a striking growth of media interest coincides with initiatives and interventions concerning desirable modes of collective memory, which come from state structures.

The establishment of the battles at Košare as an important place of remembrance was accompanied by a significant investment of state resources in various types of memorialization at the national and local level: naming streets in different cities in Serbia after the participants in the battles, setting up monuments and memorials, various ceremonies and commemorative activities attended by the highest political and military officials, the organization of various forums and the presentation of books dedicated to Košare at venues financed from the state budget. All these activities are accompanied by financing for cultural projects such as various publishing ventures, documentaries, and feature films and series with considerable public funds. For example, in 2019, the extremely popular documentary-fiction series “War Stories from Košare” was filmed as a co-production of the Ministry of Defense and Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and a TV show and feature film were announced. In 2019, the new generation of cadets of the Serbian Armed Forces was ceremonially promoted in front of the National Assembly building in Belgrade to the song “Vila sa Košara” written by Neven Milaković Likota, a writer from Bar. The video for the song, the production of which was financed by the Ministry of Defense, was premiered in 2022 at a ceremony on the occasion of *Mil-*



Memorial room "The Victims of Kosovo and Metohija - Heroes of the Fatherland" - Belgrade (2016). Photo: Dragan Petrović. Source: CPI Archive



Trilogy "We defended Košare" by Nenad Milkić. Source: CPI Archive



Heroja sa Košara Street - Novi Sad (2023). Photo: Dragan Petrović. Source: CPI Archive



Book Fair 2018: Promotion of the book "Battle of Košare, memories of the participants in 1999" at the stand of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia. Source: CPI Archive



Mural Heroes of Košare – Kraljevo (2020). Photo: Nedžad Horozović. Source: CPI Archive

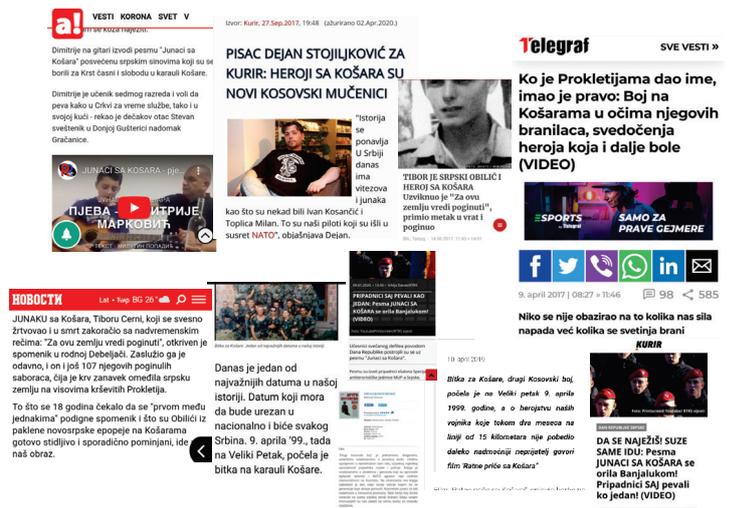
itary Veterans Day, established in 2015. Since then, it has been celebrated every year by all units and institutions of the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Army. Such examples point to the existence of the intention and interest of state structures to regulate the content of collective memory and impose their own interpretation of the events in Košare.

The reason why the period after 2012, and especially since 2016, can be considered a new phase of the culture and politics of memory in Serbia is that, in addition to the NATO bombing as a central reference

point for observing and interpreting the wars of the 1990s, with an exclusive focus on Serbian victims and their instrumentalization, which has dominated the discourse in the previous decades, one can also observe the process of the ever-increasing heroization of the wars of the 1990s and their interpretation as defensive and liberation wars. This especially refers to the war in Kosovo (1998-1999). This process can be traced precisely using the example of the narrative shaping of the battles at Košare and their integration into the mythical narrative about the heroism, vul-



Mural *Those who forget the brave at Košare's stand, Let Kosovo's heroes curse them from that sacred land* – New Belgrade. Photo: Dragan Petrović. Source: CPI Archive



Media texts. Source: CPI Archive



Ivan Antić – Election campaign for the 2022 parliamentary elections. Photo: Dragan Petrović. Source: CPI Archive



Children's books: *Košare - The New Battle of Kosovo, Serbian heroes - From the Battle of Kosovo to Košare and Serbs against NATO from 1991 to 1999*. Source: CPI Archive

nerability, and martyrdom of the Serbian people throughout history. Excluding the linear and most often simplified connection with the NATO bombing and the status of Kosovo, in public and political discourse, as a rule, the presentation of the battles at Košare omits any broader contextualization of the historical and socio-political circumstances of the conflict, of which these events are a part. Instead, the interpretive framework offered is based on a Manichean view of conflict as a mythical struggle of the forces of *Good* against the forces of *Evil*, “Us” versus “Them”, in which its actors function as metaphors for homogenous essentialized ethnic collectivities with clear positive and negative signs, with direct reliance on ethnohistorical stereotypes as an important part of the (ethno-)nationalist discourse of being threatened and surrounded by enemies. So on one side, among other things, there were “Shiptar terrorists”, “Albanian beasts”, “criminals” and “hordes”. And on

the other: “bearded heroes”, “Serbian knights”, “Obilićs from an infernal new Serbian epic” and “(new) Kosovo martyrs” who show that “the Serbian people are invincible when they fight against evil and injustice and protect what is dearest and most precious to them”. The young soldiers are thus constructed as a symbolic embodiment of the entire Serbian people, and Košare becomes another point in the inevitable and fateful series of life and death battles, for the “survival or destruction of the Serbian people” and “the protection of its right to its uniqueness and future”. This is further strengthened by the connection with battles from national history (especially with the Kosovo war), which have a special status in national memory. In this process, first, the personal stories of (young) soldiers who participated in the battles become a metonymic image of all the soldiers and policemen who participated in the war in Kosovo in 1999, then of the entire war in Kosovo, and in the next step,

all the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. In 2017, the website of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs reported the statement of the competent minister Aleksandar Vulin at the Meeting of the Association of Veterans' Organizations of Serbia, who initiated the building of a monument to Tibor Cerna, one of the participants. Aleksandar Vulin talked about how "for the first time, the government of Serbia with Aleksandar Vučić at its head paid attention to the problems of fighters and their families", as well as that the government of Serbia is not ashamed of the historical truth and that "in its past, Serbia has always led wars of liberation and only fought when attacked", pointing out:

Just as Serbia did not provoke and did not seek the start of the civil wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, it neither provoked nor sought the NATO aggression. For all these reasons, Serbia has no reason to be ashamed of its warriors. It can only be proud of them, their struggle, their love for their country.

This presentation of the battles in Košare and beyond, the wars of the 1990s, is a *usable past* for the ruling structures in many ways. It is determined by current political interests and its usefulness in today's context for at least several reasons. The isolation of certain historical periods, episodes, and personalities and the erasure of others, which can be seen (i) in the example of Košare, is a usable mechanism for suppressing and/or neutralizing all potentially unpleasant questions about the 1990s that could call into question the righteousness of the "Serbian people", and what is even more important - the policies of the previous 30 years. The mythical narrative about the fateful suffering and heroism of a small nation throughout history, the question of political decisions that, among others, concern war and peace, but also the responsibility of those who made them, is moved to the level of *fatum* or natural disaster for which there is neither personal nor collective responsibility. In Serbia, due to the ideological and personal continuity of the ruling structures from the 1990s, there is a direct interest in getting rid of this responsibility and eliminating the possibility of taking stock of the social, economic, and political balance of the policies of the 1990s and their consequences, not only for the

neighboring countries but also for the population and society in Serbia. In such a framework, the sphere of politics ceases to be a dialogic practice of political communities that concerns all members of society, and politics is constituted as something that belongs exclusively to the state, that is, to a narrow circle of its representatives. The ultimate origin of this position is that any attempt to open controversial topics in public at the level of the entire society and enter into a debate on issues of the common good, social goals, and values in the internal political process, turns into an act of potential betrayal.

At the same time, the atmosphere of constant existential threat promoted by such representations of history imposes the need for homogenization and mobilization against those whom elites designate as enemies. The category of external and/or internal enemies is variable and adapts to current political interests, dissent becomes an act of betrayal, and violence is constituted as expected and legitimate. Such a direct use of the example of Košare to draw a distinction between "patriots" and "traitors and enemies of the state" could be seen, for example, during the 2022 election campaign in which Zdravko Ponoš, the presidential candidate of the opposition *Freedom and Justice Party (SSP)* and Chief of the General Staff of the YA in 2006-2008, described in the regime media as "an English, then a German student" who "kicked heroes from Košare out of the army" and "who wanted to destroy our army".

While on the one hand, the dominant narrative about the fighting at Košare is a useful tool for disqualifying political opponents and, more broadly, the democratic changes after October 5, 2000, at the same time it is a powerful instrument in legitimizing the regime's current policies through the motifs of a "return to dignity" and "Serbian pride". Thus, during the aforementioned 2022 election campaign, one could also see a billboard with the image of Ivan Antić, one of the participants in the fighting in Košare and a candidate in the parliamentary elections on the *Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)* "Aleksandar Vučić - Together we can do everything" list with the text:

Vučić is the only president who remembered us HEROES FROM KOŠARE. I had no ambition to be involved in politics, but I just couldn't refuse an invitation to be on the SNS list.

The uproar raised in the general public by the rare attempts, even in the critical media, to move the events at Košare from the mythical framework into the field of political discussion, indicates that the dominant narrative about this event corresponds to the needs of significant parts of society, as well as that it goes beyond the public's views of the current regime. In this sense, one can speak of the constitution of a new political myth that relies on the already existing cultural framework and political discourses. At the same time, the decontextualization of those events and easy identification with

their protagonists offers the necessary space for venting the accumulated frustrations and resentments, their articulation in a way that frees them from responsibility and provides meaning to the suffering from that time, but also to the current low living standard.

In the end, even without opening the question of who won the battles at Košare, many answers are conspicuously missing. Most of them concern the responsibility of Serbia and the policy of its former and current representatives for the Yugoslav wars and their origins, of which the deaths of young soldiers at Košare are a part.

According to data from the *Humanitarian Law Centers* in Belgrade and Prishtina, during the armed conflict in Kosovo in the period from March 24 to June 10, 1999, more than 6,200 Albanian civilians were killed or disappeared. In the area of responsibility of the 125th Motorized Brigade (the municipalities of Leposavić, Kosovska Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Srbica, Vučitrn, Klina, Istok, Peć, and Dečani), 1,813 civilians were killed, while 216 are still missing. Among the killed civilians were 236 children and 327 women. The area of responsibility of the 125th Motorized Brigade bordered that of the 549th Motorized Brigade, under the command of Božidar Delić. In the area of responsibility of the 549th Motorized Brigade (municipalities of Prizren, Đakovica, Orahovac, and Suva Reka), more Albanian civilians were killed than in the area of responsibility of any other brigade operating in Kosovo in 1999. In the period from March 24 to June 10, 1999, 2,174 Albanian civilians were killed. Of that number, 459 were found in mass graves in Serbia, and 375 are still missing.

Both the 125th Motorized Brigade and the 549th Motorized Brigade were part of the Pristina Corps of the Third Army of the YA. The head of the Third Army was Lieutenant General Nebojša Pavković, until December 25, 1998, who was sentenced in 2009 to 22 years in prison for crimes against humanity and violation of the laws and customs of war during the war in Kosovo in 1999 before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. In 1998, he was replaced as commander of the Third Army by the former commander of the Pristina Corps, General Vladimir Lazarević, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2009 by the Hague Tribunal, which was reduced to 14 years in 2014, for his command responsibility for crimes in Kosovo.
