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PEACE,
UNCONDITIONAL!

Institute for Recent History of Serbia
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PEACE, UNCONDITIONAL!

Peace Policies and Practices in Yugoslavia and Beyond

Edited by
Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

Belgrade, Ljubljana
2025

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UNCONDITIONAL!

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Stanislava Barać*

"Lest We Forget": Desanka Maksimović's Remembrance Politics and Anti-War Engagement**

Abstract The paper aims to conduct a broad contextual and close reading textual analysis of Desanka Maksimović's novel *Ne zaboraviti* (*Lest We Forget,* 1969). The novel is interpreted as the literary manifestation of Desanka Maksimović's thoroughly thought-out remembrance politics. The paper's thesis is that this ultra-popular and best-selling Yugoslav poet and author established remembrance politics that corresponded with the official state antifascist remembrance culture after the Second World War. The novel *Lest We Forget* tells the dramatic story of the three days around the Kragujevac mass shooting of civilians on 21 October 1941. As Desanka Maksimović had already addressed the tragedy in her poem *Krvava bajka* (*A Bloody Fairytale,* published in 1946), which was already well-known in Yugoslavia, the paper raises the question of why Desanka Maksimović wanted to create an additional and more developed narrative of the same traumatic event. The answer and the second thesis of the paper are that Maksimović was aware that anti-war engagement within the country's official antifascist policy was not a finished enterprise in the Yugoslav community and that she, therefore, participated in the 1960s multi-medial dynamic of Kragujevac October's remembrance practices. In other words, author constructively participated in the ongoing Yugoslav peace policy through continued literary engagement.

Keywords Desanka Maksimović, politics of remembrance, *A Bloody Fairytale, Lest We Forget*, the 1960s memory culture, Yugoslav community

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Introduction: historical facts and memory studies concepts

> It was in a land of peasants / In the mountainous Balkans, / A company of schoolchildren / Died a martyr's death / In one day. // They were all born / In the same year / They schooldays passed the same / Taken together to the same festivities, vaccinated against the same diseases, / And all died on the same day. // It was in a land of peasants / In the mountainous Balkans, / A company of schoolchildren / Died a martyr's death / In one day. // And fifty-five minutes / Before the moment of death / The company of small ones / Sat at its desk / And the same difficult assignments / They solved: how far can a traveler go if he is on foot… // Their thoughts were full and throughout their notebooks in school bags / Lay an infinite number / Of senseless A's and F's. / A pile of the same dreams / And the same secrets / Patriotic and romantic / They clenched in the depths of their pockets. / And it seemed to everyone / That they will run / For a long time beneath the blue arch / Until all the assignments in the world / Are completed. // It was in a land of peasants in the mountainous Balkans, / A company of schoolchildren / Died a martyr's death / In one day. // Whole rows of boys / Took each other by the hand / And from their last class / Went peacefully to slaughter / As if death was nothing. / Whole lines of friends / Ascended at the same moment to their eternal residence.[1]

This poem – *Krvava bajka* (*A Bloody Fairytale*) – was written by Desanka Maksimović in 1941 (according to her post-war testimony) as an immediate response to the Wehrmacht's mass shooting of civilians in Kragujevac on 21 October,[2] which came as a reprisal for the people's uprising in Serbia against the occupiers. The reprisals followed the Third Reich's formula of killing 100 hostages for one killed German soldier and 50 for a wounded one, applied only at the Eastern Front. More precisely:

> On 16 September, Hitler ordered Wilhelm List, commander-in-chief of the armed forces in the Southeast, to "impose long-term order by using the harshest of methods". The same day, Field Marshal Wilhelm von Keitel issued an order to quell the uprising in Serbia. […] "To atone for the life of one German soldier, 50 to 100 Communists must, as a rule, be sentenced to death. The method of execution should strengthen the measure of determent."[3]

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1 Desanka Maksimović, *A Bloody Fairytale* (translated by Sarah O'Keefe), Laban, accessed 26 February 2025, https://www.laban.rs/lib/Sarah/#fnm_40.

2 The most precise description of the sequence of events and the way the crime was committed in Kragujevac and its surroundings on 19–21 October in English can be found in Staniša Brkić's study *Name and Number: The Kragujevac Tragedy of 1941* (Belgrade, Genocide Victims Museum), 2024.

3 Brkić, *Name and Number*, 35.

The Wehrmacht General Franz Böhme, who was in charge of implementing this directive in the occupation zone of Serbia, made it slightly more precise.[4] Since the Wehrmacht's troops could not find enough "numbers" in the existing pool of hostages and prisoners (communists, Jews and insurgents), after the rebels' attack and the killing of German soldiers in Gornji Milanovac at the end of September, they turned to civilians: peasants, ordinary citizens and, finally, schoolboys. The retaliation policy resulted, among other crimes, in at least 2381 killed civilians in the Kragujevac mass shooting alone.[5]

The significance and the incomparable influence and effect of *A Bloody Fairytale* on the Yugoslav community after the Second World War can hardly be overstated. Because of that, in this article, I raise and try to answer the question of why the author needed another avenue to contribute to the ongoing memorialization of the same traumatic event and war crime. Since she did so in 1969 when she published the novel *Ne zaboraviti* (*Lest We Forget*), the contextual and textual analysis of this work is central to my argumentation. The argumentation methodologically relies on selected historical interpretations based on memory studies and close reading of the novel.

By reconstructing the context of *A Bloody Fairytale* and similar (anti-)war Yugoslav poems (by Ivan Goran Kovačić and Skender Kulenović) and later works of art (two 1960s feature movies), this paper gradually comes to an analysis of anti-war politics of remembrance created in the novel *Lest We Forget*. In the shortest, the official remembrance politics in socialist Yugoslavia, in its first decade, gave an advantage to war heroes (antifascist fighters, Partisans and revolutionaries) over civilian victims. More precisely, in an attempt to build a new society based on the values of the socialist revolution, officials tried to create a unifying narrative that would give sense to all the sacrifice and suffering during the war. This narrative did not distinguish between combatants and civilian victims. Thus, "there was no concept of a causeless victim"[6] in this phase of Yugoslav socialism, and "all victims of fascist terror were commemorated equally".[7] However, in this phase, some literary works took over the role of a "public space" for recognizing, commemorating and remembering the (specifics of) civilian victims.

More precisely, as historians such as Olga Manojlović Pintar and Hajke Karge have investigated and elaborated, socialist Yugoslavia's official remembrance politics regarding the Second World War victims can be divided into two phases. The first phase lasted from the end of the war to the mid-1950s, when the spotlight was on fallen Partisans and

4 Ibid., 36–37.

5 Ibid., 164–362. For a more comprehensive list and the number of persons executed in the surrounding villages see also Brkić, *Name and Number*, 128–163.

6 Ana Panić, "'Blood Is My Daylight and Darkness Too'. Fine Art Works Thematising Nazi Concentration Camps from the Holdings of the Museum of Yugoslavia," in *Freedom is Just a Dream for Us*, edited by Veselinka Kastratović Ristić and Ana Panić (Belgrade: Museum of Yugoslavia, 2022), 290.

7 Panić, "'Blood Is My Daylight and Darkness Too,'" 290.

combatants, and civilian victims were marginalized. A new phase in the conceptualization and realization of the official state memory politics on war and war victims began in the early 1960s, as shown by Manojlović Pintar and Karge.[8] Among other reorientations in war remembrance, from the early 1960s, the state (with the Alliance of Veteran Associations of the People's Liberation Struggle of Yugoslavia) decided to turn to young generations "since they were considered the most active recipients of all the examined mass media".[9]

The second phase lasted from the mid-1950s or early 1960s when civilian victims gradually gained their rightful place in official memory politics. Bearing in mind these facts, Maksimović's poem *A Bloody Fairytale*, popular from the mid-1940s, played a unique role: as an intimate, almost private, and "moral" testimony, clothed in a veil of secrecy because it was known that the poem was written in the occupied Belgrade. Desanka Maksimović herself, as a "moral witness",[10] was extraordinary in that sense. She represented all those who had not fought actively but stood staunchly against the occupation, occupiers and fascism. Thanks to new editions of Desanka Maksimović's poems, school programs – the poem was included in the readers for two school subjects: the Serbo-Croatian literature reader and history textbooks[11] – and the fact that it was often recited in public, *A Bloody Fairytale* had an extensive reception in the 1950s and 1960s.

Further, I take the concept of *remembrance* from Heike Karge, who, in turn, adopted the concept developed by Jay Winter (1999). Karge applied it to the remembrance of the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia from 1947 to 1970. Karge explains that she prefers the concept of remembrance to the notion of *memory (culture)* because she researches, in Winter's terms, "collective remembrance as the result of individuals and groups which act not by the state injunction or any of its organizations, but because they feel that they have to express themselves".[12] Thus, in this article, I use the term remembrance politics in the sense of both official and individual and local remembrance practices. When needed, I use the term memory culture to refer to older terminology in this field and, thus, the historians' earlier results.

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8 See: Olga Manojlović Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja: Spomenici i identiteti u Srbiji 1918–1989* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, Udruženje za društvenu istoriju 2014); Hajke Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*, trans. Aleksandra Kostić (Beograd, Biblioteka XX vek, 2014), 53–65.

9 Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*, 55.

10 Alaida Assmann's concept of *moral witness*, together with the other kinds of witnessing and witnesses, will be briefly introduced in my argumentation. This aspect is important to mention because the concept of witness in memory studies is inseparable from the concept of civilian war victims. However, the issue of witnesses' categories, applied to Desanka Maksimović and selected Yugoslav authors, deserves a separate study.

11 Dubravka Stojanović, "1941 – godina koja se menja. Revizije tumačenja 27. marta i streljanja u Kragujevcu u udžbenicima istorije (1955–2014)," in *80 godina od izbijanja Drugog svetskog rata na prostoru Jugoslavije i stradanja grada Kragujevca: novi pomaci ili revizije istorije*, edited by Dmitar Tasić and Lela Vujošević (Kragujevac: Centar za naučnoistraživački rad Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti i univerziteta u Kragujevcu, Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2021), 39–55.

12 Winter, after Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*, 8–9.

By the end of her research – in which remembrance practices of the Kragujevac mass crime and its civilian victims feature prominently – Heike Karge reached conclusions that my research and analysis mostly confirm. In that respect, I have singled out five of Karge's key insights. Firstly, *public remembrance* in socialist Yugoslavia was not limited to the *practices of official memory*.[13] Secondly, "the official 'memory canon' should not be understood here only as coercion, a repressive instrument used 'from above', but also as an opportunity – which should be used and was indeed used – to communicate with the past within the local area, the area in which individual, family, local, federal republics' and federal forms of war preserving remembrance encounter".[14] The third insight implies that, although the starting point of Karge's observation is the remembrance (politics) work of the state-official organization, the Alliance of Veteran Associations of the People's Liberation Struggle of Yugoslavia and its local units, she understood remembrance as a social practice created "from below", which cannot be controlled entirely "from above".

This methodological frame ultimately explained that even when initiatives came "from above", "in the practices of war remembrance investigated here it wasn't about the professional, scholarly interpretation of the People's Liberation War, but about popular forms and practices of searching and inventing ways to preserve war remembrance", in which various groups took part: "surviving Partisan fighters, and those active on the home front, artists and educators, political elites and specific interest groups, based on their different war experiences".[15] The fourth important insight is Karge's detection of the limitations to the artistic representation of the past imposed by the official discourse in a socialist state: "The question is", she argues, "if the artistic expression of remembrance of the dead could at all be presented differently, conceptualized differently than with borrowings from the symbolic language of religion".[16] Finally and most pertinently, as it refers specifically to the memorial dedicated to the Kragujevac victims, Karge showed "the failure of the officially staged attempt to portray civilian victims as heroes".[17]

However, I would nuance this conclusion by noting that artists sometimes used *subtle heroic depictions* of civilian victims. This is connected to the previous insight: artists, as well as the broader community, desperately needed some kind of solace and catharsis to cope with causeless victims and unnecessary losses. Meeting these needs, the verses in Maksimović's poem: "Went *peacefully to slaughter* / As if death was nothing", represent, I would argue, an aspect of the symbolic language of religion.

13 Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*, 245

14 Ibid., 246.

15 Ibid., 247–248.

16 Ibid., 250.

17 Ibid., 252.

By the beginning of the occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Desanka Maksimović (1892–1994) was already highly acclaimed in literary criticism and a distinctly popular lyrical poet with a broad readership. As her day job, she taught literature and history in high schools in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia from 1922: a private high school in Obrenovac, the Teacher School in Dubrovnik and the First Girls' Gymnasium in Belgrade. When Germany occupied Yugoslavia, she was a teacher at the First Girls' Real Gymnasium in Belgrade and was retired in line with the policy of the occupational regime. As Bojan Đorđević found in his archival research, Maksimović was forced into retirement (at the age of forty-three) based on the Regulation on the Systematization of Positions in State and Self-governing Services because she was considered by the officials of the collaborationist regime "insufficiently 'nationally reliable'".[18] This label meant, from the occupiers' and collaborators' point of view, that she was suspected of being a possible enemy of the Third Reich and fascism, or, in other words – an antifascist.

Thus, Maksimović stayed quiet during the occupation and took no risks. That is why the poem *A Bloody Fairytale* remained an unpublished manuscript tucked away at her home. As mentioned, Maksimović wrote *A Bloody Fairytale* immediately upon receiving news of the war crime. Among other testimonies regarding the poem's creation, Maksimović recalled:

> It [the poem *A Bloody Fairytale*] was created the moment I heard of the Kragujevac massacre. An unknown old man approached me in the street and said: "Have you heard?" The fact that an unknown man had the urge to talk to me about the shared pain prompted me to write that poem right away. And it was left the same as I wrote it then; I did not dare touch it later to improve it. Let it be as if I cried or lamented. I needed to feel as if those children had not vanished, that they were still alive somewhere. In my despair, I wanted to defend myself: that all of them had sailed away to the sky – like in religion, although there was nothing religious there.[19]

The poem was published after the war, in 1946, as part of the cycle "Poems on Slavery and Freedom" ("Pesme o ropstvu i slobodi") within the collection of poems *The Poet and Homeland* (*Pesnik i zavičaj*).

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18 Bojan Đorđević, "Desanka Maksimović," in *Plemenita misija ili muka živa* (Beograd: Društvo za srpski jezik i književnost, 2018), 128.

19 "Nastala je istog trenutka kada sam čula za kragujevački pokolj. Na ulici mi je prišao nepoznati starac i rekao: Jeste li čuli. To što je nepoznati čovek osetio potrebu da mi govori o zajedničkom bolu, to me je pokrenulo da odmah napišem tu pesmu. I ostala je kako je tada napisana, nisam smela da je naknadno diram, da je usavršavam. Nek ostane kao da sam zaplakala ili zakukala. Imala sam tada potrebu da osetim da ta deca nisu nestala, da žive negde. U očajanju sam htela da se branim: da su oni svi otplovili negde pod oblake – kao u religiji, iako nije bilo nimalo religioznog", Desanka Maksimović, *Pesme. Knj. 2 (1936–1951)*, in *Celokupna dela, Tom 1* (Beograd: Zadužbina "Desanka Maksimović", 2012a), 789.

As the author's testimony suggests, the poem was written as a kind of trauma response. It was not created within the communist agitation and propaganda framework, unlike the poems briefly analyzed in the next part of the article. However, as the following sections will show, it did not sit entirely outside that framework either.

Although this poem remained "untouched" after the first rush of emotions in 1941, Desanka Maksimović still needed to write about the tragedy, and during the war wrote another poem inspired by the same event: "At the Grave of the Executed Schoolchildren" ("Na grobu streljanih đaka").[20] This poem, for example, develops the story about the old gardener who often walks through the field where the Kragujevac mass execution of civilians took place. It was also first published in *The Poet and Homeland* (*Pesnik i zavičaj*, 1946). Despite the popularity and reception of this author among ordinary readers as well as among critics and scholars, the second "graveyard" poem about the same collective trauma was rarely read, analyzed or even mentioned and does not feature in collective knowledge and community remembrance.

More importantly, Desanka Maksimović had made an act of instant response, or an act of *immediate memory culture* (the concept will be introduced and contextually elaborated in the next part of the article), even before writing *A Bloody Fairytale*. Alarmed and even horrified by the International Aviation Exhibition held in 1938 at Belgrade's newly built Fairground, she promptly wrote the poem "A Woman at the Air Show" ("Žena na vazduhoplovnoj izložbi").[21] While the Exhibition was widely seen as a great success for the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's government, Desanka Maksimović and leftist intellectual circles viewed the exhibition and, more generally, the global development of the aircraft industry primarily as part of the fascist countries' militarization process and preparation for total war. In other words, a year after a similar anti-fascist and resistance act by Pablo Picasso – his instant painting of "Guernica" in response to bombing of the eponymous town, which was promptly sent to be exhibited at the 1937 Paris International Exposition – Desanka Maksimović made similar gesture in 1938 on the local level when she published her poem in *Žena danas* (*Woman Today*) magazine.[22] This was also a gesture of resistance, as well as an expression of open support for the young anti-fascist and communist women in its editorial team.[23] The young women associated with *Žena danas* magazine faced

20 Maksimović, *Pesme. Knj. 2 (1936–1951)*, 576–577.

21 The first stanza reads: "I'm afraid of all these aluminium big birds / with cryptic letters written on them; / May their shadow never fall on my brother and son, / not even over my roof." ("Strah me je svih ovih aluminijumskih ptičurina / po kojima pišu zagonetna slova; / Neka nikad njihova senka ne padne na moga brata i sina, / ni preko moga krova".) Desanka Maksimović, "Žena na vazduhoplovnoj izložbi", *Žena danas* 3.16 (1938): 15.

22 Maksimović, "Žena na vazduhoplovnoj izložbi," 15.

23 Stanislava Barać, "Anagažovana prozaistkinja Desanka Maksimović," in *Radi svoga razgovora: zbornik radova u čast akademika Staniše Tutnjevića*, edited by Saša Šmulja and Andreja Marić (Banja Luka: Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Banjoj Luci, Akademija nauka i umetnosti Republike srpske, Institut za književnost i umetnost u Beogradu, 2022), 233.

continuous risk of arrest, and their magazine was constantly in danger of prohibition by state censorship, as the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had been officially banned in 1920, along with any form of communist propaganda.

Desanka Maksimović belonged to the anti-fascist intellectual circles in Belgrade, which did not support the pro-German policy of the Government of Milan Stojadinović, and later, the cabinet of Dragiša Cvetković, clearly recognizing its pro-fascist leanings. At that time, she espoused the position of preserving world peace within the anti-fascist politics of the Popular Front.[24] The imperative of safeguarding world peace aligned seamlessly with Maksimović's belief in the possibility of peaceful coexistence, non-violent and harmonious conflict resolution and reconciliation between conflicted sides. This idea was first explicitly articulated in Maksimović's short stories published in the 1930s, which address social injustice. In these narratives, conflicts are often resolved with the reconciliation of representatives from antagonistic classes.[25] While some critics view this approach as naive,[26] I would argue that it reflects a utopian vision of reconciliation, embodying Maksimović's poetic and ethical worldview, in which peaceful solutions are considered the only viable outcome.

Hence, the alignment of Desanka Maksimović's post-war works with the remembrance politics and memory culture policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (renamed the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1952) is hardly surprising. It is precisely in this aspect that the author reveals herself as a kind of fellow traveller of the Party or communist ideology, at least from the mid-1930s up until the late 1960s.

Immediate memory culture: three Yugoslav (anti-)war poems

One could thus argue that there is such a phenomenon as *immediate memory culture*. Besides Picasso's *Guernica*, a globally famous and iconic painting, many similar artistic acts of memorialization took place in wartime Europe, including Yugoslavia. Historian Sanja Petrović Todosijević explained how works of art supplement historical accounts and how some artists became "the first documentalists" of particular events and war crimes. She draws our attention to the Spanish Civil War, with the example of Picasso's *Guernica*, and the Second World War, with Yugoslav examples such as Aleksandar Deroko's *Sketch*

24 In short, the Popular Front strategy (whether conducted under the direct influence of the Communist International or not) in the second half of the 1930s involved the alliance of previously unassociated social forces and parties, now unified around the goal of preventing a new total world war and stopping Nazism and fascism.

25 Barać, "Anagažovana prozaistkinja Desanka Maksimović," 228–232.

26 Ibid.

for Hanging in Terazije Square on August 17, 1941,[27] or Miloš Bajić's series of paintings documenting his internment in the Banjica and Mauthausen concentration camps.[28]

Besides artists, poets and writers could also play the role of "first documentalists". During the Third Reich's (and its allies') occupation of Yugoslavia, in the midst of battles between the Axis forces and the Yugoslav anti-fascist armed resistance movement, three poets wrote poems commemorating ongoing traumatic events. In 1942, Skender Kulenović (1910–1978) wrote *Stojanka Majka Knežopoljka* (*Stojanka, A Mother from Knežopolje*), Ivan Goran Kovačić (1913–1943) wrote *Jama* (*The Pit*, trans. Alec Brown) in 1942, and, as explained in the introduction, Desanka Maksimović wrote *Krvava Bajka* (*A Bloody Fairytale*, trans. Sarah O'Keeffe) in 1941. The first one was inspired by the Battle of Kozara in June/July 1942, which ended in the victory of the Axis forces (joint forces of the Wehrmacht, Ustasha and Chetniks),[29] resulting in heavy casualties among the Yugoslav Partisans, members of People's Liberation Army, as well as numerous civilians deaths. The second was prompted by the slaughter of civilians at the hands of the Ustasha in July 1941 near Livanjsko Polje[30], where they were thrown into karst pits, and the testimony of one of the survivors. The third poem was written in response to the Kragujevac tragedy in October 1941, especially the execution of schoolboys, among other civilians, as explained above.

The first two poems were well received in the "public sphere" immediately upon publication, being read and recited among the Partisans. Kulenović personally recited his poem *Stojanka, A Mother from Knežopolje* on 19 August 1942 before the Second Partisan Squad of Krajina. The poem was frequently recited by Vera Crvenčanin, a young prewar actress and a communist Partisan during the conflict. This led to her meeting the poet, resulting in their mutual affection and subsequent marriage, becoming a well-known revolutionary couple.[31] In 1943, actor Vjekoslav Afrić delivered the first public reading of *The Pit* to wounded Partisans of the First Proletarian Division, after which the poem became popular among other units.[32] This poem was also widely read and performed. By contrast, Maksimović's *A Bloody Fairytale* did not become widely known until it was published in 1946, even though it had been written during the occupation, as explained. The reason for their different fates is plain enough: The first two authors were Partisans

27 Sanja Petrović Todosijević, "The Identity of Resistance: Collections of Museum of Yugoslavia as the Source for the Identification of Male and Female Prisoners of the Banjica Concentration Camp 1941–1944)," in: *Freedom is Just a Dream for Us*, 256–258.

28 Petrović Todosijević, "The Identity of Resistance," 265.

29 The Ustasha were the army of the pro-fascist puppet state of the Independent State of Croatia; the Chetniks were a heterogeneous guerrilla army led by former general Draža Mihailović, comprising pro-monarchist and anti-communist members of the defeated Royal Army and other ideologically like-minded groups.

30 Both Kozara Mountain and Livanjsko Polje are in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of which was controlled by the so-called Independent State of Croatia in the occupational distribution of the defeated Kingdom of Yugoslavia's territory.

31 Vera Crvenčanin, *Ima tako ljudi* (Beograd: Svet knjige, 2012), 175–149.

32 Vojislav Đurić, *Ivan Goran Kovačić* (Beograd: Rad, 1966).

and soldiers at the time of writing and, at least temporarily, used the liberated territories to shape the public discourse, while Desanka Maksimović was a civilian in the occupied Belgrade and had no such opportunities.

From that perspective, two distinct streams emerge within *immediate memory culture*: a) one stream was created by active armed resistance members, Partisans and communists, whose works of art received immediate attention, and b) the second stream, created by civilians in the occupied territories, regardless of their connections to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Just like Aleksandar Deroko's first drawings documenting the occupier's early crimes, Maksimović's poem had to wait for the liberation to assume an effective role in the collective remembrance culture. Regardless of its delayed effect compared to the *Pit* and *Stojanka, A Mother from Knežopolje*, all of these works belong to immediate memory culture, as defined above. To reiterate, my definition of this concept relies on Sanja Petrović Todosijević's research and conclusions. She additionally explains:

> *Quite by chance,* some of the most difficult [occupier's crimes] were witnessed on August 17, 1941, by the Serbian architect and professor at the University of Belgrade, Aleksandar Deroko (1894–1988). Already at that time, the renowned designer of the Church of Saint Sava in Vracar (1930) jostled with the mass stunned and frightened Belgraders under the hanged bodies of five Communists and members of the Kosmaj partisan detachment, which were displayed in one of the central streets of Belgrade, on the Terazije Square, as a demonstration of power and might of the occupying forces, but also as a warning, "how will fare" all of those who tried to oppose to the new authorities and "the new order". *On the very same day,* Aleksandar Deroko *"sketched" and documented* one of those *crimes* of occupation authorities that would be among the first echo on the soil of the German occupation area in Serbia, and foreshadow numerous mass crimes that would be committed in Serbia during the fall of 1941.[33]

While the first two poems (*The Pit* and *Stojanka*) are structured as lengthy narrative poems minutely describing war crimes, *A Bloody Fairytale* is a shorter poem that assumes its readers are already familiar with the traumatic events and war crimes it references, hinting at the crime through partial depictions, poetic comparisons, allusions and other lyrical devices. Despite these differences, all three poets employed one shared procedure: *instantly* and *promptly* documenting, in their chosen literary way, specific war crimes and trauma, (un)intentionally influencing future collective remembrance of these events. Although the future of the community they addressed was uncertain, it could be argued that the three authors created an immediate memory culture – with elaborated differentiations – through these works.

33 Sanja Petrović Todosijević, "The Identity of Resistance," 258 (my emphases).

To contextualize the three poems, it is necessary to revisit the intellectual antifascist engagement of the three authors during the 1930s, now considered together. All three belonged to or were close to the political generation[34] and other intellectuals that predicted the global consequences of the fascist threat[35] during the Popular Front era[36], as elaborated in the first part of the article. Therefore, their immediate literary response was much more than a spontaneous reaction to those atrocities. This arguably provided the central context for the creation of these works: the Yugoslav Partisan movement inherited the struggle model of the Spanish Civil War, in which warfare was an essential part of resistance, no less so than accompanying revolutionary and war propaganda, literature included.

As an active pre-war communist, Skender Kulenović joined the Partisan units as soon as they were formed in Bosnia (1941). Thus, his poem *Stojanka* represents *a testimony*, *a propaganda work*, and *a work of art* all at once. The first two aspects of the poem are even spelt out in its (long) full title: *Stojanka, A Mother from Knežopololje Calls for Revenge While Searching for Her Sons Srdjan, Mrdjan and Mladjen, Slain in the Fascist Offensive*. Regarding the described event and testimony, the poet himself could be classified as a *historical witness*, as per Aleida Assmann's definition of the concept.[37] The poem contains some characteristic motifs of the Serbo-Croatian oral epic tradition but also relies upon antifascist messages and values established in the morale-boosting songs of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, which, during the second half of the 1930s, became the adopted "tradition" of every well-educated communist, regardless of their (non)participation in the International Brigades. For example, Stojanka is a martyrial but active and heroic figure ("The grieving mother Stojanka who followed you this winter in action, / All night long through the white snow staggered, / and broke the rail!").[38]

Kovačić's poem, *The Pit*, equally highlights war crimes and the necessity of the liberation struggle. Although it is based on detailed and precise descriptions of the horrific executions perpetrated by the Ustasha, drawn from a survivor testimony, and serves as a worthy memorialization of the victims, its final solar symbolism signifies healing from trauma and calls for not giving up on life and social utopia. The poem and, by extension,

34 Isidora Grubački, "Communism, Left Feminism, and Generations in the 1930s: The Case of Yugoslavia," in *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, edited by Anna Artwińska, and Agnieszka Mrozik (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2020), 45–65.

35 See: Erik Hobsbaum, *Doba ekstrema: istorija Kratkog dvadesetog veka 1914–1991*, trans. Predrag J. Marković (Beograd: Dereta, 2002), 33.

36 I use the term *Popular Front Era* to encapsulate the significance and intensity of several years (1934–1939/40) in global and European history, used in that sense in Nathanael Greene's book *Crisis and Decline: The French Socialist Party in the Popular Front Era* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1969), and accepted by other scholars (see: Charles K. Warner, 1969).

37 Alaida Asman, *Duga senka prošlosti: kultura sećanja i politika povesti* (Beograd: XX vek, 2011), 104–105.

38 "[...] žalosna majka Stojanka, što vas je zimus pratila u akciju, po svu noć cjelcem batrgala i prugu trgala!" "Stojanka majka Knežopoljka," Projekat Rastko, accessed 26 February 2025, https://www.rastko.rs/knjizevnost/umetnicka/poezija/skulenovic-stojanka.html

the poet, is, I would argue, akin to the *historical religious witness* in Assmann's theory of cultural memory.[39]

A Bloody Fairytale, at first glance, focuses on the *martyrdom* of innocent victims. The last stanza can arguably be interpreted as also showcasing a kind of children's *heroism* because, as elaborated in the first part of the article, they go to their deaths peacefully: "Whole rows of boys / Took each other by the hand / And from their last class / Went peacefully to slaughter / As if death was nothing. / Whole lines of friends / Ascended at the same moment to their eternal residence".[40] However, it provided instant solace but did not encourage further conflict. Compared to the other two poems, the position of the lyrical subject in *A Bloody Fairytale* and its author, Desanka Maksimović, aligns more with a *moral witness* than a *religious* or *historical witness*, according to Alaida Assmann's theory of individual and collective memory regarding victim-perpetrator relationships.[41] According to Assmann, unlike religious and historical witnesses, the testimony of moral witnesses does not establish the symbolic meaning of innocent victims' death or a "founding story" usable in rebuilding the community.[42] Nevertheless, this poem had a role to play in the postwar renewal.

1950s and 1960s remembrance politics and memory culture of Kragujevac October

In the following lines, particular facts on memory culture related to the Kragujevac tragedy will be discussed. These facts confirm recent theories in memory studies and vice versa. I rely on the conclusion of Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaet summarizing the research of memory culture in the works of post-Yugoslav authors in their volume *Post-Yugoslav Constellations*. They found useful the shift "in focus from static to dynamic models of cultural memory", found, among others, in Erll and Rigney's edited volume *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (2009). Thus, they turned "from storage (Pierre Nora's 'lieux de mémoire') to circulation; from the view of 'media as passive conveyors of information' to an understanding of the necessarily mediated character of practices of remembering".[43] In other words, Beronja and Vervaet's broader conclusion seems applicable to memory culture in the case of Kragujevac October in the 1950s and 1960s:

39 Asman, *Duga senka prošlosti*, 107.

40 Maksimović, *A Bloody Fairytale*.

41 Asman, *Duga senka prošlosti*, 102–113.

42 Ibid., 108.

43 Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaet, "Introduction", in *(Post)-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature and Culture*, edited by Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaet (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter), 6.

> Cultural memory is not bound to specific sites or merely 'contained' or 'transported' by media – cultural memory circulates from one medium to another (from fictional to non-fictional stories to photos, to monuments, to commemorative ceremonies, to souvenirs), between social groups, and through plurimedial networks outside as well as below the level of the state.[44]

Besides, looking at the timeline of remembering events regarding the Kragujevac October and noticing their temporal closeness or synchronicity, it emerges that numerous acts of memorialization – in different genres and artistic media – interacted with each other and created specific inter- and intra-dynamics of memory culture.

It is evident that Desanka Maksimović aimed to contribute to this process with a new literary work. She tried to do so by writing and publishing the novel *Lest We Forget* in 1969. However, her message remained unnoticed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, despite the intense memory culture surrounding the October trauma during these decades. Thus, the novel was excluded from further cultural memory dynamics and dialogue from the outset. I would argue that there were at least two reasons for its exclusion: new audiences found new media, such as feature movies, more appealing, and literary critics failed to recognize the value of the novel *Lest We Forget* and did little to help its reception.

Above all, one has to bear in mind the dynamic of conceptualizing and building the Kragujevac October Memorial Park (established in the 1950s) and the accompanying programs (which continue to develop), as Olga Manojlović Pintar and Heike Karge elaborated in their studies.[45] Since a certain point in time, new monuments have been placed in the Memorial Park every few years. These monuments are usually gifts from artists across Yugoslavia, Europe or elsewhere in the world. Likewise, beginning in the 1970s with the establishment of *The Great School Lesson*, a program specifically dedicated to commemorating the executed schoolboys and their teachers, a new poem has been written every year by a chosen guest poet.[46] As both of these practices continue to be implemented, it may be possible, I would argue, to "restore" the forgotten novel *Lest We Forget* to public memorialization.

It may be useful to reconsider whether Maksimović's 1969 novel, as well as her other writings from this decade, stemmed from the population's ever-growing need to commemorate Kragujevac October continuously. On the one hand, the state systematically undertook commemorative projects *from the top down*, opening the Kragujevac October Memorial Park in 1953, deciding to establish the 21 October Museum in 1955,

44 Beronja and Vervaet, "Introduction," 2.

45 Manojlović Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja*; Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*, 159–176.

46 The author of the first poem, in 1971, was Dušan Radović. The poem was entitled *A Black Day* (*Crni dan*).

inaugurating the *Great School Lesson* program in 1957 and unveiling the first sculpture in the Memorial Park in 1959. On the other hand, there was another (official and personal/intimate) constant need for public commemoration. The most iconic and famous memorial, besides *A Bloody Fairytale*, became the Park's sculptural monument "Prekinut let" ("Interrupted Flight"), erected in 1963. commonly referred to as "Peto tri" ("Class V-3"), it is explicitly dedicated to the memory of the slain schoolboys. Over time, the monument and its form have become the most recognizable symbol of the town of Kragujevac.

Notably, in 1968, "The Crystal Flower" monument ("Kristalni Cvet"), dedicated to 15 killed Roma shoeshine boys, was placed in the park. In that context, three narrative artworks produced simultaneously, two films (analyzed below) and the novel, testify that artists and the community at large felt that there could never be enough memorialization of such victims. In that sense, the spatial inter-reaction and interconnection of events and memorialization acts are noticeable.

Indicatively, the *Great School Lesson* program and the Memorial Park and Museum eventually absorbed and integrated other cultural events. For example, the *Salon of Anti-war Caricature*[47] eventually became part of the Museum's commemorative events and the *Great School Lesson* program, which had not been the case initially.[48] This institutional and artistic time and space overlapping, hybridizing and interference inevitably informed the content, artistic devices and meaning of particular artworks. It significantly influenced the audience's reception of the meaning and messages of particular memorialization (art) acts, with artists, artworks and institutions inevitably adopting each other's poetics and memory policies.

* * *

The 1960s, as explained, brought a change in the official and artistic memory culture surrounding Kragujevac October. Notably, two feature movies appeared during the 1960s, which is essential for interpreting Maksimović's novel *Lest We Forget* because they shared certain values, messages and artistic devices, constituting part of the described dynamic model of memory culture. The films in question are the 1962 film *Roll Call for Class V-3* (*Prozvan je i V-3*), scripted and directed by Milenko Štrbac, and the 1969 film *A Bloody Fairytale*, scripted and directed by Branimir Tori Janković. Both films focus on children's perspectives and children's fates.

47 See: "Salon antiratne karikature Kragujevac," Spomen-park "Kragujevački oktobar," accessed 26 February 2025, https://www.spomenpark.rs/salon-antiratne-karikature-kragujevac/.

48 For further reading, see: Katarina Ćirović, "Children as a Symbol of Pacifism in the international Perception of the Massacre in Šumarice – Anti-war Caricatures and the Bloody Fairytale by Desanka Maksimović," in *Poetika Velikog školskog časa: deca*, edited by Vladimir Perić (Kragujevac: Spomen-Park "Kragujevački oktobar", 2024), 109–125.

Roll Call for Class V-3 is rooted in both the author's poetics and actual official memory culture demands. Commenting on Štrbac's filmmaking style and poetics, film historian Slobodan Novaković noted that "some characteristic dramaturgical motifs are constantly used and varied" in all of his documentaries (for which he was better known) and feature movies. These motifs illustrate "the emotionality, soulfulness and noble world view of this highly sensitive author",49 who, mostly "with the help of children [characters], expresses his own emotions and beliefs".50 Novaković further argued that, as a director of feature films, Milenko Štrbac "deals almost exclusively with human solidarity, seeing it as the basic motif for drama".[51]

Roll Call for Class V-3 introduces the plot with humour appropriate for depicting children and school life and gradually builds an atmosphere of horror and tragedy. Although the film does not spare the audience the distressing killing scenes, it still shows enough pictures of life in all its aspects and visions of human values, such as falling in love, learning, friendship, commitment, sharing and a sense of community. Thus, the film's ending does not leave the audience in absolute despair. The portrayal of the German commander, who victoriously leaves the crime scene in the film's last seconds, as if absolute evil has won, is simultaneously given a *forte* musical background that does not produce sadness.

In *Roll Call for Class V-3*, the motif of solidarity is at its peak when "the old professor stands in solidarity with his students in moments of greatest temptation, when they are led to their deaths, calmly standing with them to face German rifles".[52]

The later film, *A Bloody Fairytale*, which takes its title from Desanka Maksimović's poem, shifts the spotlight from the schoolboys to another group of children, who represent even more vulnerable victims: Roma children – the town's shoeshine boys between the ages of 12 and 15. The soundtrack by Vojislav Kostić sets the rhythm for the entire film and contributes much to its meaning. In the beginning, the leitmotif is loud and fast (*forte*) but gradually subsides and assumes a mournful tone as the tragic events pick up pace.[53]

Both films exhibit a distinct authorial originality. However, they reflect a new phase in the implementation of the official state remembrance policy that began in the early 1960s, as Karge noted.[54] Among other reorientations, the state – with the Alliance of Veteran Associations of the People's Liberation Struggle of Yugoslavia as its most representative organization regarding war remembrance – decided to turn to young

49 Slobodan Novaković, "Štrbac, prethodnik (Milenko Štrbac)," in Slobodan Novaković, Mrtvi (Beograd: RTS, 2017), 219.

50 Ibid., 219.

51 Ibid., 222.

52 Ibid., 222–223.

53 The film won the Karlovy Vari Lidice Award.

54 Karge, *Okamenjeno sećanje – sećanje u kamenu*, 53–65.

generations, as explained.[55] The two movies represent examples of artistic remembrance in which individual sensibility and remembrance policy of particular artists reflected the state-sponsored memory policy and culture.

The film *A Bloody Fairytale* warrants in-depth scholarly examination and analysis. Regarding the dynamic model of memory culture, it is noteworthy that at the film's premiere, immediately before its first screening, the acclaimed Yugoslav actress Marija Crnobori delivered a "suggestive" recitation of Maksimović's *A Bloody Fairytale*.[56] More importantly, this film is interesting because it defies genre classification, leaving the recipient unsure whether it is a film for adults or children, a war drama or an eclectic mixture of genres, an arthouse film or a B-movie. Similarly, Desanka Maksimović's novel *Lest We Forget*, like all her other novels, poetically is at a genre junction, straddling highbrow and lowbrow literature, allowing us to describe it as middlebrow literature.[57]

Middlebrow authors typically aim to reach the broadest possible audience. Achieving this goal requires a proficient level of storytelling; however, it also involves avoiding the additional aesthetic effort often placed on readers in "highbrow" literature and staying away from experimental writing styles and unconventional narrative devices. This type of literature caters to an audience seeking immersion in the story and its characters. Desanka Maksimović's novels all belonged to middlebrow literature. Notably, this does not apply to the films that have the same intention. The mixture of genres in those films is, at the same time, the result of film experimentation and the unavoidable influence of such tendencies in Yugoslav cinematography.

A Bloody Fairytale was Branimir Tori Janković's directorial debut, and, as Milutin Čolić noted, this lack of experience resulted in some aesthetic shortcomings, such as "the unsteady fabulation" or the director's failure to find "an optimal balance between the tragic plot and the more mundane moods of the little heroes in everyday life situations".[58] Nevertheless, it does not undermine the value and overall effect of the film, which conveys "spontaneous resistance, abhorrence of force and violence against the town and its people".[59] Even though "tragedy is at the core", this tragedy is also "actively involved in the events, and thus, the revolt against monstrous oppressors reaches its highest point".[60]

A Bloody Fairytale, unlike *Roll Call for Class V-3*, is less concerned about historical accuracy. Every authorial choice and device serves to communicate the (final) message of *anti-fascist resistance* to the occupier. I argue that it is precisely the film's eclecticism

55 Ibid., 55.

56 Milutin Čolić, *Jugoslovenski ratni film* (Beograd: Titovo Užice: Institut za film, Vesti, 1984), 308.

57 See: Stanislava Barać, "Desanka Maksimović's Engaged Medical Novel *Open Window* (1954)," *Slavia Meridionalis* 22 (2022): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.11648sm/2679.

58 Čolić, *Jugoslovenski ratni film*, 308.

59 Ibid., 308.

60 bid., 308.

and closeness to experimental "black wave" poetics that make its language universal.[61] Of course, in the 1960s, these works of art, addressing the same topic but rendered in trendier formats, were too stiff competition for Maksimović's novel to come through.

Lest We Forget

By the time the novel *Lest We Forget* was published in 1969, Desanka Maksimović had already developed distinctive narrative devices and narrative structure, which she again applied in this novel. Whether shaping an extensive narrative, such as in the multilayered medical novel *Open Window* in 1954, or a less extensive yet broad one with a number of characters and their different *Weltanschauung* perspectives, like in her 1960 novel *A Rebellious Class* (*Buntovan razred*)[62], Desanka Maksimović stays true to her poetics and ethics. She broadly depicts a crisis moment in history by including all relevant perspectives, often diametrically opposed, even sympathizing with each of them, but clearly and unambiguously expressing her ideological position as the novel's narrator, a public figure (writer), professional (high school teacher of literature and history) and human being.

Indicatively, like Maksimović's previous two novels, *Lest We Forget* was published by a smaller and less prestigious publisher (Minerva, Subotica). This suggests that mainstream criticism reserved its acclaim for Maksimović's poetry, sidelining her fiction as a less notable contribution. Among other reasons, these reservations played a part in the modest reception of *Lest We Forget*.

The decision to write a novel on a topic she had already addressed in a poem that had proven quite influential in the memory culture surrounding the Kragujevac tragedy implies at least three things. Firstly, Desanka Maksimović had yet to process fully her personal and intimate trauma. Secondly, she believed that the existing body of art dealing with the crime had not done enough to encourage community healing and remembrance processes. Thirdly, Desanka Maksimović was inspired by other works on Kragujevac October, which were, inversely, inspired by her poem. The novel *Lest We Forget*, however, failed to resonate with a broader readership, faring no better with literary critics, who deemed it had little literary value. Thus, the novel stayed under the radar, and the intricate portrayal of events and characters within it remained largely unknown.

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61 That may be why the Tokyo-based Kadokawa Corporation and Tuttle-Mori Agency recently bought the rights for a manga adaptation of the film by Hisashi Sakaguchi, a renowned Japanese manga artist and animator. See: "Serbian Classic Sold for Comic Book Adaptation in Japan", Film New Europe, accessed 26 February 2025, https://www.filmneweurope.com/news/serbia-news/item/123557-serbian-classic-sold-for-comic-book-adaptation-in-japan.

62 Cf. also Desanka Maksimović's collection of short stories *Horrible Game*: Desanka Maksimović, *Strašna igra* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1954).

Decades later, Ana Ćosić-Vukić, the editor of Maksimović's prose writings within the critical edition of her *Complete Works,* observed that the novel's plot is more coherent than in her previous works of fiction. She noted that "the composition is more meaningful with the plot compressed into three days", more specifically, "the day before the horrible Nazi crime, the day when the schoolboys and Kragujevac citizens were executed, and the day after".[63]

Apart from this effective three-day plot compression, the composition is similar to Maksimović's earlier novels. Regardless of the novel's volume and central theme, the author develops a plot branched out enough to cover different and opposite human characters and positions, or something that could be called the *totality of life*. This narrative device – also applied in *Open Window* (a "thick" novel, with many micro-narratives in addition to the main storyline) and *A Rebellious Class* (a shorter novel with fewer additional micro-narratives) – plays an important role in *Lest We Forget,* adding to its readability. Had the novel exclusively focused on the children's tragic fate, the readers would have been unlikely to find the story as relatable as they do when it includes details from everyday life, side characters, their life paths, thoughts and feelings, including landscape descriptions and other elements of realist storytelling.

Thus, after the opening paragraphs that inevitably invoke death,[64] briefly mentioning the first killings of civilian hostages, which produce an intimidating atmosphere, the novel's plot begins with the picture of a (new) life. This kind of oxymoronic storytelling is successfully carried out until the end of the novel. The first chapter, "Children Are Also Born in War" ("Deca se rađaju i u ratu") is set in the chronotope of a morning at a maternity ward, and its main character (every chapter has a different protagonist) is Doctor Bogdanka, the head gynaecologist in the town's hospital, who knows almost every child in the town. As readers, we "witness" the birth of a child, a new life, and the joy of the parents, the doctor and all other side characters. This scene, I argue, has two effects on the readers. On the one hand, as the novel was published and read in a community where everybody knew how the story ends, a beginning like this produces anxiety as the readers' first response. On the other hand, the atmosphere of the character's temporary

63 Ana Ćosić-Vukić, "Proza Desanke Maksimović i književne tendencije u njenom dobu," in *Tradicionalno i moderno u stvaralaštvu Desanke Maksimović: zbornik radova*, edited by Ana Ćosić-Vukić (Beograd: Zadužbina "Desanka Makismović," 2008), 167.

64 "It is the early hour of the dawn, when one usually thinks of death, when one feels lonely. The Sun is still far away, perhaps near Kyiv, maybe somewhere behind the Balkan Mountain. The eastern wind makes a path through the valley's hazes, through the silence pierced by gunfire and the sudden cry of a newborn baby. After that, it is quiet and barren as if there is no one left in this world, as if everybody is already under the ground, as if those desolate hills, barely visible through the daybreak, are someone's ancient shared graves." Original version: "Rani je čas zore kad se obično misli o smrti, kad se oseća usamljenim. Sunce je još daleko, možda kod Kijeva, možda negde iza planine Balkana. Istočnjak krti stazu kroz dolinske izmaglice, kroz tišinu uskolebanu pucnjem i iznenadnim plačom novorođenčeta. Zatim je opet tiho i pusto kao da nigde na svetu nema nijednog čoveka, da su možda već svi pod zemljom i da su ta pusta brda što se kroz praskozorje jedva naziru nečije pradavne zajedničke humke"; Desanka Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, in *Proza, Romani, knjiga prva*, edited by Ana Ćosić-Vukić, in *Celokupna dela*, vol. 4, (Beograd: Zadužbina Desanka Maksimović, Službeni glasnik, Zavod za udžbenike, 2012), 395.

joyful feelings is so captivating that it produces an optimistic effect. Desanka Maksimović maintains this balance throughout the novel and within the individual chapters. That is a narrative method devised to get the readers to internalize and embrace the distressing story without a constant sense of pain, a commonly used strategy in middlebrow literature.

The lack of endorsement and recommendation from official criticism hindered the wider reception of all Maksimović's novels. In this case, this complex situation negatively impacted the great potential of the novel *Lest We Forget* and its role in the memory culture of the Kragujevac massacre. The lack of attention from official criticism is of the highest importance for this novel's subject matter and the author's other politically engaged novels. From the beginning of the 20th century onward, Serbian and Yugoslav academic literary criticism has rarely understood middlebrow literature, its raison d'être and the significant role it plays in every (national) culture. All of Maksimović's fiction was thus misunderstood and underrated, even academically "hidden" from a broader readership. As a rule, influential critics in socialist Yugoslavia were interested only in highbrow literature. Maksimović's poetry met their criteria, as did her children's books. However, her fiction aimed at adults did not. In one of the first reviews of Maksimović's novel *Open Window*, quoted by Ana Ćosić-Vukić, literary critic Petar Džadžić concludes his negative appraisal by opining that "this book *has to be consigned to oblivion* immediately, lest we forget this writer".[65] This assessment would persist and evolve into a characteristic perspective on Maksimović's prose for adults. It is highlighted here because it exemplifies the mechanism through which her adult fiction was marginalized in the literary community. In contrast, the title of the novel under consideration reflects the deliberate intent behind her writing of this genre.

And yet, middlebrow literature sometimes found its way to readers, despite receiving scathing reviews or being ignored by literary critics. However, this was not the case with this novel, which was not reprinted until the critical edition of Maksimović's *Complete Works* in 2012. I propose two theses to explain why this was so. Firstly, the mentioned films partly assumed the role in the community's memory culture the novel would have played in the previous media system (when printed media dominated). They presented the Kragujevac tragedy in a "readable," i.e., watchable way, introducing it to the audience beginning with a wider picture of the totality of life. It is, of course, a limited totality, or an illusory totality, determined by the occupational context. Inevitably, as the plot develops, tragic scenes take over the cinematic and TV screen. Secondly, in a dialogue with those films (within the audiences' and readers' responses), the novel would still retain its function and be of extraordinary importance in memory culture building, offering a more nuanced picture of the victims and perpetrators and the war crime itself.

65 Ana Ćosić-Vukić, "Proza Desanke Maksimović i književne tendencije u njenom dobu," 164 (emphasis S. B).

The second thesis deserves additional elaboration in the contemporary context of historical revisionism regarding the Second World War and anti-fascism in the Yugoslav successor states and societies. In that context, *Lest We Forget* could play the role of a reminder of revised and falsified facts. Namely, Desanka Maksimović preserved the memory of different people/characters and their very different ideological and practical positions in the Kragujevac tragedy. As a community member, author and storyteller, Desanka Maksimović, I would argue, understood all of those positions and articulated them by applying the focalization technique to the character's perspective, depicting them practically as an insider of the events.

Using the same method in her novel A *Rebellious Class*, the author equally convincingly provided motivation for antagonistic fascist and antifascist positions, adding, in some cases, psychological motivation (childhood trauma) to the character's free ideological choice. In that way, Maksimović managed to understand and narratively "justify" Nazi characters and the choices of domestic collaborators, specifically those of Dimitrije Ljotić's followers, members of the collaborationist Serbian Volunteer Corps, who were in charge of rounding up hostages for reprisals.

The novel's value lies in Maksimović's ability to narratively elaborate and, in that sense, "justify" every position. However, she does not excuse or relativize the war crime. On the contrary, she condemns the crime and all perpetrators throughout the entirety of the novel. It is important to note that Desanka Maksimović did not hesitate to condemn war crimes against the innocent when necessary, as demonstrated in her poem *Majke optužuju* (*Mothers Accuse*).[66]

In terms of nuanced and developed ideological positioning, the novel *Lest We Forget* more or less repeats the positionality of the characters seen in the movie *Roll Call for Class V-3* (1962). Nevertheless, the novel does so in a much more comprehensive way, with many additional aspects this genre can absorb (introducing many new characters, exploring their inner thoughts and emotions, developing relationships between minor characters, etc.). To some extent, the novel also develops a similar scheme of characters to the film *A Bloody Fairytale*, which was made around the same time the novel was written. Thus, we can consider these three works of art or products of popular culture as an interconnected semantic trifecta of the memory culture surrounding Kragujevac October. The question is, can these three artworks have an impact on contemporary memory culture – in historical scholarship as well as in cultural production – regarding the Second World War? Another pertinent question is whether the novel can achieve the impact it failed to make in its own time. The answers to these questions suggest that the ideological and cultural landscape in the Yugoslav successor states has changed and even turned upside-down compared to the 1960s.

66 For illustration purposes, here are the first two stanzas of the poem "Mothers Accuse" in the original: Kad užasi rata prođu, / i opet bude / u porodici toplih dana, / vama treba zabraniti / da milujete svetla temena mališana. // Vi nemate prava da slušate / sveže izvore dečjeg glasa; / oni što su nekad bili deca, snežna i plava, / poumirali su na klanicama ljudskim / vašom krivicom, / puni užasa; Desanka Maksimović, *Pesme*, in *Celokupna dela*, vol. 1, 578.

However, what is unquestionable for today's readers are other aspects of the novel. Desanka Maksimović used the novel's ability to present the totality of life to describe, at many points of the narration, what the massacre meant for a community such as a small or middle-sized town, which Kragujevac was at the time. For example, she depicts the idyllic aspect of this community (and other communities) before the war and its atrocities:

> The families in the neighbourhood resembled a patriarchal brotherhood. Sometimes, there was only one sieve, saw, dipper gourd, or ladder, so over time, people forgot who the original owner of a thing had been. The troubles of one family were considered everyone's, just as the joy of one family was celebrated by all others.[67]

One of the chapters in the first part of the novel, "Women", prepares the reader for a deep understanding of the coming tragedy. Here, Desanka Maksimović celebrates maternal love and depicts the encounter of a new mother and an "old" mother, introducing the topic of child adoption, a way to present motherhood in all possible modes.

Unlike the poem, the novel, by virtue of narrativity, allowed the writer *to confront* war criminals and their innocent victims directly and nuancedly and characterize them in a non-stereotypical manner. Maksimović's memory politics needed to portray German soldiers, the executors, who intimately disapproved of this kind of "warfare". Some of the characters reflect this need, for instance, a young German soldier (in the chapter "Shot in Front of the Church") who looks at an old man he is supposed to shoot, thinking about how to escape that.[68]

The novel's increased scope compared to the poem also allowed the author to describe post-traumatic reactions to killing people and committing atrocities. At the beginning, in the paragraphs explaining the official military directive for the mass execution of civilians, the storyteller briefly touches on the warning that the perpetrators

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67 Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 402.

68 "His gaze kept returning to the old man watching him with more secret hope than fear, akin to a father or grandfather rather than a captured enemy, with more pity than hatred. Now and then their eyes would meet and stay connected for a few seconds. … The youngest soldier tried to keep the old man in front of him, facing the barrel of his rifle. He will shoot over the old man's head. The man will fall scared or knocked down by other bodies – perhaps he would fall with a bullet, but the soldier would not be the one who killed him." (441). Original version: "Pogled mu se stalno vraćao na starca koji ga je gledao, više s potajnom nadom, nego sa strahom, više kao otac ili ded, a ne zarobljeni neprijatelj, više sa žaljenjem nego sa mržnjom. S časa na čas njihove oči bi se srele i ostale nekoliko sekundi povezane, … Najmlađi vojnik se trudio da starac bude ispred njega, naspram cevi njegove puške. Pucaće iznad starčeve glave. On će pasti uplašen ili oboren drugim telima – možda će pasti i metkom oboren, ali ga neće on ubiti"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 441.

may experience unwanted bodily reactions.[69] Later in the story, she describes a soldier vomiting after committing a crime – the crime that preceded the Kragujevac massacre. That character is Wilhelm Belk, sketched out in one paragraph, enough for the author to effectively summarize scientific findings about post-traumatic somatic symptoms in perpetrators:

> In theory, Belk absolutely agreed with the German political direction, even with the means of its conducting, with all of it, and yet, after taking part in a mass shooting in Grošnica, his body rebelled. It responded more fairly, more humanely, than his soul. A terrible pain in his stomach appeared, with constant intestinal irritation, which he could not stop with any medicine.[70]

Desanka Maksimović chose to portray the character of a staunch Nazi yet still human soldier at a peculiar moment in world history. One of the landmark events of the 1960s was the public and globally televised trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961), which unequivocally showed to the world that some Nazis never repented for their mass crimes. This realization became part and, in some cases, even the bedrock of moral for many intellectuals, finding its way into their theories on evil, guilt and responsibility. I argue that Maksimović's described portrayal in the novel not only encapsulated her vision of humanity but also expressed her remembrance policy at this globally sensitive historical moment. In such a situation, I would argue that Desanka Maksimović understood the anti-Nazi discourse in mass media as a possible turning point that could lead to a proliferation of anti-German discourses. Thus, she wanted a different example, one that would, in her understanding of the world, serve (to preserve) world peace. All of Maksimović's previous engaged prose writings point to an aspiration to establish a sublime narrative reconciliation of conflicted ideological sides at the end of her stories.[71]

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69 "In front of him there was a confidential paper on the execution method, and he underlined the places that seemed important to him: shooting with a rifle at a distance of twelve meters. A shot to the head means certain death. Five shooters are assigned to each convict. The shooting is done by the troops and units that have suffered losses. It takes forty minutes to kill a hundred people. Digging pits takes much longer. Shooters may have reactions"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 428. Serbian original: "Pred njim je bilo neko poverljivo štivo o načinu streljanja, pa je podvlačio mesta koja su mu se činila važna: strelja se puškom na dvanaest metara odstojanja. Pucanj u glavu sigurna smrt. Za svakog osuđenika određuje se pet strelaca. Streljanje vrše trupe, i to čete koje su imale gubitaka. Da se sto ljudi ubije, potrebno je četrdeset minuta. Za kopanje jama treba mnogo više vremena. Kod strelaca mogu nastati reakcije"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 428.

70 "I Viljem Belk se prevrtao u postelji. Belk se teorijski potpuno slagao sa nemačkim pravcem politike, čak i sa načinom kako se ona sprovodi, sa svim i svačim, ali mu se, kada je učestvovao u masovnom streljanju u Grošnici, telo pobunilo. Ono se kod Belka pravičnije, čovečnije bar, odazvalo nego njegova duša. Dobio je užasne bolove u želucu sa stalnim nadražejem creva, što evo ni dosad nije mogao nikakvim lekovima zaustaviti"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 449.

71 Barać, "Angažovana prozaistkinja Desanka Maksimović," 225–252.

The author's portrayal of the collaborators, the followers of the infamous Dimitrije Ljotić, stems from the same poetic and ethical choices and beliefs. During the occupation, many pre-war political supporters of Dimitrije Ljotić in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia joined the Serbian Volunteer Corps (Srpski dobrovoljački korpus; Serbisches Freiwilligenkorps), a collaborationist paramilitary under the command of the occupation regime.[72] Ljotić's followers were instrumental in rounding up hostages and helping organize reprisals and executions of civilians in Kragujevac and the surrounding villages. In this short novel, Desanka Maksimović outlines a nuanced network of ideological and psychological positions of Ljotić's men. There is a significant difference in how Desanka Maksimović depicted the "Chief" (Glavni), the leader of the local unit of Ljotić's followers, compared to his subordinates.

The chapter "The List of Honourable Citizens" ("Spisak čestitih građana") focuses on portraying the Chief, the only character not given a name in the novel. His namelessness is arguably a symbolic punishment of the character and, by extension, all non-fictional collaborators with such a war crime burden. What also sets this character apart from all the others is that he is portrayed in a distinctly caricatural manner.[73] By using agrammatical language and humorously and with striking irony painting an ignorant and even distorted picture of the world in his monologues or dialogues, Desanka Maksimović simultaneously mocks Ljotić's pro-fascist ideology.

However, the reactions of other side characters, who also belong to this ideological and political movement, serve the author to show that in concrete situations, ideologically biased people can behave and act according to fundamental human values. While the Chief finds almost everyone in the town suspicious and thus qualified for the list of hostages (worker, teacher, student, carpenter, baker, all educated people, a grandmother that has a grandchild in the school, etc.), lower-ranking soldiers, on the contrary, find an excuse for almost everyone.

These characters, different from the Chief, are individually and collectively portrayed in the chapter "Shot in Front of the Church" ("Streljanje pred crkvom"). The chapter describes one of the first mass atrocities in the "100 for one" reprisals: the execution of people who happened to be in a church in the village of Grošnica, a crime that took place a day before the Kragujevac massacre. Desanka Maksimović creates her vision of the internal and external events unfolding in Ljotić's followers who assisted in the crime:

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72 On the complex hierarchy of the occupation military-police system in the Occupied Zone of Serbia, especially police organization and its changes and phases throughout the war, see: Радосав Туцовић, *Драги Јовановић и генерал Мајснер на челу полиције у окупираној Србији* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, Чигоја штампа), 2022.

73 Cf. the representation of Marisav Petrović and the testimony of encounters with this commander of the Serbian Voluntary Corps in Kragujevac in the diaries of Katarina Bogdanović: Katarina Bogdanović, *Izabrani život* (Kragujevac: Književni klub "Katarina Bogdanović," 1986), 110–113.

> Suddenly and brutally sobered, Ljotić's men felt as if the connection between them and their birth country had been severed, that the connection with which they held onto the enemy had also been severed. They were now like those whom the sky does not want and the earth does not receive, eternal has-beens, rattled, incapacitated.[74]

In her novelistic vision, Maksimović encoded the idea of future reconciliation of the two warring sides, no matter how impossible it seemed.

Finally, nature plays a significant role in building the novel's complex networks of character's positionalities. In short, Desanka Maksimović, like in her previous works of fiction, gives a lot of narrative space to descriptions of nature, trying to find the original "language" of non-human nature for each of her prose works. In *Lest We Forget*, the traumatic events caused by humans destabilize the picture of nature as a whole, although some parts of the depicted nature "try" to "ignore" the human part of reality, seeming to be indifferent. The following description is illustrative:

> In the bushes, the branches and the fields, everything went on as before. In anthills, ants carrying tiny white balls hurried across the path on some urgent business. The hedgehog impaled scented, freshly fallen leaves on its spikes – he, too, must have enemies to hide from. Shrews and moles dug their underground corridors. The birds in the branches lived their lives, probably not devoid of worry, although it seems joyful to us. The bees busily flew past the crowd of people condemned to death. A few tall white clouds continued to live according to their imagination, hugging each other, building towers, dispersing and coming together again. And the sun, the great benefactor and torturer of those people, rose indifferently in the sky.[75]

Thus, in the author's vision, nature does not stay entirely untouched by human deeds. However, it is indifferent in some aspects. The author needed these indifferent aspects of nature to express the contrast between the possibility of peaceful life and the cruelties of war.

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74 "Iznenada i surovo otrežnjeni ljotićevci osetili su kao da je presečena veza između njih i zemlje u kojoj su rođeni, da je presečana u njima samima i veza kojom su se držali za neprijatelja. Bili su sada kao oni koje nebo neće a zemlja ne prima, za uvek u svemu bivši, pometeni, onemogućeni"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 442.

75 "U žbunju i granju i na polju dešavalo se sve što se dešavalo i do toga trenutka. Po mravinjacima su mravi užurbano mileli natovareni belim lopticama, odlazili preko putanje nekim neodložnim poslom. Jež je u smetu nabadao na bodlje mirisne, tek opale liske – i on zacelo ima neprijatelja i treba od njih da se sakrije. Rovci i krtice pod zemljom su kopali hodnike. Ptice su u granju živele svojim životom, koji verovatno nije lišen briga, mada se nama prikazuje veseo. I pčele su zaposleno proletale kraj gomile ljudi na smrt osuđenih. Nekoliko visokoh belih oblaka nastavilo je da živi prema svojoj mašti, da se grli, da gradi kule, da se razilazi i ponovo četi. I sunce, veliki dobrotvor i dušmanin tih ljudi, ravnodušno se pelo nebom"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 440.

Although ambivalent and discomforting, as in the quoted example, her descriptions of nature allow the reader to take a break from the psychological analysis of characters or descriptions of unimaginable war crimes.

The storyteller of *Lest We Forget* – as in any successfully written middlebrow novel – firmly leads the readers toward the story's end. The novel's composition is carefully organized and structured, calculated to take the readers through "secondary" narratives and characters without ever straying from the main plot. Desanka Maksimović managed to do this by organizing this short novel's story into twenty-seven chapters of varying lengths. The length of the chapters corresponds to the importance the author attributes to the described event or character in the novel's overall meaning, thus making the plot complex but transparent.

The last chapters ("Night after the Shooting", "Commander", "Day After", "Foster Child", "A Peaceful Citizen", "I Am Waiting for Ivan's Angel", "Visions of the Underground", "Ana's Letter", "Rose from the Dead", "Children in a Grieving Town", "A Town in Mourning"), sketch the horrific and oppressive atmosphere in the small town after the war crime. The narrative dynamics, achieved by alternating longer and shorter chapters, dynamize the reader's attention and reception, allowing the author to achieve at least two reception effects: a) the reader actively recalls earlier chapters, and b) the *rhythm* of the "scenes" sequence is different or even opposite to the genre of tragedy and the palpable sense of tragedy present in reality. While it may seem that Maksimović borrowed this technique from the two mentioned films, she had already applied it in her previous novels.

Most importantly, this enables the author not to relativize the severity of the trauma but simultaneously not to leave the audience (community) in utter despair. This sensitive artistic technique creates *hope* as one of its effects.

Hence, the very end of the novel, I would argue, comes at the right point in the narrative, conveying the message that Desanka Maksimović had prepared the readers to expect as the plot progressed. The last "scene" in the final chapter depicts a school lesson the teacher is having with the younger pupils after the massacre. The narrator introduces a new side character, eight-year-old Višnja. By focusing on Višnja's perspective, readers are also introduced to the expectations of younger children in Kragujevac: after a whole day of traumatic silence or cries around them, they expect words of consolation or explanation from their teacher.

Having been a teacher for her entire professional life, Desanka Maksimović knows, I would argue, that it is the responsibility of a teacher to break the traumatic silence. In the novel, the teacher says to the pupils: "As long as students and school exist, we will never forget…"[76]. Although that is all that the teacher can say in the classroom after the

76 "Nikad, dokle god bude đaka i škole, nećemo zaboraviti…"; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 517.

massacre, even the pupils in the lower grades know the implicit meaning of that incomplete sentence. The narrator explains the meaning explicitly, making it the final paragraph in the novel and the author's personal memory politics manifesto: "...but even the eight-year-old children knew what it was that would not be forgotten, and in their hearts happened something akin to an oath, something *different from the grief and fear* they had felt until that moment. And so, there was something else they could do amidst the horrific events around them, apart from wearing mourning clothes. They could: never forget..."[77] For the readers who finish the novel, this last oath or the narrator's testamentary words, *never forget*, resonate with an additional meaning: they will never forget the complexity of reality and the character's positions convincingly depicted in the novel.

Conclusion

My broad contextualization and close reading of Desanka Maksimovic's novel *Lest We Forget* (1969) confirm the overarching and more specific conclusions of Heike Karge and other historians regarding the memory politics of the Second World War in Yugoslavia and their interpretations of remembrance politics and memory culture surrounding the civilian victims of war (Olga Manojlović Pintar, Sanja Petrović Todosijević). Concurring with Karge, I would argue that public remembrance in socialist Yugoslavia was not limited to official commemoration practices.[78] Besides the political elites, as Karge stressed, there were other agents and artists, such as Desanka Maksimović, who adopted the officially established memorialization frame and yet changed its final shape and meaning with their intimate and original interpretations.[79]

Desanka Maksimović's narrative remembrance practice had roots in her pre-war narrative poetics and ethics, as well as her anti-fascist agency through literature. Desanka Maksimović's post-war memory engagement was, as Karge also noticed for many others, the result of her understanding that the official memory canon did not force authors to write in a particular and rigid way. Maksimović, again like many others, understood it as an opportunity, an artistic process, a duty towards the community and a pedagogical task. As a lifelong teacher, Desanka Maksimović was especially concerned with the last. Thus, she wrote her novel *Lest We Forget* as a middlebrow literary offering, accessible to a broad audience, suitable as reading material for Serbo-Croatian language curricula in elementary and high school education.

77 "...ali su osmogodišnja deca znala šta se to neće zaboraviti i u njihovim srcima se zbilo nešto kao zakletva, nešto *drugčije od žalosti i straha* koje su do toga trenutka osećala. Eto, ima još nešto sem nošenja crnine, što i ona mogu učiniti u strašnim događajima koji su se oko njih zbivali. Mogu: nikad ne zaboraviti..."; Maksimović, *Ne zaboraviti*, 517 (emphasis S. B.).

78 Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje*?, 245.

79 Ibid.

In other words, the relationship of Maksimović's narrative to official remembrance politics was threefold. In some aspects, it strictly adhered to the official war memory politics (achieving catharsis and not leaving the reader to despair over the causeless civilian victims of war). In other aspects, it was complementary to it, achieving catharsis despite offering an unvarnished picture of the crime. In that sense, it is comparable to the intentions of the architect and sculptor Bogdan Bogdanović regarding his 1966 monument to civilian victims of the Jasenovac concentration and death camp (which features engraved verses from the poem *The Pit*). Bogdanović says that in his Flower memorial, "the melancholic lotus of reinforced concrete not only stops evil thoughts on both sides but also has a certain cathartic effect: it has insulted no one, threatened no one, it has not called for revenge, but it has not hidden the truth".[80]

Finally, Maksimović's novel was original in some aspects.

What was this novel's most original contribution to the war memory canon? The ability to express universal sympathy and understanding for all human choices with all its nuances, while not relativizing anti-fascist values, represents the particularity and distinctive trait of Desanka Maksimović's fiction. This literary method – possibly taken to its limits in the more abstract medium of concrete in Bogdanović's sculpture – interpreted as memory culture politics, leaves the future community with the possibility of later reconciliation, or, at least, peaceful coexistence of the once conflicted ideologies and people of the warring sides. And, in Maksimović's poetic and ethical vision, this peaceful coexistence, i.e., peace as a local and global goal, should be unconditional.

80 *Public Institution Jasenovac Memorial Site*, Prospect (Jasenovac), 2024.

Summary

Focusing on Desanka Maksimović's novel *Ne zaboraviti* (*Lest We Forget*, 1969), the paper reconstructs the author's thoroughly thought-out remembrance politics. Interpreting the novel in the context of the official and unofficial remembrance politics and practices surrounding the Second World War and its victims in socialist Yugoslavia, as well as in the context of the author's previous novels and her politically engaged works from the 1930s, the paper elaborates how this ultra-popular and best-selling Yugoslav author developed remembrance politics that aligned with the official postwar antifascist remembrance culture. The novel *Lest We Forget* tells the dramatic story of the three days around the Nazi occupiers' mass execution of hostages and schoolchildren in Kragujevac on 20 October 1941. The paper raises the methodological question of why Desanka Maksimović, having already written the poem *Krvava bajka* (*A Bloody Fairytale*, 1946), chose to address the same well-known traumatic event and war crime in a different genre: narrative fiction (albeit based on a true story). The answer is that Desanka Maksimović was aware that anti-war engagement within the antifascist state policy and remembrance culture had yet to be completed within the community to which she addressed her messages. In other words, through her additional literary engagement, the author productively participated in the ongoing Yugoslav dynamic memory culture surrounding Kragujevac October, as well as in the country's official peace policy.

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