


Sites of the Memory of the Serbian Nation in Kosovo and the Place of Kosovo in the Collective Memory of the Serbs

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Abstract

Drawing on the conceptual framework of sites of memory and collective memory, the study examines Kosovo as a crucial site of Serbian national memory, focusing on the historic Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Through a qualitative analysis based on primary and secondary sources, it addresses the question of why, when, and how Kosovo became a prominent part of the Serbian collective memory. In this regard, the study explores the contribution of the Serbian Orthodox Church, historical narratives, myths, monuments, memorials, songs, poems, and other cultural expressions in both achieving and maintaining Kosovo's distinctive position within the collective memory of the Serbian nation. Moreover, the study explores Serbian perceptions and socially constructed images related to Kosovo, the Battle of Kosovo, and the national heroes central to this significant event. Finally, it scrutinizes the resurgence of the Kosovo narrative for political objectives orchestrated by Serbian political elites, with particular attention given to the influence of Slobodan Milosevic

Keywords: Kosovo, Battle of Kosovo, Sites of Memory, Collective Memory, Serbia

Kosova'da Sırp Ulusunun Hafıza Mekanları ve Sırp Halkının Kolektif Hafızasında Kosova'nın Yeri

Öz

Kavramsal çerçeve olarak hafıza mekanları ve kolektif hafıza kavramlarına dayanan bu çalışma, 1389 Kosova Savaşını odağına alarak, Kosova'nın içerisinde barındırdığı hafıza mekanları ile Sırp ulusal hafızasında taşıdığı önemi incelemektedir. Çalışmada birincil ve ikincil kaynaklardan toplanan verilere dayalı bir nitel analiz yoluyla, Kosova'nın nasıl, neden, ne zaman Sırp kolektif hafızasının önemli bir parçası haline geldiği sorusuna cevap aranmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Sırp Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin, tarihsel anlatıların, mitlerin, anıtların, şarkıların, şiirlerin ve diğer kültürel ifadelerin Kosova'nın Sırp ulusunun kolektif hafızası içindeki kendine özgü konumunu elde etmesi ve sürdürmesinde oynadığı role değinilmiştir. Çalışma ayrıca Kosova, Kosova Savaşı ve Sırp ulusu için tarihi bir önemi olan bu savaşın merkezinde yer alan ulusal kahramanlarla ilgili Sırp algılarını ve sosyal olarak inşa edilen imgeleri incelemektedir. Son olarak, Slobodan Miloseviç'in tutum ve politikaları çerçevesinde, Sırp siyasi elitlerin siyasi hedefleri doğrultusunda Kosova'yı nasıl araçsallaştırdığı ve Kosova anlatısının yeniden canlandırılmasında nasıl rol oynadıkları ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kosova, Kosova Savaşı, Hafıza Mekanları, Kolektif Hafıza,

1. Introduction

A nation's memory is the bedrock of its collective identity, an unyielding force that weaves the intricate tapestry of its existence. Through memory, societies create narratives that traverse time, shaping the contours of their shared past and guiding their present and future. More than mere remembrance, memory is a powerful tool for constructing notions of national identity, especially in regions where history is intertwined with contested territories and cultures. This paper explores one such complex area, delving into the rich tapestry of collective memory, tradition, and the invention of identity within the Serbian nation, focusing on the historical terrain of Kosovo.

Kosovo is a region of historical significance for both Serbs and Albanians (see Duijzings, 2000; Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers, 2006; Vickers, 1998), and it remains a site of ongoing disputes. The land is etched with tales of bravery, sacrifice, and resilience, and it holds a distinctive place in the Serbian national consciousness. The collective memory of Kosovo for the Serbian nation centers around the historic Battle of Kosovo, a seminal clash between the Serbian Kingdom and the Ottoman Empire in 1389. Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, a renowned Serbian national hero, sacrificed his life on this battlefield, forever cementing his name in the annals of Serbian history. Hence, the narrative of Kosovo is integral to Serbian national identity. However, Kosovo holds significant importance for Serbs as a sacred symbol, encompassing not only the historical Battle but also valuable cultural heritage, especially medieval monasteries which are located within the territory's borders. Thus, when Serbs proclaim Kosovo as the birthplace of Serb identity, their claim includes both the physical place and the sacred conceptual dimension.

This paper aims to explore the various layers of the Serbian collective memory of Kosovo and provide insight into the underlying questions of how and why Kosovo has become a cherished site of memory for the Serbian nation. To accomplish this, a variety of secondary sources are analyzed through the lenses of sites of memory, collective memory, the invention of tradition, and the politics of memory. This conceptual framework not only provides an understanding of the profound dynamics at play, but also underscores the enduring influence of memory in shaping a nation's identity. The analysis of the Serbian perspective on Kosovo is enriched through examinations of historical narratives, myths, stories, monuments, memorials, songs, poems, and other representations that have sustained and propagated the Serbian view of Kosovo. Finally, the study discusses how the image of Kosovo began to be used for political purposes by Serbian nationalist elites at the dawn of Yugoslavia's disintegration, notably in regard to Slobodan Milosevic's attitudes and policies.

2. Conceptual Framework: Sites of Memory and Collective Memory

Sites of memory, also known as Realms of Memory (Nora, 1996, 2006), are relics of a community or society's past. They include its heroes and traitors, friends and enemies, triumphs, defeats, tragedies, and glorious 'golden ages.' These sites serve to build a shared identity and history. Such symbolic sites, including monuments, emblems, memorials, commemorations, museums, national holidays, eulogies, history books, works of literature, and art, serve not only to commemorate or represent the past that is meaningful to the group, but also to dispel the ambiguities of collective memory. Within national groups, they demarcate and elucidate the boundaries of the nation by constructing a shared past that encompasses the collective experiences of pain, joy, and values that make up the essence of the nation. Additionally, they define the confines of collective memory, determining what is to be

remembered or forgotten, and distinguishing the essential elements that contribute to the nation's identity from those that do not (Özkırımlı, 2013, pp. 55–56; see Renan, 1990).

It is necessary to elaborate on Nora's (1996, pp. 1–20) distinction between memory and history to understand why sites of memory are constructed. Nora argues that as the memory allows us to remember the past and become aware of its shadow disappears, we need sites of memory to remind us of the past and reconnect us to it. Since there are no longer authentic environments of memory (*milieux de memoire*), sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*) are needed to bind societies with the past (Nora, 1996, p. 1). Referring to the difference between real memory and memory that has been the subject of history, Nora pointed out that real memory is in a state of continuous development within society, collective, plural, unlimited and individualized, in other words, more natural and spontaneous. In contrast, history intervenes within the memory in a process of social construction that attempts to reconstruct what no longer exists. It plays a constructive and motivating role in the formation of a collective consciousness that is artificially created by selecting certain events and figures from history rather than being a natural reflection. Once traces, distance and intermediaries are involved, memory turns into history (Nora, 2006, pp. 18–20). The loss of real memory result in the development of an ideological memory that constructs a collective history and identity. This led to the creation of sites of memory where this new collective memory can be received, disseminated, and perpetuated. At the same time, memory is highly valued in this new form as it is an essential part of national identity. The memory of the nation serves to create a collective consciousness and to impose various duties on itself. This replaces the spontaneous memory that arises, changes, and develops in society.

Like Nora, Halbwachs (2017, pp. 76–78) distinguishes between collective memory and history. Collective memory is continuous and authentic as it draws from the past that is still alive or has the potential to be active in the group's consciousness. In contrast, history starts where tradition ends, and collective memory fades. The more difficult it is to remember; the more history and places of remembrance are needed. In the same vein, Hobsbawm (2012) emphasizes the difference between what is stored in people's memories and what is selected and constructed by history. The history that becomes part of the ideology or knowledge capital of the nation and the state is not based on what is preserved in people's memory, but rather on sets of knowledge that are selected, written, illustrated, popularized, and institutionalized by those given this mission. Working with oral histories of the 1926 General Strike in Britain, Hobsbawm discovered that the strike occupied a much more limited and less dramatic place in people's memories than had been expected. He also observed that individuals who participate in historical events from the bottom up may not perceive their experiences in the same way as those at the top or as historians who are involved in creating, distorting, and reproducing images of the past (Hobsbawm, 2012, pp. 12–14). In essence, the distinction between collective memory and history reveals the intricate processes through which past events are selectively remembered, constructed, and institutionalized. This highlights the disparities between lived experiences and the historical narratives.

Bilgin (2013, pp. 42–44) explains that memory is not a static collection of relics that can be accessed and retrieved exactly as they were stored. Instead, it has a "biased" function that is constantly transformed, processed, and organized according to the needs and interests of society. In this sense, the collective memory is constantly reproduced in a way that serves the

group, referring to Valery's statement that "if memory were completely truthful, it would be useless" (Bilgin, 2013, p. 44). Sites of memory - important meeting places for the nation to come together in a shared consciousness - are aimed at freezing time, preventing forgetting, and embodying the memories and narratives of important events and people belonging to the nation. In this way, these sites function as a reminder of collective identity, allowing a view of the past from the present. Instead of being places where remembrance happens spontaneously, they are places where memory is fermented and reproduced. Commemorating the past means playing the theater of the past in the present (Bilgin, 2013, p. 17). The present is experienced in the context of causal connections with past events and objects. When recalling the past, people filter the past out of the present by using events and things they did not experience. However, just as the present influences the perception of the past, the past also tends to influence or distort the experience of the present (Connerton, 1989).

It is possible to consider the creation of sites of memory to construct a collective national memory within the framework of Hobsbawm's concept of the invention of tradition. This refers to the deliberate construction or reinvention of customs, rituals, symbols, or narratives, often by powerful institutions or groups, in order to create a sense of historical continuity and authenticity, even when the traditions are of recent origin or have been modified to suit contemporary needs (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). The processes of inventing tradition and creating sites of memory are intertwined in the same ideological project, the construction of a shared group identity and memory. Both draw on history and historical images, such as martyrs, heroes, and golden age myths, to create and legitimize group cohesion. From another perspective, sites of memory aim to create continuity between the past and to the present and hence belong to the invention of tradition. In this sense, Nora (1996) has identified the invention of tradition arising from the need for nations to invent a past for themselves as the political use of memory. Sites of memory are often used for political purposes, as they contribute to the invention of tradition and the creation of a unifying national narrative through countless repetitions. However, this type of memory does not simply repeat the past, but rather transforms and constantly rebuilds it according to the needs of the present. As a result, there is no fixed time frame for the past.

Like the sites of memory, collective memory is one of the main aspects of group identity. Collective memory involves the social group's search for meaning. Social representations formed in this process form the basis of the group's identity. These representations help the members to comprehend the happenings in the present and to guide their behavior accordingly (Bilgin, 2013, p. 7). An ethnic, national, or cultural group does not expect its members to spontaneously remember the past; it makes the past a common experience for group members and seeks to integrate them through this shared past. The group's memory plays a crucial role in constructing group identity by providing answers to questions such as 'Who are we?', 'Where do we come from?', and 'What is our history?' Moreover, it enables group members to discern the delineations of the group ("us" and "them") and identify those included within the group as well as those excluded (Bilgin, 2013, pp. 41–44).

Halbwachs (2017, p. 50) points to the sociological dimension of memory and remembrance, noting that remembering takes place in a social environment, and the characteristics of that environment influence the way of remembering and the content of the memory. In other words, memory is not individual, i.e., isolated from the social group and reduced only to its resources;

instead, memories are something reconciled with the group in space and time and acquire meaning within the group in the context of the given space and time. Although he distinguishes between individual, intrinsic, or autobiographical memory and collective, extrinsic, or historical memory shared with the group, he emphasizes that individual memory is not completely isolated from social influence (Halbwachs, 2017, pp. 45–47). It is thus not possible to view memory as a purely individual experience. Instead, remembrance is a social phenomenon in which memories are intricately woven into the fabric of society and profoundly shaped by the contextual and social framework (Halbwachs, 2016, p. 65). Retrieving a memory is not just a matter of uncovering or reconstructing the image of past events in our minds; we must also refer to the shared cues and concepts of social memory. We remember by referring to our group's collective view and shared images (Connerton, 1989, p. 15; Halbwachs, 2017, pp. 13; 20).

Memory is susceptible to constant transformation, as it engages with the past through the interpretive prism of the present, adapting to contemporary perceptions and understandings (Halbwachs, 2017, p. 9). When collective memory is insufficient or does not serve the desired purpose, tradition may be invented because of the need for a past that gives continuity and coherence to the community's identity (Bilgin, 2013, p. 41). Examples of collective memory construction, or what Bilgin (2013, pp. 16–17) refers to as 'official memory,' can be found in almost every country. Commemorating the heroic battles of the nation's past and highlighting national heroes can instill collective pride and self-confidence for the future. On the other hand, collective suffering and trauma of the past are selected and emphasized, and images of victims and perpetrators are constructed (Bilgin, 2013, pp. 42–43).

The memory of Kosovo is often seen as an example of collective or official memory, as it has found a place in Serbian nationalist discourse. However, it is important to avoid viewing the collective memory of Kosovo solely as an ideological element manipulated by political and nationalist elites. For Serbs, the collective memory of Kosovo has significant meaning beyond mere propaganda and official historical narratives. The significance of Kosovo to the Serbian nation is evident through various cultural artifacts such as stories, anonymous poems, and songs passed down through oral tradition. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church has given symbolic meaning to Kosovo and the heroes of the Battle of Kosovo. Images of Kosovo are also prevalent in Serbian everyday life. These factors demonstrate that Kosovo holds a deep societal significance for the Serbian people, which cannot be solely attributed to top-down memory politics.

3. The Place of Kosovo in the Serbian Collective Memory

As Tim Judah (2000, p. 30) has argued, it is not easy to find a comparable example in European history of Kosovo's impact on Serbian collective memory. Kosovo holds a significant place in the collective memory of Serbs as the birthplace of the Serbian nation (Ćirković, 2004, p. 85; Lauwers & Smis, 2000, p. 49). In Serbian nationalist discourse, it's often referred to as the heart of Serbia or Old Serbia. This is because the Serbian kingdom (Nemanjić dynasty) was established there in the Middle Ages, considered the Serbs' golden age. Today, although Kosovo represents many different images to many Serbs, it remains an indispensable facet of their cultural heritage (Dragnich & Todorovich, 1984, p. 4).

Orthodox Christianity and its physical symbols, such as churches and monasteries, hold a central place in Serbian collective memory and national identity. Therefore, the presence of

many examples of Serb Orthodox religious architecture in Kosovo, which have great religious significance for the Serbian nation and monumental value as a place of remembrance, demonstrates the importance of Kosovo to the Serbian people. In addition, since the 14th century, Kosovo has been recognized as the center of the Serbian Orthodox Church, thereby gaining a significant place in Serbian national/religious identity (see Malcolm, 2002, pp. 58–80).

Religious monuments in Kosovo serve as sites of memory, carrying the medieval past crucial to the Serbs into the present. They signify their historical presence in the land and contribute to their claim to Kosovo. The Gračanica Monastery, completed in 1321, is considered one of the best examples of Byzantine architecture worldwide. Additionally, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery and the Visoki Dečani Monastery, both from the medieval period, are important centers of the Serbian Orthodox Church and represent examples of such sites of memory. The convergence of religion and nationalism in the Balkans, notably within the Serbian nation, is exemplified by the notable presence of religious architecture in the collective memory. Consequently, Serbian sites of memory in Kosovo exhibit a dual nature, simultaneously embodying religious and national characteristics (Sadoğlu, 2016).



Figure 1: Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Photo: Vincent Ko Hon Chiu/UNESCO).

The Battle of Kosovo, fought in 1389 between the Ottoman Empire and the Serbian Kingdom on a field near present-day Pristina, is the primary source of a Kosovo myth in Serbian collective memory (Göransson, 2013). The Battle of Kosovo narrative, although based on historically dubious information, has functioned as a national myth in the formation of the Serbian nation (Judah, 2000, p. 30; Uğurlu, 2011, p. 242). When asked about the defining characteristic of their national identity, many Serbs might say it lies in remembering the Battle of Kosovo (Spasić, 2011, p. 81). It holds immense importance for the Serbian nation, representing a significant event in their historical consciousness. It symbolizes a critical moment of resistance and sacrifice of the Serbian nation against the invaders (Spasić, 2011, p. 82).

The memory of the Battle of Kosovo has been enshrined in Serbian folklore, poetry, and national mythology, serving as a source of inspiration, unity, and a rallying cry for generations (Spasić,

2011, pp. 83–84). The battle is seen as a symbol of resilience, the endurance of Serbian cultural heritage, and the yearning for national sovereignty. The significance of this battle in the collective memory of Serbs fosters a sense of historical continuity, pride, and a shared narrative that continues to shape their national identity (Ćirković, 2004, p. 85).

The defeat at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, marked as a national trauma for the Serbs, is mainly associated with the end of the nation's golden age, signifying the end of the medieval Serbian kingdom (Humphreys, 2013, pp. 45–47; Volkan, 2009, p. 72). While Kosovo is a historically symbolic place of remembrance for the Serbian nation as the birthplace, heyday, and destruction of the medieval Serbian kingdom, the Battle of Kosovo has become an equally iconic historical image of Serbian nationalism as it marked the end of the kingdom and the golden age of the Serbs. From another aspect, the battle fought on the Field of Blackbirds (Kosovo Polje) is seen as a testament to Serbian bravery and determination in defending their land and faith. Despite the overwhelming odds and the tactical draw, the battle is considered a moral victory for the Serbs. It demonstrated their unwavering commitment to their homeland and Orthodox Christian identity. Furthermore, although the Battle of Kosovo ended in defeat, it was considered a significant turning point in the creation of Serbian national consciousness, as it was the first time that all Serbian lords came together against a common enemy (the Turks) and fought together with national awareness (Umar, 2015, pp. 67–68). Therefore, for Serbs, the Battle of Kosovo and Kosovo Polje represent both a monument of sorrow, defeat, and national trauma, as well as a monument of national glory and rebirth (Benton-Short, 2008, pp. 88–93).

After the Battle of Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church played a significant role in creating legends and myths surrounding the event. Through oral storytelling, songs, poems, fairy tales, and stories, these tales spread among the Serbian people, developing a collective consciousness about Kosovo (Uğurlu, 2011, p. 244). The names of Serbian heroes who had died in the Battle were constantly commemorated in churches, thereby inscribing the memory of the Battle deep within the cultural fabric and quotidian existence of Serbian society (Humphreys, 2013, p. 45). Serbian mothers sang lullabies about Kosovo to their children, and the stories of the heroic Serbian warriors of the battle were taught in schools. In this way, Kosovo became a deeply embedded part of the collective memory, from childhood in the family to later in education and many aspects of daily life (Emmert, 1990, pp. 133–134).

The annual observance of June 28th in Serbia, known as 'Vidovan' or 'St. Vitus Day,' commemorates the Battle of Kosovo and serves as a day of national mourning. It underlines the special place that this historic conflict, its heroes and adversaries, occupy in the Serbian collective memory. On the day of commemoration, many people gather at Gazimestan Square, near Pristina, where the Battle of Kosovo was fought (Qafmolla, 2016). Notably, the participation of young people and religious leaders in commemorations is particularly intense. This involvement is exemplified by the 2013 commemoration where Serbian youth in Gazimestan Square fervently chanted that Kosovo belongs to Serbia, "Kosovo je Serbia," a slogan written on walls, chanted at football matches and printed on T-shirts, especially after Kosovo's independence in 2008 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013).



Figure 2: Serbs participating in the commemoration of the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (St. Vitus Day/Vidovan) in Gazimestan on June 28, 2016 (Photo: Balkan Investigative Reporting Network/Atdhe Mulla) (Qafmolla, 2016).

Gazimestan is home to a commemorative monument dedicated to the Battle of Kosovo. The monument was constructed under the auspices of the Serbian administration during the Yugoslav era. It serves as the central gathering site for Serbs during the Vidovan/St. Vitus Day ceremonies and holds major significance in commemorating the Battle of Kosovo. Its symbolic and physical presence serves as a poignant reminder of the historical events. It has significant symbolic value within the Serbian collective memory, fostering a deep sense of reverence and national identity.

The myths related to the Battle of Kosovo typically center around Prince Lazar. These tales were initially spread by church priests and later preserved in folk epic poetry, where they were passed down to future generations. Although historical details about the Battle of Kosovo are limited, the narratives of hagiographers, epic folk poetry, and other elements that mythologize this war have provided much detailed information and presented it in the collective memory (Judah, 2000, pp. 30–31). One of the most influential tales about the Battle of Kosovo and Prince Lazar has a religious theme. It is based on Prince Lazar's preference for the kingdom of heaven over the kingdom of the earth in the battle. According to the legend, the Archangel Elijah appeared to Prince Lazar the night before the battle and offered him the choice of winning the battle or sacrificing his own life to win a kingdom in heaven for his people. With this offer, Lazar lost the battle and chose the kingdom of heaven for himself and his people over the earthly kingdom. Through this lens, the destruction of the medieval Serbian kingdom assumes a sacred significance, simultaneously elevating the Serbian nation, its leader Prince Lazar, and the heroic figures associated with the Battle of Kosovo to a revered status, as if chosen and blessed for a heavenly kingdom (Humphreys, 2013, pp. 47–48). Following the Battle of Kosovo, the Ravaniča Monastery of the Serbian Orthodox Church undertook the canonization of Prince Lazar, solidifying his and Kosovo's sacredness within the collective consciousness (Ređep, 1991, pp. 253–254; Uğurlu, 2011, p. 244). This act contributed to the formation of a mythical narrative surrounding the Battle of Kosovo. Prince Lazar's role is believed to have bestowed

upon the Serbian nation the perception of being dispossessed from their ancestral lands or subjected to internal subjugation while simultaneously being blessed with the divine choice of the Kingdom of Heaven. Within this context, the Serbian declaration of victimization and divine chosenness through the Kosovo narrative is similar to the Jewish narrative centered around Jerusalem, establishing Kosovo as the Jerusalem of the Serbs (Erjavec & Volčič, 2007, p. 69).

A year after the battle, Lazar's body was reburied in the Ravanica monastery between Niš and Belgrade in Serbia. Religious narratives about Lazar and his martyrdom were created, and a special liturgy was even written for him to be sung on the anniversaries of the war. However, the theme of religious sacrifice/martyrdom rather than war against the enemy (the Turks) is prominent in these early narratives of the Battle of Kosovo (Malcolm, 2002, p. 77). This image of Lazar as a religious and national hero was cemented in the Serbian collective memory by the saga of Lazar, which was later included in Serbian history books (Özkan, 2008).



Figure 3: The statue of Prince Lazar in the north of Mitrovica, where Serbs are densely populated in Kosovo (Source: Nada B., <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/kosovska-mitrovica-march-13-2017-monument-672721933>, last accessed: 26.05.2023).

Another hero of the Battle of Kosovo for the Serbs was Miloš Obilić, who, according to the legend, wanted to talk to Sultan Murad during the battle, explaining that he was going to join the Turkish side, but when he approached him, drew his concealed dagger, and killed him. Although there are different versions of the legend, they all have in common that Obilić managed to approach and kill Sultan Murad by concealing his true intentions (Uğurlu, 2010, pp. 34–39). The enduring significance of Obilić within the collective memory of Serbs can be evidenced by the prevalence of the name "Milos" among the Serbian population today, the existence of a municipality in Kosovo bearing the name "Obilić," and the establishment of a football club^a in Serbia that bears the same name (Lucas, 2017). These examples underscore the sustained cultural and symbolic importance attributed to Obilić, reflecting its lasting presence in the collective consciousness of Serbs and highlighting its role as a potent symbol

^a The football club FK Obilić's stadium is named after Milos Obilić. In 1996, the club was purchased by Željko Ražnatović, also known as 'Arkan', who committed numerous war crimes with his forces during the Yugoslav war (see Lucas, 2017).

of identity and historical legacy. In the 15th century, texts about Obilić's heroism in the Battle of Kosovo began to appear. However, his name was not directly mentioned, while in the 19th century, in the epic poems of Petar Petrović-Njegoš II, a Montenegrin prince, and priest, the image of Obilić, the national hero of the Serbs, was much more intense (Ređep, 1991, p. 258). In Njegoš's poems, Obilić, a hero who outshone even the knights of Sparta and Rome, is remembered with longing (Lugar, 2005, pp. 34–35).



Figure 4: A statue of Miloš Obilić erected by the Serb-run municipality in the Kosovo town of Gracanica (Photo: Jove Pargovski, https://tr.123rf.com/photo_76747700_milos-Obilić-monument-gracanica-kosovo.html, last accessed: 26.05.2023). In 1999, the municipality of Obilić, also under Serbian rule, removed the statue. In 2014, the municipality of Gracanica erected a new one, which was met with a reaction in the Turkish press, and the related news was reported as "The statue of Obilić, who stabbed Murad I in the back, has been raised." (Hürriyet, 2014).

4. Serbian Image of Kosovo in Oral Folk Tradition and Songs

The use of oral folklore, epic poetry, literary compositions, and the religious significance attributed to Kosovo and the Battle by the Church have had a profound impact on the positioning of Kosovo within the framework of national memory, from the earliest elegies proclaimed by the Serbian Orthodox Church about the Battle of Kosovo and its heroic figures to the present day. The transmission of oral narratives about Kosovo, which were gradually codified and preserved through written records, led to the development of a literary tradition focused on Kosovo (Lugar, 2005, p. 30). Nevertheless, the oral tradition concerning Kosovo has a more significant influence on the Serbian nation than the written sources (Uğurlu, 2010, p. 23). Oral narratives such as Serbian epic poetry, folk songs, and hymns, which provide the historical and cultural links between the past and the present, have ensured the perpetuation in the national memory of many heroic legends that cannot be found in written sources. These legends about Kosovo remind the Serbs of their glorious past and their heroes in the Middle

Ages, similar to the way the ancient Greeks preserved their collective memory of the past of the Mycenaean civilization through the poetry of Homer (Pappas, 1994, pp. 29–30).

In the oral folk tradition of the Serbs, stories about the Battle of Kosovo, especially those created by the Serbian Orthodox Church, became widespread soon after the war. New ones were added over the years, and the image of Kosovo has maintained its importance in the Serbian national memory for centuries. For example, in the late 17th century, the Battle of Kosovo was depicted in a folk play believed to have been written by a resident of the town of Perast, now within the borders of Montenegro. It has a relatively long title: *“Here begins [sic] the battle of Prince Lazar and the evil purpose of Miloš Kobilić^b and of the traitor Vuk Branković and the nine Jugović brothers at Kosovo field on June 24, 1343.”* (Ređep, 1991, p. 262). According to the myth, Vuk Branković, married to Prince Lazar's daughter, betrayed Lazar by conspiring with the Ottoman Sultan Murad during the Battle of Kosovo. Thus, Branković represents the traitor's image in Serbian collective memory (Ređep, 1991, pp. 260–261). Therefore, as the title suggests, it refers comprehensively to many notable heroes and traitors who, from the Serbian perspective, were prominently involved in the battle. In this way, Vuk Branković became the notorious traitor who symbolized Judas, who joined the enemy and played a role in the Serbian defeat, just as Lazar symbolized Jesus Christ in the Kosovo myth (Spasić, 2011, p. 84; Šuber, 2006, p. 4).

The utilization of poems, songs performed by minstrels accompanied by the traditional single-stringed instrument known as the *gusla*, as well as hymns sung within religious settings, all comprising the rich oral tradition of the Serbian nation, served to sustain the enduring significance of Kosovo within Serbian national identity as a potent site of memory. Simultaneously, these cultural expressions further fortified Serbian national consciousness by perpetuating the collective memory of the perceived defeat by the "Turks" in the context of the Battle of Kosovo (Greenawalt, 2001, p. 49). Sell (2002, p. 71) argues that the oral tradition surrounding the Battle of Kosovo was pivotal in constructing Serbian national identity, forging a collective consciousness that endured across generations. Through the transmission of these narratives, Serbian national identity was preserved and solidified, perpetuating the significance of the Battle of Kosovo as a foundational element within the broader fabric of Serbian historical and cultural memory. The impact of the Battle of Kosovo, one of the memory sites of the Serbian nation, on the formation of national identity, is not surprising, given that memory sites are the building blocks of belonging to a national group and serve the purpose of forming and preserving national identity (Suda, 2017, p. 36).

^b Miloš Obilić's name is mentioned in some early sources as "Miloš Kobilić"



Figure 5: Uroš Predić's famous painting "Kosovo Girl" (Косовка девојка) depicts the Battle of Kosovo. traditional Serbian song titled in Serbian "Sini jarko sunce sa Kosovo" (Shine Bright Sun From Kosovo) is an intense expression of love and longing for Kosovo. The song features Serbian national heroes with phrases such as "We are not giving you away, o land of (Tsar) Dušan,"^c "We are not giving you away, o land of Nemanjić, Obilić, brothers Jugović!" and "Stand up, Prince Lazar!". Another remarkable statement in the song is: "All the Serbs will, just like Jugović brothers, go to Kosovo, for the honorable cross! To defend the bountiful land, For the honorable cross, and the golden freedom!"^d Thus, through the Jugovic brothers, who are said to have fought and martyred heroically in the battle for Kosovo, the Serbian people were reminded of the sacredness of Kosovo cause with the image of the cross. This emphasis on sanctity can also be observed in the section "As long as there is Peć and Dečani, Gračanica and Gazimestan, we are not giving you away, o resurrected Kosovo, the most sacred Serbian field!", where the cities in Kosovo with important Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries from the Middle Ages and Gazimestan, where the Battle of Kosovo took place, are mentioned. Another Serbian folk song about Kosovo is the "Hymn of the Kosovo Heroes" (*Himna kosovskih junaka*). In this song, Kosovo is referred to as the destiny written on the foreheads of Serbs. In addition, the sacredness attributed to Kosovo is emphasized again with the statement, "Serbian land is flying through the clouds. It is flying over the heavenly heights, its wings are Morava and Drina," referring to Kosovo.^e

^c The medieval Serbian kingdom flourished during the reign of King Stefan Dušan (1331-1355) and became a state with significant influence in the entire Balkan geography (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 195–196).

^d For a video of the song performed with English subtitles, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWMrf-J1CSY>, (Last Accessed: 27.05.2023).

^e For the lyrics of the song translated into English and shared, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlvyxdhCFbY>, (Last access: 27.05.2023).

5. The Invention of Tradition: Revisiting the Construction of the Battle of Kosovo as a Site of Memory

Over the centuries, the story of the Battle of Kosovo has grown into a monumental legend, while the accurate account of historical events has often been distorted or revised (Calic, 2019, pp. 35–36). The Battle of Kosovo is usually portrayed in Serbian history as a significant defeat that marked the end of the medieval Serbian state and the beginning of prolonged Ottoman rule. However, a closer analysis reveals the narrative's inherent socially constructed nature (Muhadri, 2021, pp. 437–438). Certain historical documents related to the Battle of Kosovo allude to a triumph over the Turks instead of a Serbian setback. Moreover, an alternative perspective emerges that challenges the overarching narrative—contrary to popular belief, the medieval Serbian state was in a period of decline long before the battle, triggered by the death of Stefan Dušan in 1355 (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 197–198). It is crucial to reassess the narrative's claim that the Battle of Kosovo marked the culmination of this decline, as the subsequent historical analysis indicates the persistence of the Serbian state for some seven decades after the war (Čirković, 2004, p. 85). Moreover, despite the Ottoman influence that enveloped the Serbian nation after the Battle of Kosovo, the fabric of its identity remained intact and, as Judah (2000, p. 31) argued, even underwent a remarkable "cultural renaissance" during this period.

According to Malcolm (2002, p. 58), the Ottoman triumph at Marica in Bulgaria in 1371 emerged as a crucial precursor to subsequent Ottoman conquests in the Balkan region and thus had a more significant historical significance for Serbian history than the Battle of Kosovo. During the Battle of Marica, the Ottoman forces achieved a decisive victory by conducting a nighttime assault against a considerable Serbian military contingent, subsequently securing key Macedonian territories under Serbian control by the war's conclusion. This illustrative instance underscores a discernible pattern of selective interpretation in constructing social memory concerning historical events. In a deliberate act of collective amnesia, the Serbian nation selectively ignored a defeat of paramount importance, choosing instead to extract the Kosovo defeat from historical narratives and incorporate it into the fabric of its national memory (Malcolm, 2002, p. 58).

Similar to most medieval conflicts, the Battle of Kosovo was not strictly waged between distinct entities identified as "Serbs" and "Turks" in national terms. However, such categorizations were retrospectively imposed at a later stage (Spasić, 2011, p. 84). When the historical context of the period is examined alongside accounts of concurrent conflicts, it becomes clear that the Battle of Kosovo involved opposing Serbian and Ottoman forces that were not homogeneously defined along national lines. Instead, it was a military confrontation between the army of the Balkan coalition (Serbs, Arbri, Bosniaks, Hungarians, Croats, Vlachs, Czechs, etc.) led by Prince Lazar, and the Ottoman coalition, which encompassed diverse ethnicities, including Bosniaks, Albanians, Hungarians, Greeks, Bulgarians, and even Catalans (Muhadri, 2021, pp. 437–438). As a result, the characterization of the Battle of Kosovo as a binary confrontation between Serbs and Ottomans, or more broadly, between Christian and Muslim factions, proves to be an oversimplification (Muhadri, 2021, pp. 440–441).

Amidst the complexities of the battle, it is noteworthy that Albanian princes were allied within the coalition forged by the Serbian side, and at the same time, some Serbian princes were identified among the combatants fighting alongside the Ottoman forces (Uğurlu, 2010, p. 12; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 200). Moreover, Stefan Lazarevic, the descendant of Prince Lazar,

participated in the ranks of Yildirim Beyazit's army during the decisive Battle of Ankara on July 24, 1402. Similarly, during the Battle of Niğbolu on September 25, 1396, Stefan Lazarevic and his Serbian contingent sided with the Ottoman forces against a Crusader coalition that included almost all European nations (Umar, 2015, pp. 116–117; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 200–201). Nevertheless, the prevailing nationalist and religious rhetoric, endeavoring to establish a national memory via the Battle of Kosovo as an integral facet of Serbian identity, has seemingly disregarded these multifaceted historical intricacies (Humphreys, 2013, p. 46).

A look at the history of the transmission of Kosovo narratives reveals the dynamic and adaptable nature of mythic narratives (Šuber, 2006, p. 3). In this regard, the symbolism of Kosovo for the Serbian nation has evolved with changing historical circumstances. In some Serbian chronicles of the 16th and 17th centuries, it is possible to find references to the Battle of Kosovo and its heroes, such as Prince Lazar. However, in these chronicles, the Battle of Kosovo and its heroes were not treated in a mythological and epic way; only some basic information about what happened on the battlefield was presented (Ređep, 1991, p. 260). The Battle of Kosovo gradually symbolized spiritual sacrifice in the collective Serbian memory, epitomized by Prince Lazar's martyrdom for the Kingdom of Heaven. As Ottoman influence waned and Balkan revolts grew, Milos Obilić's assassination of Sultan Murat became a central emblem of national heroism (Bakic-Hayden, 2004, pp. 27–28; Šuber, 2006, pp. 3–4). Thus, the religiously rooted myth of Kosovo transformed a more nationalistic narrative, serving the political agendas of nationalist elites in the nineteenth century. It was notably utilized to mobilize resistance against both Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule (Calic, 2019, p. 36).

Since the Kosovo narrative has come to symbolize not only Serbian identity but also the ethos of the Serbian political agenda, the story of the Battle of Kosovo has been reinterpreted and used by political elites at various times under the prevailing political ideals of Serbia (Calic, 2019, p. 36). The transformation of Kosovo's significance in the late 1980s under Milosevic, reflecting the contemporary milieu and accentuating the historical plight of Serbs (Judah, 2000, p. 30), underscores the constructed and perpetually evolving nature of Kosovo's memory, adapted to suit specific agendas (see Anzulović, 1999). While Milosevic sought to revive Serbian memories of the region and the Battle of Kosovo, his efforts included rituals and monumental efforts to bridge the past and present in Serbian collective memory (Šuber, 2006, pp. 4–6; Till, 2006, pp. 289–290).

Under Milosevic, the defeat of the Battle of Kosovo and the imagery of Kosovo were revived as poignant sites of Serbian national memory, imbued with a narrative of collective sacrifice and martyrdom. This revival aimed to cultivate the notion that reclaiming Kosovo would signal the culmination of the 600 years of Serbian defeat and humiliation initiated by this historical conflict (Savaş, 2001, p. 104; Volkan, 2009, p. 72). To wield influence over the Serbian populace and reap political advantages, he exploited Serbian nationalism. He used the battle of Kosovo, a central facet of this ideology, as a propaganda tool. The underlying message was that to prevent a recurrence of such adversity, it was imperative to support a leader capable of ensuring Serbian unity. Through constant reminders of historical adversaries and their malevolent aspirations, coupled with the juxtaposition of these historical enemies with contemporary uncertainties and dangers (e.g., the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a potential loss of Serbian statehood similar to the aftermath of the battle for Kosovo), the goal was to create an image of the leader as a national hero who would be able to emancipate Serbs from their historical

burdens and perceived injustices and ultimately build resilience against perennial adversaries (Djilas, 1993, p. 88; Sell, 2002, p. 5).

6. Conclusion

Collective memory is the shared social consensus that encapsulates a unified conceptual framework and historical narrative that guides collective remembrance and commemoration, independent of direct individual experience. It refers to the shared social consensus that encapsulates a unified conceptual framework and historical narrative that guides collective remembrance and commemoration, independent of direct individual experience. The phenomenon of memory in a communal context is inherent to all societies and manifests as social constructs that guide the processes of remembrance. Fostering social cohesion requires individuals to converge into a collective entity through a consensus on what to retain and forget, creating a collective memory. In the context of the Serbian nation, the Kosovo narratives serve as a shared reservoir of memory that is not experienced individually by all Serbs but is collectively formed and maintained as a unifying emblem of Serbian identity.

As Serbs pass by the statue of Milos Obilić in Gračanica, Kosovo, and absorb the strains of a folk melody that resonates with the essence of Kosovo, they become intertwined with other members of society in a shared cognitive landscape. The phrase 'Kosovo is Serbia' is often chanted, evoking memories of Kosovo through shared concepts and values. In this communal narrative, the pride in Obilić's bravery is intertwined with a longing to reclaim Kosovo, and a wave of anger is directed at the collective adversary. An exploration of Kosovo's significance in the Serbian national psyche is illuminated through a broad temporal spectrum spanning from the Middle Ages to the present day. The image of Kosovo is deeply ingrained in Serbian culture, appearing in various aspects of everyday life such as rituals, football club names, fan chants, folklore, art, ecclesiastical realms, urban street names, and other communal areas.

The narratives surrounding the Battle of Kosovo have been imbued with religious significance, elevating this historic event and its revered figures, such as Prince Lazar and Milos Obilić, from mere repositories of memory to sacred status for Serbs. Furthermore, Serbian nationalist elites have strategically elevated Kosovo as a primary site of nationalist memory. During the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's image was shaped by elites to suit their political aspirations and disseminated in the public sphere. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 significantly increased its importance in the collective memory of the Serbian nation, making the image of Kosovo more prominent in the lives of Serbs.

While Serbian nationalism contributed to establishing Kosovo as a locus of memory, disentangling the extent of top-down versus bottom-up influence during the myth's inception remains intricate. Indeed, Hobsbawm (2012) points out the complexity of deciphering a tradition that combines facets of conscious invention and natural evolution within circumscribed groups or over extended periods. While the crystallization of Kosovo as a repository of memory for the Serbian nation may indeed echo an invented tradition, this phenomenon owes a considerable debt to discrete social enclaves, particularly clerics and minstrels, who played a pivotal role in fostering and disseminating the Kosovo narrative. Rather than attempting to discern the division between contrived and naturally evolving elements that shape Kosovo's prominence in the Serbian collective consciousness, a more apt approach would be to highlight the interrelated contributions of nationalist elites, ecclesiastical authorities, and diverse social

segments such as minstrels and artists. Together, these actors have woven Kosovo and the Battle of Kosovo into a symbolic site of memory for Serbs.

The process of national identity and nation-building must include an element of memory (Connerton, 1989, p. 14). Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the impact of the Battle of Kosovo on the formation of Serbian national identity within the framework of what Nora calls 'real memory,' which circulates naturally in society and is not subject to political and ideological intervention. It is necessary to avoid any 'invention of tradition' in this evaluation. The question at hand is whether Kosovo was the driving force behind the formation of Serbian identity or if Serbian identity, in turn, influenced the interpretation and understanding of Kosovo. While acknowledging that sites of memory and collective memory are socially constructed and subject to memory politics, since it is not possible to determine precisely what proportion of such images in social memory are socially constructed and what proportion are naturally present among the public, the most reasonable answer to these questions should be "both."

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