

Yugo-Nostalgia Thrives at Tito Memorials

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CONFLICTING MEMORIES

Post-War Balkan Monuments in Focus

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Monuments to Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito were installed all across the Balkans, and in some places they are still cherished by those who fondly remember the old state.

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 *Hundreds of people gather every year at Tito's memorial, mausoleum and museum complex in Belgrade* Tito died in

1980 and the country he once ruled has since ceased to exist, but on his birthday this year, hundreds of people gathered at his lovingly-maintained memorial, mausoleum and museum complex in Belgrade to remember the man they recall as a great statesman who presided over a more peaceful and prosperous era in the Balkans.

It one of the largest and best-kept memorial complexes in the region, although monuments to Tito elsewhere in the region have suffered harsher fates since Yugoslavia collapsed.

In his home village of Kumrovec in Croatia, his statue was bombed in 2004, although it was later restored, while in Uzice in western Serbia, known during the communist period as Tito's favourite town, his likeness was removed altogether in 1991.

The Belgrade complex consists of the Museum of May 25, the House of Flowers the Old Museum. The museum has a collection of more than 200,000 items that illustrate 20th century Yugoslav history, with a special focus on the life of Tito, while at the centre of the House of Flowers is the former leader's grave.

The Serbian state spends 52,495,000 dinars (477,227 euro) annually on maintaining the memorial. A small amount of revenue is also raised by the sale of badges, T-shirts and other trinkets bearing Tito's likeness which are sold in the complex's gift shop.

The museum's spokesperson Mirjana Slavkovic says that around 80,000 to 100,000 people visit the complex each year.

“The most often-asked question by visitors is, what is our [Serbian] stance towards the Tito period? That is what is not clear to them, what are ordinary people saying about Tito,” Slavkovic said.

The Tito enthusiasts who gathered at the memorial for his birthday made it clear that they remembered both Yugoslavia and its former leader with fondness.

“I think he was one of the greatest men of all time. Wherever he appeared, he was bringing peace. When he disappeared, there was neither peace nor tranquility,” said one woman dressed in a Communist ‘pioneer’ uniform, who had come all the way from Bosnia to Belgrade to honour her former president.

“We all know we were living in Yugoslavia under Tito, and now we are only surviving,” she said.

“He was a world-class man. Today the region lacks his spirit. The region is steeped in hatred, intolerance and regional differences,” said an elderly man.

‘Tito must rise again’



After it was announced that Tito had died in Ljubljana on May 4, 1980, many Yugoslav citizens cried openly in the streets.

Although accused of the imprisonment and murder of political opponents and a poorly-advised economic policy that threw the country into economic crisis after his death, many recall his 35-year reign as a time of peace and believe that his death marked the beginning of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Many ex-Yugoslav citizens still mourn their former leader

they are monuments to an entire period. I think that should be cherished,” said Emir Filipovic, a history professor at Sarajevo University.

“One of the reasons for people appreciating the Tito monuments is that

“He was a significant historical figure, no matter how one sees him,” Filipovic said.

In the Serbian town of Uzice, Tito’s fans are campaigning for his monument to be restored. The town was once known as ‘Tito’s Uzice’ for its role in the Yugoslav Partisans’ struggle against fascist forces, almost every street bore the name of a Partisan fighter and a five-metre-high statue of the former leader dominated the main square – Partisan Square.

It was removed in 1991 when the country began to descend into war and placed in the local museum, but an organisation representing former partisans, called SUBNOR, recently petitioned Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic to have it put back.

In its letter to Nikolic, SUBNOR pleaded with Serbia's current leadership to "restore to [Tito] the honours he has as an important player in history".

The Uzice museum's director, Nikola Gogic, agrees that monument should be restored to the town's main square.

"The monument was removed from there illegally without consulting the relevant cultural institutions and it should be returned," Gogic said.

A campaign group has even been formed to lobby for the restoration, and many locals – even some who weren't even born during Tito's rule - agreed that the statue should rise again.

"Of course it should be returned. There was no reason why it was removed. We are proud of our anti-fascist past and therefore Tito should be celebrated properly," said Miodrag Pavlovic, aged 45.

"He was one of the greatest leaders we had and the whole world knows us through him. Everybody would be proud if they had a person like Tito as a part of their history. And we lived better in that period," said Dragoljub Savic, 37.

'Yugoslavia cannot be revived'

□ Identical statues of Tito were installed in several other places across the former Yugoslavia, one of them in Kumrovac in front of his former house.

Tito's statue in his hometown of Kumrovec

Photo by Beta

This one however was targeted by unknown assailants who set off an explosive device there in 2004. There has been speculation that the attack was carried out in retaliation for the Croatian government's removal of monuments to World War II Ustasa fighters.

The monument was restored however, and this year thousands of people gathered in Kumrovac to mark his birthday, listen to old Yugoslav songs, hear speakers praising the former leader's ant-fascist history and buy Tito memorabilia from stalls.

Several monuments to Tito still stand in Bosnia and Herzegovina, three of them in Sarajevo, while in the Macedonian capital Skopje, a small statue remains outside a school which still bears the former Yugoslav leader's name.

In Kosovo, however, almost all such statues have been taken down, while the Josip Broz Tito School in Pristina has been renamed after Albanian leader Ismail Qemajli.

“Nations whose rights were violated by the Tito regime insisted more on the removal of all Tito monuments. We have to bear in mind, Albanians were not always treated equally to other nations during the Tito regime,” said Pristina-based political analyst Behlul Beqaj.

Back at the birthday celebration in Belgrade, Joska Broz, who is Tito’s grandson and also the current president of Serbia’s Communist Party, says that despite the nostalgia that many feel for the old united state, it cannot be rebuilt.

“There were several attempts to revive the Yugoslav idea in Slovenia, Macedonia and Bosnia. But it is very complicated to revive the idea now,” Broz said.

But he believes that Yugoslavia’s spirit lives on and that its various nations should stick together.

“We cannot be without each other. We should remember that without each other we cannot compete economically with Europe and only united can we compete with the world,” he concluded.

Additional reporting by Elvira M. Jukic in Sarajevo, Sinisa Jakov Marusic in Skopje, Boris Pavelic in Zagreb, Edona Peci in Pristina.

