

**BUBANJ MEMORIAL PARK:  
A MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS OF NAZI TERROR  
AND MASS EXECUTIONS IN WORLD WAR II**

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**Abstract.** *The "Bubanj" Memorial complex, located on Bubanj Hill at the outskirts of Niš, was built with the aim of marking the site of mass executions of the innocent victims of Nazism in the Second World War. It is a symbol of suffering but also of resistance, struggle and desire for freedom, embodied in the symbolic depiction of three huge clenched fists. The "Three fists" symbolize resistance and defiance against fascism. They are a recurrent reminder of the importance of freedom as the supreme human value. The paper first briefly presents the eugenics policy, which was the ideological basis of Nazism and ferocious Nazi crimes. Then, the authors outline the historical circumstances leading to the establishment of the Concentration Camp Crveni krst in Niš and Bubanj Hill as the execution site. The central part of the paper focuses on the construction of the Bubanj memorial complex, its importance in the post-war Yugoslav society, and its current position on the cultural map of Serbia. While calling attention to the agony sustained by victims of Nazi terror in these parts of Serbia, the authors highlight the strength and resilience of the people who endeavored to preserve and defend freedom and right to dignified life as ultimate human values.*

**Key words:** *Bubanj Memorial Park, "Three fists" monument, mass executions, World War II*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Nazi Germany invasion of Europe and atrocities committed during the Second World War caused enormous destruction and human suffering. Regardless of the fact that the Nazi ideology seems to have been defeated in the modern world, in recent years, we may observe different trends of reactivating the Nazi ideas by the extreme right-wing neo-Nazi groups in many countries under the guise of nationalism or patriotism (Mirić, 2015:

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114). Nowadays, considering the tendency of relativisation of fascist and Nazi crimes, it seems important to raise awareness of young generations about the importance of the anti-fascist struggle for freedom.

Monuments are silent witnesses of that struggle, which serve as reminders of the great sacrifices that human beings made for freedom. The Bubanj Memorial Park, renowned as the "Three Fists" monument on Bubanj Hill at the outskirts of the City of Niš (Serbia), is one of the memorial sites testifying about the struggle, sacrifice and suffering of the people in South-eastern Serbia during the Nazi regime. The Bubanj Memorial reminds us that racist ideologies about the supremacy of one nation, the extermination of "inferior" races, and the destruction of cultural diversity should forever remain defeated by the ideas of freedom, peace and tolerance. The memory of the Bubanj shooting victims obliges us to preserve and nurture freedom and the right to dignified life as the supreme values of humanity.

First, we briefly present the eugenics policy, which was the ideological basis of Nazism and ferocious war crimes. Then, we present the historical data on the establishment and operation of the Concentration Camp *Crveni krst* in Niš and the Bubanj Hill execution grounds. In the central part, we focus on the construction of the Bubanj Memorial complex, its importance in the post-war society, and its current position on the cultural map of Serbia. While calling attention to the Nazi atrocities in this part of Serbia, we highlight the strength and resilience of people who struggled to preserve and defend freedom and right to dignified life as ultimate human values.

## 2. EUGENICS AS THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF NAZI GERMANY

Eugenics was the basis of Nazi Germany policy. This policy may be traced through the development of criminology in Germany (Kostić, 2011). Etymologically speaking, the term *eugenics* (*eu*-good and *genera*-offspring) does not have negative connotations; it entails racial hygiene as one of the most important branches of social policy, i.e. the science examining the conditions that lead to the creation of physically and socially healthy offspring, and prevent the birth of unhealthy and unfit offspring (Vujaklija, 1986: 303). Eugen Fischer, the leading Nazi Germany eugenics researcher, claimed: "It is a rare and special good fortune for a theoretical science to flourish at a time when the prevailing ideology welcomes it, and its findings can immediately serve the policy of the state" (Rafter, Posick, Rocque, 2016: 198).<sup>1</sup> Thus, two scientific projects were developed within the framework of Nazi-oriented criminal biology: eugenics and racial hygiene. These two terms are frequently used as synonyms. The eugenics project aimed to improve the quality of the "the human race" by encouraging "superior" people to reproduce ("positive eugenics") and discouraging the reproduction of "inferior" ones ("negative eugenics") by forced exile, marriage bans, institutional confinement, sterilization or elimination. Generally speaking, eugenics was aimed at preventing the reproduction of all people having hereditary defects, for the benefit of all. During the 1930s, Jews were among those who were included in eugenics projects (in Germany or elsewhere); criminologically speaking, it led to the identification of hereditary criminals of all races and ethnicities, for the purpose of preventing their further reproduction. On the other hand, the racial hygiene program was aimed at identifying ethnic and racial groups, such as Jews or Roma, for the purpose of exterminating those of "impure" blood and ensuring the purity of

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<sup>1</sup> Rafter, Posick, Rocque, 2016:198, quoted after Müller-Hill, 1988:18.

the "Aryan race". From a criminological point of view, racial hygiene coincides with eugenics in the part where specific racial-ethnic groups were identified as genetically criminal entities (Rafter, 2008: 293; Kostić, 2011).

In the development of criminology in general, the field of criminal biology seems to be under-researched and it still raises numerous questions, such as: how the ideas of criminal biology fit into the explanations of crime committed during the Nazi era; what were the consequences of "Nazi" criminology, etc. Nevertheless, an insight into the former periodization of the development of criminology in Germany indicates that there is no single definition of the concept and the subject matter of its study, apart from precisely determined individual aspirations or development directions. Thus, there is a clearly stated methodological position that the process of defining the prominent direction or the science as a whole is necessarily coloured by "defining the content of its subject matter, the methods used in studying the subject matter, different ideological conceptions in examining natural and social phenomena, as well as its independent position in the system of sciences" (Konstantinović- Vilić, Nikolić-Ristanović, 1998: 4).

The immediate detrimental consequence of such pernicious ideological views on eugenics and the hegemony of the "Aryan race" were infamous Nazi concentration camps, mass extermination of "inferior races" and mass executions of innocent people in countless killing grounds throughout Europe. As human beings, we are all obliged never to forget the victims of these heinous war crimes. In the next part of the paper, we will present two infamous places of human suffering in the South-eastern Serbia during World War II: The Concentration camp *Lager Nisch* (at *Crveni Krst*, Niš) and the mass shooting grounds on Bubanj Hill at the outskirts of the City of Niš. These two places of human suffering and mass executions were also the places of struggle for freedom and the right to a dignified human life.

### 3. BUBANJ HILL: A PLACE OF SUFFERING AND DEFIANCE

The Concentration Camp at *Crveni Krst* (*Lager Nisch*) and the monumental complex of the Bubanj Memorial Park at the outskirts of Niš are inevitable reminders of the Nazi terror during World War II. In the tragic circumstances, the inextricable link between the Concentration Camp as a place of torture and suffering and Bubanj Hill as an execution ground has drawn a huge interest of local historians endeavoring to shed more light on the historical circumstances that led to establishing these two memorial sites as well as on the actual number of victims and their social and ideological characteristics. In this part of the paper, we present the historical facts whose validity the researchers commonly agree upon, and which are relevant for understanding the reasons for establishing the Bubanj Memorial Park and its development.

The Concentration Camp located near the *Crveni Krst* railway station in Niš (Gr. *Anhalter lager-Nisch*), was established in April 1941 as a temporary detention centre for the Yugoslav Royal Army prisoners of war. It was quartered in the warehouse building of the former "*Miloš Obilić*" cavalry regiment barracks (built in 1930). In June 1941, it was designated to serve as a prison for captured political prisoners and opponents of the Third Reich (Ozimić, 2011: 3). The facility was completely adapted by September 1941 and officially instituted as a concentration camp by the *Feldkomandature* 809– Niš, based on the superior command to suppress the "Serbian insurgent movement" by taking urgent and ruthless repressive measures (hanging, shooting, taking hostages, deportation to concentration camps, etc.) (Milovanović, 1983: 62). According to the Report of the City Commission of the State Investigative Commission of SR

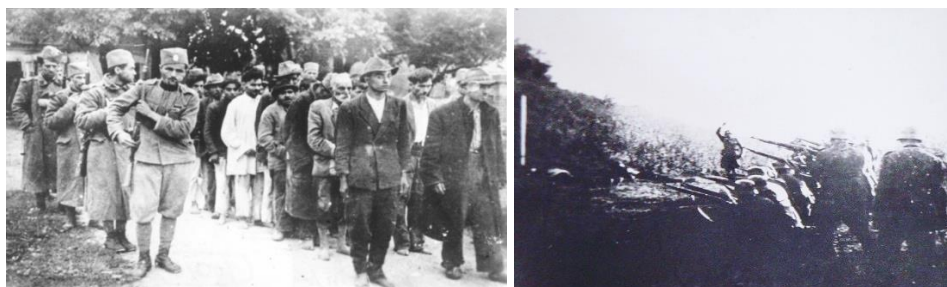
Serbia on War Crimes (1945)<sup>2</sup>, more than 30,000 people were imprisoned in this concentration camp in the period 1941-1945 (Ozimić, 2011:37). The entire complex (1,5 hectares) was colloquially named the *Crveni Krst* Concentration camp.



**Fig. 1** Nazi Concentration camp *Crveni krst* Niš (*Anhalterlager Nisch*) (1941-1944)  
*Source:* Archive photos of the *Crveni Krst* Concentration Camp (1942), IPCM Niš (Milovanović, 1988:70, 73)

From preserved primary historical material, published and unpublished eye-witness testimonies, and recorded conversations with survivors, we learn that the citizens of Niš watched with horror and immense grief the processions of tortured prisoners being taken to the concentration camp. Milovanović noted that "Germans, Bulgarians and members of the Quisling collaborators brought the non-combatant population into the camp by trucks, mainly elderly people over the age of 70 and children under the age of 10" (Milovanović, 1983: 66). In early October 1941, the German embarked on the mass persecution and detention of Jews and Roma from Niš and south-eastern Serbia (about 800 men, women and children in total). In mid-October 1941, it was followed by mass arrests of about 150 renowned citizens of Niš (doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, political leaders, retired officers, merchants, priests, teachers, etc.), and detention of communists and partisans in December 1941 (about 100 in total); hundreds of Serbs and Jews were imprisoned and held hostage for retaliation purposes. The conventional Nazi policy was to shoot 100 citizens for a killed German soldier and 50 citizens for a wounded one (Milovanović, 1983: 63, 91, 97). Prisoners performed different jobs in the camp or grave-digging works at the Bubanj execution grounds. Some prisoners were held in the camp temporarily, until being deported to other concentration camps (in Serbia, Poland, Germany) or forced-labour camps (in Austria, Germany, France, Sweden), or most frequently until being mass executed on Bubanj Hill (Ozimić, 2011: 5, 9, 32). The mass persecution and detention of Roma people from Niš and surrounding towns ensued in October 1942 (Milovanović, 1983: 195).

<sup>2</sup>The Report of the City Commission of the National Investigative Commission of SR Serbia on War Crimes committed by the Occupation and Collaboration Forces, no. 552 of 22 February 1945, Niš (Archives of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments- IPCM, Niš)



**Fig. 2** a) Taking prisoners (Roma, Jews and Communists) to the Concentration camp *Crveni krst* Niš (Source: Historical Archives Niš), and b) the German Shooting Squad at Bubanj execution site (Source: The National Museum Niš)

The number and the structure of prisoners in the camp was constantly changing. The prisoners arrived to the Concentration camp *Crveni krst* Niš from all parts of Serbia, and very few of them were kept there for more than five months. In line with the German instructions on the organization and management of concentration camps, prisoners were classified into several groups: 1) prisoners sentenced to death in urgent proceedings in mock tribunals and serious offenders who could be shot in retaliation; 2) prisoners who were on the list for deportation to a concentration, internment or forced-labour camp; 3) prisoners for whose conviction there was insufficient evidence; and 4) detainees who were to be released (Milovanović, 1983: 66).

According to Milovanović, The Concentration camp at *Crveni krst* Nis was not a large one, as it could house around 2,000-2,500 prisoners at a time. It was guarded by 20 German soldiers and several German sheppards. Due to the constantly increasing number of prisoners, the Chief of the Gestapo in Nis selected the 6-ha space on Bubanj Hill (a former military practice site 3 km from Nis) to be used as the execution site (Milovanović, 1983: 67, 75).

According to the Report issued by the City Commission of the National Investigative Commission of SR Serbia on War Crimes (1945), the first shooting of a group of hostages at the Bubanj execution site took place in January 1942.<sup>3</sup> It is certain that the first mass shootings of the concentration camp prisoners occurred in the period from 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1942, when more that 1,000 people (Serbs, Jews and Roma) were killed at the Bubanj execution site in retaliation for the successful escape of 105 prisoners from the *Crveni Krst* Concentration camp on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1942 (while 42 prisoners were shot in the endeavour to flee). This event was recorded as the first major escape from a Nazi concentration camp in the occupied territory of Europe (Ozimić, 2011: 24). The shootings at the Bubanj execution site continued until the end of the war, but never in such large numbers.

Referring to the Report of the City Commission for War Crimes committed on Bubanj Hill (1945), Milovanović noted that the Germans destroyed all documentation about the Concentration camp at *Crveni krst* Niš and the number of people executed on Bubanj Hill; the official documents and announcements on the list of people to be shot were rare or fragmentary. In August 1944, immediately before liquidating the Concentration camp and retreating, the Gestapo took action to hide the traces of mass killings and the number and identity of victims by destroying the remains of the victims which were, as a rule, buried in common (mass) graves.

<sup>3</sup> This document also contains a record that the first shootings of individual detainees from the improvised prison at *Čele Kula* (the Scull Tower) were executed on *Delijski Vis* (Delia Hights) from July to October 1941, and that their bodies were buried at the Military Cemetery. (Archives of the IPCM Niš).

The Concentration camp at *Crveni krst* Niš was officially liquidated on 14 September 1944.<sup>4</sup> In 1967, the former campgrounds were turned into the “12<sup>th</sup> February” Memorial Museum, to commemorate the date of the first escape from a Nazi concentration camp in Europe. In 1979, it was declared a Cultural Monument of Exceptional Importance (EHRI, 2012).<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 3** Public Announcement of *Feldkommandature* 809-Niš: List of communist hostages to be shot in retaliation (July 1944). *Source:* The National Museum Niš



**Fig. 4** Bubanj shooting and burial grounds (Feb. 1945): Footage of the Commission for War Crimes, Pits and trenches where victims were buried, and later exhumed from and burnt in August-September 1944; *Source:* The National Museum Niš

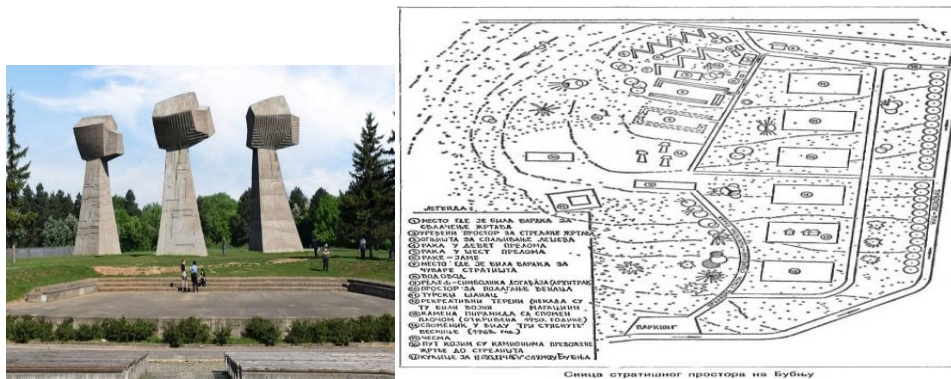
At the end of the war, the City Commission for War Crimes (February 1945) established that the Nazis excavated the corpses, placed them in huge piles several meters wide, poured them with inflammable substance and burnt them, covered the pits and trenches with soil, and

<sup>4</sup> Logor *Crveni krst* Niš (blog), last updated 2017; <http://logorcrvenikrst.wikidot.com/start>; <http://logorcrvenikrst.wikidot.com/zrtve>; <http://logorcrvenikrst.wikidot.com/venceslav-glisic-o-logoru> (12.12.2022).

<sup>5</sup> EHRI (2012): Muzej "12. februar"/ Memorial Museum 12<sup>th</sup> February - former Concentration camp *Crveni krst* Niš, the National Museum Niš, 2012; <https://portal.ehri-project.eu/institutions/rs-006503> (accessed 12.12.2022)

leveled the terrain with tanks and bulldozers. According to eye-witness testimonies, the process of concealing the evidence of the committed war crimes took more than two months while the burning of victims bodies alone took more than three weeks; citizens could see the smoke and smell the stench of the burning corpses for months (Milovanović, 1983: 77). In early September 1949, under the pressure of fleeing in front of the advancing liberation army units, the Germans blew up the remaining mass graves with mines and explosives (the IPCM Niš Archives). Considering the number of pits and trenches, their length, width and depth, several layers of burnt corpses, and the remains of human bones, hair, burnt clothing items and individual possessions, the Commission concluded that there was a huge number of victims (Milovanović, 1983: 77).

The statistical data compiled in recent research (Ozimić, Dinčić, Simović, Gruden-Milentijević, Mitić, 2014) cast more light on the tragic events, primarily through narrative account of survivors and eye-witnesses whose recollections helped identify some victims of Nazi terror, but the exact number of victims is most unlikely to be established with precision, given the lack of primary historical and documentary sources that the Nazis destroyed before retreating.



**Fig. 5** Bubanj Memorial Park: A sketch of the Bubanj execution grounds (IPCM Niš). a) Bubanj Memorial Park; b) A Sketch of the Bubanj execution grounds *Source:* Portal 105.rs, <https://105.rs/spomen-park-bubanj> (accessed 12.12.2022); Milovanović, 1988:78

The archives of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments (IPCM) in Niš contain documentation on material traces that confirm the exact positions of mass graves (pits and trenches where the victims were initially buried and subsequently exhumed and burnt), the former location of barracks where the victims were stripped off their clothes and possessions, and the buildings made of solid material where the execution site guards lived. The documents also contain the results of probe soil survey and investigation of several sites where mass graves were suspected to have been located (the IPCM Niš Archives). Milovanović presents parts of official reports submitted by the City Commission on War crimes (1945) which depict the situation encountered during the on-site investigation of the Bubanj execution site in the period 16-18 February 1945. These reports were primarily based on the written records kept by the Commission members during the investigation<sup>6</sup> and eye-witness testimonies and recollections of the tragic events, individual human destinies and acts of courage and defiance.

<sup>6</sup> The report (16-18 February 1945) described the investigation site in detail: “At the very entrance, on the right-hand side, there is a burnt-down building made of solid material, with visible foundation and wall remains, where

#### 4. BUBANJ MEMORIAL PARK: THE PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE

The first memorial to the victims of mass shootings at Bubanj execution grounds was a truncated stone pyramid (2.5m high), installed on 7 July 1950, at the initiative of the Association of Peoples' Liberation Army Veterans of the City of Niš. The inscription on the memorial plaque commemorates over 10,000 victims of Nazi terror from all parts of Serbia (Andrejević, 1975).



**Fig. 6** The truncated stone pyramid, the first memorial to the Bubanj mass shooting victims (1950)



**Fig. 7** The Bubanj Memorial Park (1963).

Source: Archives of the IPCM Niš.

The importance of Bubanj execution grounds in the post-war society may be illustrated by the fact that the conceptual project proposal for the Bubanj memorial park was being pursued for almost ten years. Namely, after the first public call for the Bubanj monument failed to yield adequate results (*Narodne novine*, 24 July 1954)<sup>7</sup>, the proposals in response to the second public call were evaluated in 1959. In view of the stance that the memorial was to be an expression of the past, present and future, the project committee decided to

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the guards of the Bubanj shooting range lived. On the left to this building, at a distance of 80 meters, there are the foundations of a burnt-down barracks building where the victims were stripped of their clothes and possessions. In front of that building, along the entire length of the front side (55m long), there is a sloping rampart 2.5m high, in front of which there is a leveled field 55m long, 12m wide on the northern side, and 6m wide on the southern side. On the south side of this plateau, there is the entrance, allowing for the passage of trucks and transportation vehicles. On this terrain, on the entire northern and northeastern side, there are trenches and pits. The first trench is broken into six smaller zig-zagging sections (54m long in total and 2.5m wide). Beyond that trench, and running parallel to it, there is another zig-zagging trench, broken into nine zig-zagging sections (25m long in total and 2.5m wide). Between these two trenches, there is a large pit (21.5m long and 2.5m wide). Towards the northeastern side of the first-mentioned trench, there are two pits (5m long and 3m wide each), one next to the other. On the northeastern side of the barracks, at a distance of about 30 meters, there are two pits, running one after the other; the first one is 20m long and 5m wide. The soil in these pits has caved in; the pits are of concave shape, with visible surface traces left by a heavy vehicle, most probably a tank with track threads. On the eastern side of the parapet which protected the barracks, there is a huge hearth (about 50m long and 3m) wide, and further on, near the guards' building, there is another hearth (3m in diameter). There are remains of burned human bones on both hearths. The charred bones show the structure of bone cells." The Commission further reported: "The probe survey of the pits (250cm in depth) shows that the soil in the pits located north and north-west of the barracks is loose; according to the witness accounts, Jews and convicts from the Penitentiary Institution were buried here. In all trenches and pits, all the way to the bottom, there are small pieces of human bones and hair, glued with lime, as well as objects made of materials that do not decay or burn easily (cigarette holders, pipes, buttons). In some layers of soil, there are visible calcareous traces of ash and coal, and a stinking substance in large quantities near and at the very bottom; thus, the bottom layer is grayish in color and completely soaked in rotting substances of organic origin and foul stench" (Milovanović, 1983: 76-77).

<sup>7</sup> *Narodne novine* (1954). *Prvi konkurs za spomenik na Bubnju nije uspeo* (The first public call for the Bubanj monument was unsuccessful), *Narodne novine* (newspaper), 24. jul 1954, Niš, p. 1.



accept the proposed conceptual design of the sculptor Ivan Sabolić from Zagreb (*Narodne novine*, 27 July 1959).<sup>8</sup>

The Bujanj Memorial Park complex was envisaged as a composite structure which would symbolically depict the tragic events. The central monument “Three fists” was to be proportional to the size of the victims who were executed at the Bujanj shooting grounds. As noted in the elaboration on the proposed project by Sabolić in 1961, it was designed to be a symbol of eternal struggle, defiance, resistance and freedom. The three impressive clenched fists, raised towards the sky in a proud and threatening gesture, symbolize the call for rebellion and uprising of all free people against terror (Sabolić, 1961). According to the proposed idea, the complex was to be used as a functional public park, where future generations could enjoy the progress brought about by freedom (*Narodne novine*, 14 September 1963). The construction of the Bujanj Memorial Park started in April 1962; it was completed and ceremoniously opened on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1963, the date commemorating the liberation of Niš in World War II (*Narodne novine*, 12 October 1963).<sup>9</sup>



**Fig. 8** The horizontal white marble bas-relief at the Bujanj Memorial Park, Niš Source: The Institute for Preserving Cultural Monuments, Niš (2017); *Spomenik Database*, <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/nis> (accessed 12.12.2022)

The Bujanj Memorial Park is a unique and monumental architectonic complex which encompasses a memorial trail and access paths, a horizontal frieze panel with a marble bas-relief, a paved plateau leading to the central part of the memorial complex, and the imposing “Three clenched fists” composition. The marble bas-relief contains a five-panel composition, an abstract depiction of oppression and atrocities committed by the Nazis and their impact on the people, including the German “killing machine” (shooting squads), standing victims lined up for execution, the fallen bodies of victims, fists of defiance and rebellion raised against oppression, and the ultimate victory embodied in the steadfast forward movement. Behind the marble memorial wall stretches a terraced plateau leading to the central part of the memorial complex: “Three fists” (16m, 14m and 13m high) bursting from the grassy surface towards the sky. The three clenched fists are powerful and universal symbol of defiance, resistance, human struggle for freedom and against injustice (*Narodne novine*, 12 October 1963).

Given the fact that Bujanj Memorial Park covers 47 hectares of forested land, including the central memorial area, its preservation, maintenance and landscaping has been an issue which has been the subject matter of considerable debates since its construction. In addition to the professional security service which would secure the monument itself, there was an

<sup>8</sup> *Narodne novine* (1959). *Ocenjeni radovi sa konkursa za podizanje spomenika na Bujanju*. (Evaluated project proposals submitted in response to the public call for the Bujanj monument), *Narodne novine*, 27. jun 1959, p. 1

<sup>9</sup> *Narodne novine* (1963). *Spomenik u brojkama* (Monument Statistics), *Narodne novine*, 12. oktobar 1963, p. 3.

interesting proposal (in 1963) to entrust the park to the maintenance of the Scouts Association of Niš, who would establish their encampment in part of the forest and "work on maintaining, preserving and revitalizing the park, and above all on organizing activities aimed at promoting the development of the Bubanj memorial tradition" (*Narodne novine*, 14 September 1963).

The documentation of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Niš shows that the Bubanj Memorial Park was managed and maintained by different city institutions. While the records from the 1960s show a satisfactory financial standing, the records from the 1970s show that none of the local institutions had the financial capacity to maintain and adequately preserve the memorial complex. Although the mention of the Bubanj Memorial Park was part of the regular political rhetoric at the time, and although the organization of appropriate commemorative, cultural and youth events was a common mechanism of ideological promotion, very small sums of money were allocated for maintenance and preservation purposes. Thus, the overall condition of the entire memorial complex gradually deteriorated. In 1973, the Bubanj Memorial Park was awarded the status of a cultural monument of exceptional importance<sup>10</sup>, in an attempt to secure regular funding for the memorial complex.

After the disintegration of the SFRY (1991) and during the ensuing civil wars (in the 1990s), there was a prominent rise of ethnic nationalism in the former Yugoslavia regions. Gradually, all communist-socialist symbols from the SFRY era were removed, cities changed their population structure, and not all WWII memorials were preserved. Thus, due to the artistic conception of the Bubanj Memorial Park, its universal symbolism and the power of the local people's emotional heritage, the "Fists" exceeded the ideology of the time when they were built.

Nevertheless, during the last two decades, Bubanj Memorial Park was neglected and excluded from the cultural map of Serbia, considering the fact that the society paid more attention to other historical periods more closely related to the Serbian national identity and heritage. This is a consequence of the ubiquitous historical revisionism that has been the dominant historical discourse from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day. Due to the relativization of the importance of the Second World War victims, both the anti-fascist combatants and the civilians killed during the Nazi occupation, citizens became disinterested in the symbolic and real value of this monument. As a result, the memorial site experienced considerable neglect, degradation and deterioration. Alongside with the neglected values of anti-fascism, Bubanj Memorial Park has been a victim of nationalist and extremist (neo-Nazi and fascist) subculture groups, whose members vandalized and desecrated the memorial to the innocent victims of Nazi terror by shocking graffiti celebrating and glorifying the perpetrators and collaborators of the war crimes committed on Bubanj Hill. Such highly detrimental and socially dangerous discourse undermines the historical and architectonic importance of this significant monument and perverts the symbolic and real meaning of the memorial in public.

Today, the memorial complex is no longer perceived as an important historical and architectural asset, nor a significant point in city life; the entire area is largely used as a picnic area and recreation ground. Notably, in 2017, the competent Ministry provided financial support for a rehabilitation of the Bubanj Memorial complex (renovation of access paths, seating and recreational areas, information boards, lightening, landscaping a video surveillance system, conservation of the memorial wall and bas-relief, etc (*Niške vesti*, 17 October 2017).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Decision of the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments Niš, no. 695/1 of 30.5.1973, *Official Gazette SRS* no. 14/79.

<sup>11</sup> *Niške vesti* (2017): Spomen-park Bubanj zablistao (Bubanj Memorial Park shines), M. Vodeničarski, 17. 10.2017; <https://niskevesti.rs/spomen-park-bubanj-zablistao/>

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Concentration camp *Crveni Krst* Niš and the Bubanj Memorial Park complex are historical and cultural monuments of exceptional importance. During the Second World War, these two sites were places of torture, suffering and mass execution, which bear witness of the cruelty and bestiality of Nazi terror in south-eastern Serbia. The Concentration camp *Anhalter Lager Nisch* was established with the aim of suppressing the libertarian spirit of the Serbs, Jews and Roma who lived in the area of Niš and its surroundings for centuries. Historical researcher estimate that more than 30,000 people were imprisoned there in the period from April 1941 to September 1944, while more than 10,000 people were executed by German shooting squads at the Bubanj Hill execution grounds in the same period. The precise numbers are highly unlikely to be established, considering that the Nazis destroyed the primary documentary sources evidencing the atrocities. The identification of victims and event descriptions are largely based on eye-witness testimonies and recollections of the tragic events, individual human destinies and acts of courage and defiance. However, despite almost daily executions, the Nazis failed to suppress the desire for freedom, which is an intrinsic part of human nature. On 12 February 1942, 105 prisoners managed to escape from the camp, while 42 were shot in the attempt; this event was recorded as the first major escape for a Nazi concentration camp in occupied Europe. In retaliation, in the period 16-20<sup>h</sup> February 1942, the Germans organized the first mass shootings of prisoners at the Bubanj execution grounds. Depending on the Gestapo classification, prisoners were either deported to other (concentration, internment, labour or death) camps or executed at Bubanj killing fields. In August-September 1944, the Germans tried to destroy the evidence of their war crimes by exhuming and burning the corpse at Bubanj Hill execution grounds.

In the post-war period, the Concentration camp *Crveni krst* was turned into a Memorial Museum in 1967. The Bubanj Memorial Park complex was completed in 1963. In the post-SFRY period, it was neglected, inadequately maintained and subjected to vandalism and desecration. The situation was slightly repaired during the last renovation works in 2017 but, given its historical, architectonic and symbolic importance, it still does not have the adequate place on the cultural map of Serbia. Today, eighty years after the prisoners' escape from the Concentration camp *Crveni Krst* and the subsequent mass shootings at the Bubanj execution grounds, these two historical sites represent places of torture, suffering and execution, but they are also symbols of defiance, resistance and rebellion. As such, they are constant reminders of our obligation to preserve freedom, through permanent struggle for justice and truth.

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## **MEMORIJALNI PARK BUBANJ: SEĆANJE NA ŽRTVE NACISTIČKOG TERORA I MASOVNOG STRADANJA U DRUGOM SVETSKOM RATU**

*Memorijalni kompleks „Bubanj“ je sagrađen sa ciljem obeležavanja mesta stradanja nevinih žrtava nacizma u Drugom svetskom ratu. Predstavlja simbol stradanja, ali i otpora, borbe i želje sa slobodom, oličen u prikazu tri ogromne stisnute pesnice. „Tri pesnice“ simbolizuju otpor naroda i prkos fašizmu. One su stalni podsetnik o važnosti slobode kao najveće ljudske vrednosti. One su stalni podsetnik na važnost slobode, kao najveće ljudske vrednosti. Autori u radu najpre ukazuju na politiku eugenike, kao ideološke osnove nacizma i svirepih nacističkih zločina, da bi se zatim osvrnuli na istorijske okolnosti koje su dovele do formiranja koncentracionog logora "Crveni krst" u Nišu i Bubernja kao stratišta. Centralni deo rada je posvećen analizi procesa izgradnje Memorijalnog kompleksa „Bubanj“, njegovom značaju u posleratnom jugoslovenskom društvu i trebutnoj poziciji na kulturnoj mapi Srbije. Ukazujući na masovnost stradanja i patnje žrtava nacističkog terora u ovim krajevima Srbije, autori ističu snagu naroda koji je nastojao da očuva i odbrani slobodu i pravo na dostojanstven život, kao najvažnije ljudske vrednosti.*

Ključne reči: *Bubanj memorijalni park, stradanje, Drugi svetski rat, spomenik „Tri pesnice“.*