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Wikipedia as Primary Source: A Case Study on Jasenovac

In 2006, Roy Rosenzweig wrote an article on Wikipedia asking where historians fit in the age of open, crowd-sourced history.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wikipedia has guidelines and regulations to encourage the quality and impartiality of its articles, however, Rosenzweig is (reasonably) concerned with the misinformation that Wikipedia can produce. While he makes critical points about the future of historians in this model of history making and offers solutions, perhaps Rosenzweig isn’t asking all the right questions. He overlooks the advantages of Wikipedia and the numerous ways it can be treated as a critical primary source to evaluate how the public interacts with the past and imagines itself and other national communities. Maybe instead the question is: What can we learn about public memory, national identity, and community engagement with history, through crowd-sourced history platforms like Wikipedia.

Millions of people a day read the millions of articles created for and by the public, on the 290+ active language editions of Wikipedia.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the former Yugoslavia, where the past is regularly contested and conceived based on national lines, Wikipedia functions as an intangible space where the past and the nation are constantly engaged with, imagined, and constructed. Using Croatian and Serbian language Wikipedia articles on Jasenovac—a highly contested World War II-era Croatian concentration camp—as a preliminary case study, this essay examines the multiple ways scholars can use Wikipedia as a primary source and considers the following questions: How do Croats and Serbs use Wikipedia to construct their contested pasts? What aspects of Jasenovac’s narrative are emphasized, absent, or under critical debate? How do Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia users comprehend the “nation” in these texts and debates? Where do their understandings of Jasenovac fit into their contemporary conceptions of national identity? How do these crowd-sourced Wikipedia articles reflect the nature of Croatian and Serbian public-memory of Jasenovac? These are large and complex questions that will not be answered in full here, but will be approached to offer preliminary conclusions that might be reached by treating Wikipedia as a rich, and largely untapped primary source.

This paper adopts the idea of collective remembrance as defined by J.M. Winter to understand how active Wikipedia users recall the past through the construction of these articles. It also applies Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined community in an effort to understand how Wikipedia users imagine Jasenovac within national histories and contemporary national identities.[[3]](#footnote-3) To do so, I first provide a general history of Jasenovac and then dive into explaining how Wikipedia functions and its use to scholars as a primary source. I examine the different narratives of Jasenovac found on Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia and then then look to their histories to compare multiple versions and sample how they have developed over time and what elements of these narratives have shifted or remained consistent. Next, I look to the article’s talk pages to show what issues are of greatest concern to users, how they interact with one another, and how they understand themselves and others as members of national communities. I then offer preliminary conclusions on what we can learn by treating Wikipedia content as primary source evidence and what limitations and challenges exist.

While numerous scholars have studied Jasenovac and its contested memory in national contexts, they have generally only examined official spaces of memory like commemorations, museum exhibitions, political rhetoric, international criminal courts, and other politically charged, state, or institutionally mediated spaces.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their studies are thus unable to actually articulate what public memory of Jasenovac exists in Yugoslav successor states on an unstructured, everyday basis. As an unaffiliated, online, open-source, and community-built public space, these Wikipedia articles offer a more accurate image of Croatian and Serbian public memory of Jasenovac and their understanding of its place within their national histories and contemporary identities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This preliminary study of Croatian and Serbian language Wikipedia articles on Jasenovac reveals a deep distrust of communist-era scholarship and varied interpretations of what Wikipedia’s purpose is. On both pages, contestations center on the nature of the camp (collection camp versus death camp) and the number of victims (ranging from 1,654-1.2 million). Likewise, users from both pages seems thoroughly convinced that the article’s position and wiki user’s personal opinions on the number of victims and the nature of the camp in some way speaks to the national character of Serbs and Croats. In both contexts, discussions on Jasenvoac are tied to crimes that took place during the wars of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. Likewise, Jasenovac’s relationship to the Holocaust is ill-defined. The Holocaust and Nazi Germany are only invoked to either support or delegitimize claims on the nature of the camp or its victim number. While it can be challenging to draw a precise profile of the users engaged in writing and debating these Wikipedia articles or measure the extent to which their national identity factors into the contributions they make and discussions they participate in, treating Wikipedia as a primary source can ultimately grant scholars access to an intangible digital memory landscape that offers abundant insight on public memory and national identity particularly relevant to post-conflict societies and contested pasts.

A Brief History of Jasenovac

On April 6, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded Yugoslavia. Shortly after, with the legitimizing hand of Nazi Germany, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was proclaimed by the Ustaše and their *poglavnik* or Führer Ante Pavelić.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Ustaše were a Croatian proto-fascist, ultra-nationalist organization with strong ties to the Catholic Church. They believed that all Croats were of Aryan descent, but that their blood had been compromised through mixed marriages and reproduction.[[7]](#footnote-7) Citizens of the NDH were defined as Aryans actively loyal to the state. Jews and Roma were therefore not extended the rights and protections belonging to citizens and were considered a threat to a “pure” Croatia. Legally speaking, Serbs were not strictly seen as non-Aryans, but rather as “politically incompatible elements and ‘perennial enemies.’”[[8]](#footnote-8) Serbs were to blame for the political and biological regression of Croats and the loss of an independent Croatian state.

As a Nazi collaborationist regime, the Ustaše were extended almost unlimited freedom in crafting their internal policies. Their end goal was an ethnically pure Greater Croatia that would come to fruition by forcibility removing Serbs, Jews, and Roma people.[[9]](#footnote-9) From April 11, 1941, laws were passed that effectively removed these groups from civil society and legalized on the spot executions, mass incarcerations, and the formation of concentration camps.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Ustaše are a rare example of a collaborationist regime that ran its own camps without instruction or aid from Nazi Germany. The largest Ustaše run camp was Jasenovac. Established in 1941 and located fifty-five miles southeast of Zagreb on the left-bank of the Sava River, the camp spanned more than 150 square miles, and was made up of several smaller camp units.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is widely known as “the Yugoslav Auschwitz,” or the “Auschwitz of the Balkans.”

Like Nazi-run camps, Jasenovac prisoners were killed by gas chambers, burning, starvation, disease, and hard labor. But while Nazi concentration camps were characterized by the mechanical efficiency with which liquidations were carried out, this was not the case at Jasenovac. The Serbian, Jewish, Roma, anti-fascist, and communist prisoners of Jasenovac were subject to death using mallets, maces, axes, machine guns, hatchets, wooden and iron hammers, hanging, and knives.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Jews and Roma were incompatible to the Ustaše ideal of a greater Croatia with a “pure” racial pedigree, Serbs were their primary targets due to the biological and political “danger” they posed to the nation. While the number of victims killed at the camp is still a highly-contested matter, over 83,000 victims have been identified, with Serb victims in a large majority. It is estimated that some 100,000 people, in total, were killed at Jasenovac.[[13]](#footnote-13)

With the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the post-war period, World War II was presented as a triumph and liberation of the Yugoslav people in the spirit of “brotherhood and unity” which tried to abolish the idea of national difference and conflict. Jasenovac was thus interpreted in these terms over the span of communist rule. Officially, the camp was understood as a place where fascists (in very general terms) were responsible for killing around 750,000 Yugoslavs (this number was inflated by Yugoslav President Tito in order to gain greater reparations from Germany) rather than targeted national or racial groups. While this ideology and narrative generally held the SFRY together for several decades, narratives of national conflict at Jasenovac and elsewhere in Yugoslavia during the Second World War endured and were remobilized as propaganda during the wars of Yugoslavia‘s dissolution.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the post-Yugoslav era, World War II memory, and especially memory of Jasenovac, remains highly contested among Serbs, Croats, and their state governments. Wikipedia is a unique space where those contested narratives are constructed and debated without official mediation.

Wikipedia as Primary Source

Wikipedia is a free, unrestricted, online encyclopedia that runs on open-source software, meaning its source code is made available to, and edited by, online contributors (essentially anyone with access to the internet).[[15]](#footnote-15) While Wikipedia is totally open to the public, it is governed by a set of regulations and guidelines that direct things like content, behavior, and style. However, there are four main pillars that govern contribution to Wikipedia: 1. No original research. Only conventional understandings of a topic should be reported. 2. Articles should be written from a neutral point of view.[[16]](#footnote-16) 3. Do not infringe on copyright. 4. Respect other users. While these rules are imperfect, Wikipedia continues to grow in participation, use, and number of articles annually. As of December 2018, Serbian Wikipedia has reached a total of 600,000 plus articles and Croatian Wikipedia more than 200,000. Likewise, between the two, more than sixty-eight new articles are added to Wikipedia daily, with more than 40,000,000 page views per month combined.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There are three components to Wikipedia’s functionality and public interface that scholars should be aware of: the main article, its history, and talk page.

**Wiki Articles and the Construction of Jasenovac Narratives**

All Wikipedia articles, regardless of language or national affiliation are generally structured the same way. They contain a general summary and table of contents, followed by a detailed article. For purposes of this essay, only the general summary of Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia articles on Jasenovac will be examined since both articles are quite lengthy and many users seeking basic information on a subject often do not read past a Wikipedia article’s initial summary. Examining general narratives of the camp presented in these article summaries reveals significant difference in how users have constructed historical narratives of Jasenovac and suggests how they do or do not see it in relation to national identity.

Croatian Wikipedia describes the camp as follows: Jasenovac was a collection and work camp established in the NDH for the “detention, forced labor, and murder of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croats (against the Ustaše).” It continued to function in the SFRY post-1945, when it was used to intern communist defectors. Jasenovac was created as a result of “racial and national exclusionary policies” and was run by the Ustaše, who were under the wing of, and directly influenced by, Nazi Germany. In socialist Yugoslavia, a “megalomaniac myth of Jasenovac” was cultivated that claimed 750,000 victims were killed in “rare ways” to vilify Croats and martyrize Serbs. That number of victims was disproven following the dissolution of Yugoslavia by two demographers, one Serb and one Croat. While the memorial site to Jasenovac claims that over 83,000 people died there, many authors consider that number inflated too. In addition, a Croat journalist of Serbian descent whose family were imprisoned at Jasenovac, wrote a book based on “700 boxes of archival material” and claimed that the Serbian media invented Jasnovac as a space of mass murder based on national identity and religion, when it was a place of forced labor based on political beliefs. Authors are still unsure of the exact number of victims, but some claim as low as 1,654.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The narrative of Jasenovac constructed in the Croatian article’s summary subtly seeks to rescue the image of Croats from 1941-1945 (and perhaps in the 1990s too). First, users who contributed to this article believe Jasenovac has a mythic quality crafted by Yugoslav socialists, and later by the Serbian media and government to vilify Croats and shame Croatian national consciousness. Subtly pointing to Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia in 1990 and the war that followed, Jasenovac is partially understood as an *idea* that has victimized Croats and their national development, rather than a tangible site of mass execution and internment. That victim status is further supported by stating that while Serbs, Jews, and Roma died at Jasenovac, so did Croats on the basis of oppositional political views, further suggesting that Croats had no responsibility for crimes at Jasenovac since they were victims too. That is affirmed by the idea that Nazi Germany guided the Ustaše’s governance in the NDH, distancing the regime or state from responsibility for crimes at Jasenovac. Finally, in dismissing the generally accepted number of roughly 83,000 Jasenovac victims and including the much smaller estimate of 1,654 victims, the idea of a Jasenovac “myth” is reinforced.

While the users who constructed this article communicate that crimes at Jasenovac were tangentially related to national identity, they simultaneously manage to make national identity central to understanding the camp. The article delegitimizes the inflated number of victims invented by Yugoslav communist authorities by invoking research jointly conducted by two demographers, one Serbian and one Croatian. Mentioning their national identities, which insinuates cooperation between individuals from both the victim and perpetrator national groups, is somehow meant to legitimize their claims. Likewise, the article’s mention of research that questions the very nature of the camp conducted “by a Croatian journalist of Serbian descent whose family were in Jasenovac” implies that if *he* can question and prove that socialist-era narratives of the camp were false, it’s likely true.

Conversely, the narrative of Jasenovac crafted by users on Serbian Wikipedia, appears less concerned with the assignment of national identity to victims and perpetrators (though it does do this) and more interested in stressing the brutality of the crimes, the size and logistical operation of the camp system, its demographics, and status as a genocide. While it identifies Serbs, Jews, Roma, their sympathizers, and communists as victims, and Ustaše as perpetrators, it clearly labels Jasenovac as a death camp, established and run by the Ustaše. Stressing the violence of the camp and its size, Jasenovac is described as “a barbaric place of terror” with the largest transit and execution of men, women, and children in the NDH. Uninterested in locating the camp in the pre or post-World War II eras, the summary describes the camp system in detail, likely to emphasize the camps brutality and support its claim of genocide: Camp Ciglana had a crematorium, Donja Gradina was the main space of executions, children were taken to Sisak, and women to Stara Gradiška. The article subsequently states that the number of Jasenovac victims has never been established, but in 2012 the Museum of Genocide Victims in Belgrade confirmed a list of 88,000 names. Since other inflated or minimized numbers are not included, we can conclude that users have reached some level of consensus with this number. Wanting to make responsibility for crimes at Jasenovac clear, the article also recognizes that although Jasenovac was modeled after German concentration camps, its establishment, organization, administration, and security were under the supervision and command of the Ustaše.[[19]](#footnote-19) Given this article’s narrative, we can conclude that users who constructed it want the victims (which are evenly represented) and their deaths acknowledged only within the context of the Second World War. The want to be clear that Jasenovac was a death camp, it constituted a genocide, and while responsibility is undoubtedly assigned to the Ustaše, their Croatian nationality is not given particular emphasis nor is their ideology.

Interestingly, although the Croatian article attempts to lean on Nazi fascism, Ustaše ideology is curiously absent from both article summaries. However, both contain their idea of an inclusive description of Jasenovac victims, recognizing not only Serbs, Jews, and Roma, but anti-fascists and communists as well. Similarly, both articles are largely detached from the greater context of the Holocaust, which undoubtedly fostered the Ustaše’s ability to establish the camp and carry out mass executions there. Although the Croatian article does try to lay blame on Nazi Germany, both user-generated articles seem to understand the camp and the people murdered there only within the Yugoslav context.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Wikipedia’s “View History” Feature—Revising Jasenovac**

One little known feature of Wikipedia is the “View History” link found on each article. This page tells users everything they need to know about revisions made to the article including who made what edits and when. Since its creation in August of 2005, the Croatian Jasenovac article has experienced over 800 edits and the Serbian version, created in September 2004, more than 700.[[21]](#footnote-21) While some of these edits relate to grammar and style, examining earlier articles allows us to trace how public narratives of Jasenovac have (or have not) changed over time.

Examining earlier versions of the Croatian Wikipedia article on Jasenovac shows how understandings of the camp’s nature have changed over time and how its characterization as “myth” is relatively recent. An August 2005 version, for example, does not refer to Jasenovac as a collection or work camp, but rather “a concentration camp for destruction.”[[22]](#footnote-22) A 2012 version of the article still did not refer to Jasenovac as a work camp, but rather a collection and death camp.[[23]](#footnote-23) The word death camp was not erased from the introduction and replaced by “work camp” until the 14th of August, 2018.[[24]](#footnote-24) Likewise, for much of the article’s life time, its summary did not focus on the post-war era or the creation of a “myth” by the communist regime and Serbian authorities, but instead described the various racial laws and legal provisions passed by the Ustaše. Mention of the Yugoslav socialist regime’s treatment of Jasenovac as propaganda appeared in May 2016, but the idea of Jasenovac as a myth was not added to the article until December 2018.[[25]](#footnote-25) Looking at the article’s history shows that these two vital components of the Croatian article’s current narrative are not necessarily long held public ideas about the camp, but might in fact be more recent.

It is interesting to note, however, that from the Croatian article’s inception, it has always recognized Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croats (in opposition to the Ustaše regime) as Jasenovac victims. Thus, the site’s authors have always wanted it known that along with other victim groups, there were Croat victims at Jasenovac too. Likewise, a reliance on Nazi Germany as the source of Ustaše ideology in the NDH has been consistently present.[[26]](#footnote-26) Meaning, that the Ustaše’s specific ideology that placed victims in Jasenovac has generally been absent from the narrative and primary responsibility has consistently been placed on other sources of fascism. Together, these ideas neutralize the Croatian state or nation from much responsibility for Ustaše crimes and places it the victim category.

Serbian Wikipedia’s Jasenovac article has also experienced a level of change as well as relative consistency. While it’s earliest iteration contained numerous details like the names of certain Ustaše, specific facts and stories of heinous murder and torture methods, and specific examples of groups being collected, transported, and liquidated, it also carried much of the same narrative still found in the current Wiki article. Namely, that Serbs and Jews (the Roma are noticeably absent in the article’s earliest versions but were returned to the narrative in 2006[[27]](#footnote-27)) were brutally treated and executed by Ustaše at Jasenovac in the NDH.[[28]](#footnote-28) While Ustaše ideology and national affiliation was not explained or stressed, by 2006 the article’s introduction gave more information about the physical camp space and its location.[[29]](#footnote-29) It was not until August 2012, however, that Serbian Wikipedia’s introduction described crimes committed at Jasenovac as genocide. Still, that version of the article made it clear that while Croats and Muslims died there on a political basis, they were never killed based on national identity.[[30]](#footnote-30) This emphasis on nationality however was later deleted and is not present in the current version. By examining these various versions of the Serbian Wikipedia article, we can see that users have generally privileged presenting the camp as a large site of mass violence against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Ustaše political opponents, over other interpretations.

**“Talking” About Jasenovac**

In addition to a “view history” link, all Wikipedia articles have a “talk page” where users can engage in discussions related to the article and revisions made to it. Looking at these discussions allows us to examine how users understand Jasenovac history, connect narratives of Jasenovac with national identity, and uncover the complex memorial landscape Jasenovac occupies in Serbian and Croatian national consciousness.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Croatian Wikipedia’s Jasenovac article opens with an introductory chart and two questions with answers that are often debated on the page.[[32]](#footnote-32) In this initial section, user SpeedyGonsales defended the article’s label of Jasenovac as a work camp rather than a concentration camp. He explained that when the camp functioned, it was called “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac” which translates to “Work Camp Jasenovac” which makes the article’s title a direct translation. He further defended the term by explaining that in Croatian, the word for collecting is “sabiranje” and the word “koncentracija” or concentration, cannot not be applied in the same sense, which make the title “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac” most appropriate. SpeedyGonsales also defended the lower estimation of Jasenovac victims found in the article by stating that in the spirit of Wikipedia’s Neutral Point of View Policy, the article must present all views on the subject and the “history of change in numbers in official sources.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

SpeedyGonsales’ post was met with a slew of responses that reveal how closely tied issues of Jasenovac are to crimes that took place during Yugoslavia’s dissolution, and that despite an unclear image of where Jasenovac fits into the Holocaust, to some, reducing the number of victims who died there, is akin to Holocaust denial. User Thhhommmasss’s reply exemplifies this. He argued that citing an estimate of less than 2,000 Jasneovac victims on Croatian Wikipedia is the same as “Holocaust deniers claiming that almost no one was exterminated in Auschwitz” or in the case of Srebrenica, reducing the generally accepted number of 8,000 victims, to just 400. This is also seen in a later conversation when users MirHaven and Roberta F. argued that Jasenovac was not a place of genocide. In response, one user compared Jasenovac to Mauthausen Concentration Camp and argued in favor of using the term in reference to Jasenovac, while another asked, “why don’t you throw out the word genocide from the article ‘Genocide in Srebrenica?’”[[34]](#footnote-34) These interactions show that to some extent, users measure Jasenovac against Nazi concentration camps and crimes from the 1990s to compare and determine its relative horror and destruction.

Like Croatian Wikipedia, the Serbian version also contains debates on the number of victims killed at Jasenovac and accusations of Holocaust denial. Users who argue that the number is below the Yugoslav-era estimate of 750,000 victims were often met with responses like, “in normal countries like Germany, revisionists are jailed for denying the 6 million people killed at Auschwitz,” or “Serbs are playing with victim figures. Not even the Germans do that anymore.”[[35]](#footnote-35) But unlike Croatian Wikipedia, users engaged in discussion on the Serbian version’s talk page are more concerned with the idea of objectivity and the purpose of Wikipedia. In an extended string of dialogue, users argued about an image from Donja Gradina Memorial Zone featured in the article that states 750,000 people died at Jasenovac including 500,000 Serbs.[[36]](#footnote-36) User Obsuser argued that the article contains a disclaimer which states the number from Donja Gradina is likely false, but “it doesn’t matter if it’s the real number…” rather, it’s important that the reader gets a wide view of what numbers have been claimed, by whom, and on what basis. He went on to state that a Wikipedia contributor’s only job is to include relevant information and “the position of all sides and not simple write what he believes is the truth.” User Bojan was not convinced and argued that “it is important for the user to believe that he is writing the truth.” However, users like Nikola B. found it unlikely that the “truth of Jasenovac” could be found since Yugoslav-era documents were falsified and many victims were murdered in such a way that their remains are untraceable.[[37]](#footnote-37) These users and others are generally preoccupied with presenting the truth(s) of Jasenovac on Wikipedia, despite conflicting understandings of what that truth is.

While users on the Serbian and Croatian versions of the Jasenovac article have varying interests and positions on aspects of the former concentration camp’s history, interactions on both talk pages show that users believe narratives of Jasenovac have everything to do with how they imagine the Serbian and Croatian nations. On Croatian Wikipedia, user Željko argued that inflated numbers of Jasenovac victims were “shamelessly invented with the aim of continually accusing Croatia of being charged with these crimes.” The user Mirhaven affirmed this idea and stated that “this anti-Croat garbage will be thoroughly regulated,” along with another user, who shared that sentiment and wrote “Those numbers are made up… to create a myth of the Croatian people as ‘genocidal’.” Unregistered user 193[[38]](#footnote-38) then replied “Well Croats are a genocidal people,” and cited ethnic cleansing that took place in Croatia in 1995, and Croats who celebrate Operation Storm, the Ustaše, and Jasenovac.[[39]](#footnote-39) Without any evidence regarding the unregistered users national identity, users Vodomar and Roberta F. immediately assumed he was Serbian, and told user 193 to deal with “their own crimes” at Sajmište and Banjica (two German concentration camps operated by Serbian Nazi collaborationist authorities in Serbia during Nazi occupation from 1941-1945). User 193’s response similarly assumed the national identity of those engaged in the debate, and placed collective responsibility on them stating “This isn’t about Serbian crimes, but Croatian ones. *The fact that you’re trying to remove guilt shows that you aren’t ready to face your crimes.*[[40]](#footnote-40)This example (of many) suggests that Wikipedia users not only imagine themselves as a part of a nation, but also imagine the nations they believe other users belong to as well.

Users on the Serbian version’s talk page more or less do the same. Users who criticize elements of the article are assumed to be pro-Ustaše Croats, and those who support it are assumed to be Serbs. The users engaged in these discussion find it hard to image a Serb who would question the higher estimation of victims or a Croat who wouldn’t support a lower one.

In a thread concerning the objectivity of victim numbers, user Bojan, who believed the numbers to be doctored, told user Obsuser, who supported the article’s numbers, to use his “Bosnian-Serb head” to “start thinking and stop being stupid.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Another user later wrote a lengthy reply in support of the article’s interpretation of Jasenovac, to which user Tajga responded “only in Serbian Wikipedia will you find bullshit like this.” [[42]](#footnote-42) In both cases, users Bojan and Tyga expressed their disagreement with the article and distanced themselves from what they believed to be an interpretation of Jasenovac created by the Serbian national Wikipedia community. A later comment made by an unknown user stated that “clearly the article was written by someone from the Ustaše’s homeland” since it reduced the number of victims from 700,000 to 83,000, therefore collectively labeling *all* users who participated in the article’s construction as Croats.[[43]](#footnote-43) Examining portions of both article’s talk pages demonstrate that users from both language versions of Wikipedia determine an individual’s identity and membership to a national community (including their own) based on their interpretation and understandings of Jasenovac.

Conclusion: What can and cannot be learned from treating Wikipedia as a primary source?

In the age of open, crowd-sourced history, scholars question the value of historical narratives and the potential for misinformation produced by the public in this method of history making and their place within it. While crowd-sourced history platforms like Wikipedia certainly challenge scholars to reconceptualize their purpose and importance in the digital history making sphere, they would also do well to consider what can be learned by critically treating Wikipedia as a rich primary source with the ability to reveal much about public memory, national identity, and community engagement with history. As unofficial and unmediated digital spaces, the more than 290+ active language versions of Wikipedia are especially useful to scholars who study post-conflict societies or contentious pasts. Examining the articles, histories, and talk pages of the same historical place, event, or person in different language Wikipedia can reveal how historical narratives vary based on national interpretation, how they might shift over time, what different narratives exist in public memory, and how users understand themselves and others within national communities.

Examining articles on Jasenovac through Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia allows us to draw preliminary conclusions on changing public understandings and debates of the former concentration and death camp and its relation to national identity. While imperfect like any primary source, this case study grants insight on the value and challenges to treating Wikipedia as a primary source.

Comparing the Croatian and Serbian Jasenovac articles shows us how users on each site tell the story of Jasenovac in contrasting ways. The Croatian article is interested in rehabilitating the image of Croats fostered through narratives of Jasenovac and stresses that the “myth” of Jasenovac, cultivated by Yugoslav and Serbian authorities, is false. The article’s talk page shows however, that while previous iterations of the article described Jasenovac’s treatment during the communist period, the emphasis on myth is a relatively new addition (August 2018). Similarly, the article’s designation of Jasenovac as a work and collection camp versus a death or concentration camp is also new (December 2018). Tracing these changes shows that the current narrative of Jasenovac on Croatian Wikipedia has undergone significant change in the last six months. While it is difficult to say whether the narrative is representative of overall Croatian public memory of Jasenovac, examining various versions of the article shows that interpretations are not uniform and that for more than thirteen years the Croatian version did in fact consider Jasenovac a death camp.

In the case of Serbian Wikipedia, we’re able to observe that while the page has undergone some change, since its creation in 2004, users have been committed to presenting a narrative of Jasenovac that demonstrates the brutality of crimes committed at the camp, its size, and clearly labeling the Ustaše as perpetrators. The talk page does indicate that early versions of the article didn’t interpret the camp as a site of genocide, but by 2012 this changed and has remained a permanent fixture of the article’s summary. However, the article considers the term genocide to only apply to Serbs, Jews, and Roma killed at Jasenovac and not those who were interned or executed on a political basis.

Wikipedia’s talk page feature also has much to show scholars in regard to user interactions and national community. In both cases users categorize their own and others national identity based on their support for the Wikipedia article and their understanding of Jasenovac. Users who support a less malign interpretation of Jasenovac and a small number of victims are considered to be Croats and those who emphasis the brutality of the camp and an inflated number of victims are seen as Serbs.

A challenge to using these talk pages rests with user profiles. Some Wikipedia contributors are registered users with curated profile pages that grant scholars the ability to understand who is contributing to these articles and how their backgrounds might influence their understandings of Jasenovac. Other users, however, have very bare profiles that don’t provide much in regard to their identity, while other contributors are totally unregistered and their comments are only associated with an IP address. If more users had curated profile pages, additional conclusions could be made regarding national identity and national narratives of Jasenovac. This issue notwithstanding, both talk pages reveal that debates surrounding Jasenovac are compared to Holocaust denial yet deeply tied to ethnic conflict that took place during the wars of Yugoslavia’s dissolution, demonstrating that in both Croatian and Serbian society, Jasenovac is not as much an issue of the distant past, but the recent past and present.

Scholars of history and memory often try to understand how public narratives of the past are formed in national communities or smaller collectives, what influences them to change, and how. While Wikipedia like any primary source has certain flaws, it is fertile ground to explore these questions. As an unrecognized and underutilized opening into the complex digital terrain of contested memory in post-conflict societies like the former Yugoslavia, treating Wikipedia as a primary source can grant scholars a better understanding of contested historical narratives, their evolution, and the role of national identity in the formation of public memory and its influence in contemporary society.

1. Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2006): 117-146, here 117-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “List of Wikipedia’s,” Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, last modified March 29th, 2019, Accessed April 6th, 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias>; Rosenzweig, “Can History be Open Source?” 117-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jay Winter, *Remembering the War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the 20th Century,* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006), 4-5; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism,* (New York: Verso, 2006), 1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lilijana Radonić, “Croatia – Exhibiting Memory and History at the ‘Shores of Europe,’” *Culture Unbound* 3 (2011): 355-367,; Rob Van Der Laarse, “Beyond Auschwitz? Europe’s Terrorscapes in the Age of Post-Memory,” *Memory and Post-War Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past,* ed. Marc Silberman and Florence Vatan, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 71-92; Stipe Odak and Andriana Benčić, “Jasenovac- A Past That Does Not Pass: The Presence of Jasenovac in Croatian and Serbian Collective Memory Conflict,” *Eastern European Politics, Societies, and Cultures* 30 (2016), 805-829; Heike Karge, “Mediated Remembrance: Local Practices of Remembering the Second World War in Tito’s Yugoslavia,” *European Review of History* 16 (2009): 49-62; Đurašković, Stevo. “National Identity-Building and the ‘Ustaša-Nostalgia’ in Croatia: The Past That Will Not Pass.” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 772–788. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I acknowledge that the state has an inherent effect on public memory through educational and other official institutions, however as an unregulated space Wikipedia offers a more accurate view at what that unstructured memory landscape looks like when the public is left to its own devices. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alexander Prusin, *Serbia Under the Swastika,* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michele Frucht Levy, “‘The Last Bullet for the Last Serb:’ The Ustaša Genocide against the Serbs 1941-1945,” *Nationalities Papers* 37 (2009), 807-837, here 814. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stipe Odak and Andriana Benčić, “Jasenovac- A Past That Does Not Pass: The Presence of Jasenovac in Croatian and Serbian Collective Memory Conflict,” *Eastern European Politics, Societies, and Cultures* 30 (2016), 805-829, here 807-809. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Prusin, *Serbia Under the Swastika,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945,* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 15-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Jasenovac Concentration Camp,” Jasenovac Memorial Site, <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6886>, accessed December 12, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Levy, “The Last Bullet for the Last Serb,” 18; Vladimir Dediđer, *The Yugoslav Auschwitz: The Croatian Massacre of the Serbs During World War II,* (Freiburg, Germany: Prometheus Books, 1992),231-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Van Der Laarse, “Beyond Auschwitz?” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nicolas Moll, “Fragmented memories in a fragmented country: memory competition and political identity-building in today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, No. 6 (2013): 910-935; Srdjan Cvijic, “Swinging the Pendulum: World War II History, Politics, National Identity and Difficulties of Reconciliation in Croatia and Serbia,” *Nationalities Papers* 36, No. 4 (2008): 713-740; Dejan Djokic, “The Second World War II: Discourses of reconciliation in Serbia and Croatia in the late1980s and early 1990s,” *Journal of Southern Europe and Balkans* 4, No. 2 (2002): 127-140; Vladana Putnik, “Second World War monuments in Yugoslavia as witnesses of the past and the future,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 13, No. 3 (2016): 206-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Maren Orchard, “Wikipedia: How does it work and why don’t we teach it?” *Digital History Methods* (blog), *Word Press,* January 26th, 2019, <http://www.dighist.org/2019/01/wikipedia-how-does-it-work-and-why-dont-we-teach-it/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wikipedia acknowledges the difficulty in this but encourages contributors to write without bias when possible and fairly describe contested points, rather than take a position on them. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Serbian Wikipedia at a Glance,” Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, last modified February 1st, 2019, Accessed March 15th, 2019, <https://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/SummarySR.htm>; “Croatian Wikipedia at a Glance,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, last modified February 1st, 2019, Accessed March 15th, 2019 <https://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/SummaryHR.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified March 9, 2019, Accessed March 12th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac#cite_note-5>. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia,” modified February 11th, 2019, accessed March 15th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86>. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It’s also worth noting the initial photographs found in the introduction to these articles, which appear a bit counter intuitive. The Serbian article for example has an image of a memorial to Jasenovac called the “Stone Flower” and a map of the NDH, while the Croatian version shows the entry way to Jasenovac (possibly because the image shows a plaque above the entry that called it a work camp thus justifying the articles use of the term) as well as an image of murdered internees. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Istorija Izmena Stranica ‘Logor Jasenovac,’” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, last modified Februrary 11th, 2019, Accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86&offset=&limit=500&action=history>; <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=5222470>. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Sabrini Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified August 5th, 2005, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=85529>. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “Sabrini Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified May 22nd, 2012, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=3389874>. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified August 14th, 2018, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=5125230>. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified December 14th, 2018, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=5178518>. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Sabrini Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified August 5th, 2005, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=85529>;

    <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=3389874>; “Sabrini Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified May 22nd, 2012, accessed April 5th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac&oldid=3389874>; “Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified March 9, 2019, Accessed March 12th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac#cite_note-5>. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified May 3rd, 2006, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86&oldid=350232>. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified September 18th, 2004, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86&oldid=58314>. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified May 3, 2006, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86&oldid=350117>. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Logor Jasenovac,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified August 21st, 2012, accessed May 6th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86&oldid=5888129>. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Because these talk pages are extensive, I have selected a few pertinent examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “Razgovor: Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” modified January 22nd, 2019, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razgovor:Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac>. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “Razgovor: Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” modified January 22nd, 2019, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razgovor:Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac>. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “Razgovor: Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” modified January 22nd, 2019, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razgovor:Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac>. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “Razgovor: Logor Jasenovac: Arhiv 2,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified November 30th, 2016, accessed April 7th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80:%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86/%D0%90%D1%80%D1%85%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0_2>. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the territory of Jasenovac Concentration Camp spanned over the Yugoslav Republics of Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina. Post 1990s, that territory is now spit between Croatia and the Serba majority political entity Republika Srpska that compose contemporary Bosnia and Herecegovina. Donja Gradina is located in Republika Srpska; “Razgovor: Logor Jasenovac: Arhiv 2,” Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, modified November 26th, 2018, accessed April 7th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80:%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86>. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Since unregistered Wikipedia contributors do not have user names, their edits and contributions are associated with their IP address which is why I refer to this contributor as user 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Operation Storm was the last major battle of the Croatian War of Independence that included the mass exodus of 500,000 ethnic Serbs from Croatian territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. My emphasis. “Razgovor: Sabirni Logor Jasenovac,” modified January 22nd, 2019, accessed April 6th, 2019, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razgovor:Sabirni_logor_Jasenovac>. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This user specifically said “Hajde mucni malo tom tvojom bosanskom glavom.” While this phrase directly translates to “Comeone and shake your Bosnian head,” it contains a euphemism that is understood as translated above. Likewise, because Bojan calls Obsuser a “Bosanac” and not a “Bosnjanac,” we can conclude that he considers him to be a Bosnian Serb and not a Bosnian Muslim. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. “Razgovor: Logor Jasenovac,” modified November 26th, 2018, Accessed April 8th, 2019, <https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80:%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%88%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%86>. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)