



Workshop: War and Identity in the Balkans and the Middle East
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Author: Dr Giuditta Fontana, g.fontana@bham.ac.uk

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Introduction

Group identities are constructed through the everyday as well as traumatic events (such as conflict). The telling and retelling of identity-sensitive narratives, and an equally powerful silence over past traumas help shape individual and group identities. This paper explores the role of conflict in the narratives of identity conveyed explicitly and implicitly in museums in Lebanon and in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (hereafter, Macedonia). It focuses on the National Museum in Beirut and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Freedom and Independence (hereafter, Museum of the Macedonian Struggle) in Skopje. By tracing the visitor experience, describing objects which typify the core identity-forming narratives, and reflecting on their contextual meanings, this paper aims to draw some implications for the sustainability of the peace process and the functioning of power-sharing in the two countries.

Research Design

Case Selection

Despite their obvious differences, Lebanon and FYR of Macedonia are similar in one main respect: they are diverse societies that experienced conflicts in the recent past.

Lebanon is a highly diverse society, with 18 sects officially recognised by the state and participating to political power and the state administration. The primary Muslim-Christian cleavage which engendered the civil war and its immediate aftermath has been increasingly overshadowed by the Sunni-Shia divide (reflecting a wider Saudi-Iranian tension in the region). In contrast, in Macedonia, language and ethnicity remain the primary markers of identity of the two main communities: the Macedonians and Albanians. However, several smaller ethnic groups exist: the Roma, Turks, Vlachs, Serbs and Bosniaks are the largest recognised groups. The conflicts in Lebanon and Macedonia can be broadly identified as identity-based conflicts. The Lebanese civil war of 1975-1989 led to over 100000 fatalities (over 7 percent of the Lebanese population), and refugees and IDPs came to account for up to one quarter of the Lebanese population. Macedonia's ethnic conflict affected the country between February and August 2001 and led to 150-250 deaths and approximately 140000 IDPs.

In a third similarity, the Taif agreement (TA) of 1989 and the Ohrid Framework agreement (OFA) of 2001 established complex consociational power-sharing in an attempt to regulate the conflicts in Lebanon and Macedonia respectively.

The existing literature casts doubts as to the impact of power-sharing on the potential to reformulate conflictual narratives and identities to foster long-term conflict transformation. On the one hand, power-sharing is criticised as promoting a politics of 'letting bygones be bygones'. The silence over the conflictual past would reflect the challenge in making sense of past events in the absence of a state-promoted, single, overarching narratives. Collective amnesia over the causes of conflict and violent events would also respond to the needs of a ruling class deeply implicated in violent crimes and atrocities during the conflict. Finally, the avoidance of debates over the causes and consequences of conflict allow for the partisan narratives of previously warring groups to be reproduced in the public and private spheres, and to perpetuate inter-group rivalry and fear.

Museums are crucial sites for the production and reproduction of official narratives of the past through their physical presence, their collections and the narratives they express. In this sense, museums are the ideal locus to examine how societies are coming to terms with their conflictual past and to explore the footprints of war in the public sphere. To compare how conflict has

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impacted identities in Lebanon and Macedonia, this paper will examine two historical museums: the national Museum in Beirut and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Skopje.

Beirut's National Museum is the product of a long history: its inauguration dates back to 1942, the year before Lebanese independence from the French Mandate. In the words of a prominent civil servant, the museum was intended to: 'be a national museum, that unites Lebanese people around national history and a common national heritage'. Up to the present, the museum is tasked with displaying only objects recovered on the Lebanese territory. As the civil war started in 1975, the museum found itself on the infamous Green Line, dividing Muslim areas from Christian areas. The museum was closed: the website describes the efforts to protect the collection:

'Small finds, the most vulnerable objects of the collection, were removed from the showcases and hidden in storerooms in the basement. The latter was walled up banning any access to the lower floors. On the ground floor, mosaics, which had been fitted in the pavement, were covered with a layer of concrete. Other large and heavy objects, such as statues and sarcophagi, were protected by sandbags. When the situation reached its worst in 1982, the sandbags were replaced by concrete cases built around a wooden structure surrounding the monument.' (Beirut National Museum, 2018)

At the end of the civil war, 'the Museum was like an open wound flooded with rainwater drifting from the roof and the windows' (Beirut National Museum, 2018). In this decrepit building, employed as a military barrack and sniper nest, the collection decayed, due to humidity, fires and the militias' disregard. The restoration and rehabilitation of the museum and of its collection were completed only recently, with the opening of the basement and of its spectacular collection of anthropoid sarcophagi in 2016.



Figure 1: The Green Line in Beirut. Cc-by-sa FunkMonk



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In contrast to the long history of the Lebanese National Museum, the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence was inaugurated in 2011. It is part and parcel of the controversial urban renewal plan Skopje 2014. Defined as a ‘nation-branding’ project (Graan 2013), Skopje 2014 transformed the centre of the Macedonian capital, giving it the flavour of a Hellenistic theme park. In its emphasis on a distinctive Macedonian identity and presence in the region since ancient times, Skopje 2014 appeared to provide a strongly negative answer to the fundamental question at the root of the 2001 ethnic conflict: ‘whether Macedonia could house a multiethnic state project’ (Graan 2013). Beyond marginalising ethnic Albanians (accounting for up to a quarter of the population of the state) and other ethnic groups, Skopje 2014 implicitly labels anyone who did not identify with the nationalist discourse of the then ruling VMRO-DPMNE party as an alien (Kubiena 2012).



Figure 2: The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence on the Vardar Riverbank. Cc-by-sa Pudelek.

The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle hosts two permanent collections (the Museum of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime) in an imposing building on the Vardar riverbank. In line with the narrative underpinning Skopje 2014, the museum was intended to ‘present the historical, cultural and revolutionary traditions of Macedonia and the Macedonian people in their perennial struggle to create a national state on the Balkans’ (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 2018).

Despite their obvious differences, the National Museum in Beirut and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Skopje are comparable as examples of cultural institutions intended for identity- and state-building purposes in contested states. Both museums have been shaped by the conflictual past of Lebanon and Macedonia. In comparing their collections, I aim to reflect on how state-managed cultural institutions present the conflictual past and on the extent to which war left an indelible footprint on the cultural sphere in the Balkans and Middle East.

Methods

This paper is based on direct observation carried out by the author in the National Museum (Beirut, April 2017) and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence (Skopje, September 2017). The observations have been recorded in extensive field notes and are cross-referenced and triangulated with the official websites of the museums to ensure accuracy. The observations are complemented by an original interview with a prominent civil servant (in Beirut) and a guided tour (in Skopje), as well as analysis of available official documents and reports about the museums. National Museum (Beirut)

Located at a busy junction along the main arteries between the East and West, and between the North and South of the capital, the National Museum is surrounded by new buildings, testifying

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to the destruction brought about by the civil war. Its smooth façade and monumental entrance do not bear any explicit reminders of the violent conflict that turned it into a military barrack for decades or of its dire conditions at the end of the civil war. Rather, the spectacular open space, expert lighting and refined collection echoes that of the British museum, reminding the visitor of the rich heritage and diverse culture of Lebanon.



Figure 3: Interior of the National Museum. Cc-by-sa Throwawayhack

At first sight, conflict appears miles away from the Museum's polished image, from the scores of schoolchildren in their tidy uniforms and from the many tourists in the galleries. However, a poster at the entrance invites visitors to the hourly screening of the 30-minute movie 'Renaissance', directed by Bahij Hojeij. The movie provides a profound narrative of resurrection from the ashes of the civil war, establishing the museum as a metaphor of the wider Lebanese nation, scarred by the conflict but still precious and rich in history and heritage.

The most powerful clip in the movie shows construction workers and archaeologists removing the grey concrete casing from around the large collection items after the end of the civil war. The viewer is faced with the destruction of the war, the decrepit building, the graffiti and holes on the precious murals and the dullness of the concrete casing. Then, from the dust of the jackhammers emerge the golden marble of the museum's sarcophagi. This emotional clip echoes descriptions of Lebanese society as a Phoenix, which re-emerged – vibrant and full of life - from the ashes of the civil war.

The theme of 'renaissance' from the ashes of conflict recurs throughout the museum. The museum is portrayed as a victim of the civil war. A partially filled hole in the precious 'Mosaic of the Good Shepherd', placed at a strategic angle so that snipers could target the busy alleyway known as 'Museum passage' is explained so:

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‘sealed on a wall, this mosaic was badly damaged in its lower left corner by a sniper during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991)’.

A glass teak on the first floor contains ‘Objects damaged during the Lebanese war (1975-1991)’ in the form of molten metal and broken glass components, destroyed during the shelling of the museum.

The theme of ‘renaissance’ culminates in the Maurice Chehab wing of the gallery – named after the first Lebanese Director of Antiquities. Here, a prominent caption recalls that:

‘During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991), Maurice Chehab succeeded to save the Beirut National Museum’s archaeological collections by building concrete blocks and masonry wells, behind which the objects were safely preserved.’

In the same room, the display of the Byblos Colossus includes two banners. The first banner, on the left of the imposing statue pictures the unearthing of the Colossus in 1926. The second banner, on the right of the statue, pictures the opening of the concrete casing which protected the Colossus during the civil war. In this parallel, the Colossus (like the Museum and broader Lebanese society) is portrayed as being born twice – at its discovery and at its re-discovery after the civil war.



Figure 4: The Byblos Colossus. Author's Picture.

This brief overview shows that the Beirut National Museum addresses Lebanon’s civil war and establishes it as a crucial element in the identity of a Lebanese people, which – much like their heritage – emerged like the proverbial phoenix out of the ashes of violence. As a prominent civil servant put it in an interview:

‘the rehabilitation and restoration of the museum was a big task because it gave confidence to the population, it gave them the reassurance of common identity... it gave them also pride.’

Despite the recurrent narrative of victimisation and rebirth, the museum is far from critically addressing Lebanon’s conflictual past. For example, there is no discussion of the deep identity

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fractures that persist in Lebanese society. The museum contains the plurality of artefacts produced by different communities throughout Lebanon's turbulent history side by side, with captions underscoring the syncretistic nature of art and culture in Lebanon's territory. Curators are conscious about the cultural sensitivities of the different communities, as a prominent civil servant put it,

'we worked a lot on... the ethics of the National Museum and how we respect the diversity of Lebanese population, all of this was taken into consideration and we thought about this.'

Yet, curative choices are predominantly explained by the quality of the pieces. There is no effort to explicitly link peoples – from the Phoenicians to the 'local Semitic population substratum' – to the fractured communities of contemporary Lebanon, but to the contrary, the impression is of a rich and multidimensional yet unified Lebanese nation.

Moreover, despite the numerous mentions of the civil war, there is no statement of the causes and evolution of conflict. Whilst this may simply reflect the firm focus of the museum on the antiquities, it also underscores the continuing sensitivities as to the causes of violence. It also amplifies the official silence about the causes and unfolding of the civil war, and the avoidance of important questions as to collective and individual responsibilities for violence. As such, the National Museum largely echoes official state narratives of a Lebanese nation which was a victimised by the conflict in its entirety.

Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence (Skopje)

The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence is the largest building on the Vardar riverbank. Its imposing Hellenistic-inspired architecture is a powerful reminder of the intent behind the Skopje 2014 urban renewal project: the establishment of an indisputable link between the contemporary state and the territory by tracing an unbroken genealogy stretching back to pre-modern times. This identity-building project was catalysed by the name dispute with Greece, which delayed Macedonia's access to international institutions and funding upon its independence. It was further precipitated by the 2001 conflict, which questioned the viability of a 'national state of the Macedonian people' (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991).



Figure 5: The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence. Cc-by-sa Raso mk.



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The official website presents the museum as ‘a documented, contemporary and an objective directorial tool of the most important events and processes in the recent history of Macedonia’ (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle. 2018). In fact, the visitor is immediately faced with the intent to establish an official, linear history leading up to the establishment of an independent state in Macedonia, and to convey it didactically to the public.

Visits are only possible through a 90-minutes guided tour, and visitors are not allowed to steer away from the group, take pictures or chat. In contrast with the National Museum in Beirut, original documents and artefacts do not take centre stage in the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle. In keeping with the narrative goal of the museum, the visitor is faced with walls upon walls of Romantic-style paintings portraying notable anecdotes and personalities in the recent history of Macedonian nationalism. Despite their antique style, all the paintings were produced in 2010-2011 in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. These are complemented by wax figures representing the most salient moments in the history of the nationalist movement, ranging from establishment of the Secret Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation in 1893, to the assassination of King Alexander and French Foreign Minister Barthou in 1934, through numerous revolts, reprisals and rebellions.

On the one hand, the extreme accessibility of visual representations of the past conveys a modern and lavish appearance to the museum. On the other hand, the museum’s attempt to ‘bring to life the history of Macedonia’ (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 2018) through extravagant wax vignettes endows it with a caricature-like quality, projecting contemporary identities back to historical times, and providing a simplified linear portrayal of the past.

Conflict for the Macedonian territory is at the core of the museum and of the narrative conveyed by the tour guide. This conflict is portrayed as the result of predatory foreign powers (Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia) attempting to establish their unrivalled dominance on Macedonia and carrying out, in the guide’s words ‘repressions against innocent people’. The Macedonian national movement is presented as the victim of successive invasions and occupations. For example, the display known as the ‘Museum of the Martyrs of the Communist Regime’ portrays the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), as embodied in the person of Tito, as repressing Macedonians’ desires for independence. As the website puts it:

‘the museum exhibits are records of the anguish suffered by the Macedonian patriots for their uncompromising disapproval of the partial solution of the Macedonian issue within communist Yugoslavia’ (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 2018)

This simplistic narrative overlooks the crucial role of the SFRY in establishing the current borders of the Republic of Macedonia, codifying the official Macedonian language and establishing the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The narrative of Macedonian victimhood and oppression feeds a controversial portrayal of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation’s violent actions. The guided tour consists of an unbroken list of anecdotes and names of past heroes who committed ‘martyrdom’ for the Macedonian fatherland, in line with the organisation’s motto ‘freedom or death’. On the one hand, those who commit suicide or die of cancer are labelled as ‘self-sacrificing’ for Macedonia. On the other hand, the visitor is encouraged to sympathise and support terrorist actions, bombings and assassinations as a necessary means to independent statehood. In fact, the guide is quick to point out – in the case of the bombing of the Ottoman Bank in Thessaloniki in 1903 that there were ‘no civilian victims’. Time and time again, the visitor is reminded that violent action was a legitimate response to the

‘deep disappointment and dissatisfaction with the incomplete resolution of the Macedonian issue, the impossibility of territorial unification of the Macedonian



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people and rejection of the status of Macedonia within Yugoslavia' (Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 2018)

If the glorification violence is at the heart of the museum's narrative, the collection is very silent about the roots of contemporary conflicts in Macedonia. For example, the guide is careful to emphasise the participation of women and Jews to the struggle for independence. It also identifies prominent Turkish supporters of the Macedonian cause, including Ataturk (whose first girlfriend was apparently Macedonian). The final gallery, including the Macedonian Declaration of Independence, also includes a round-up of wax statues of all the modern supporters of a Macedonian state. However, the museum completely ignores the presence of ethnic Albanians on the territory of present-day Macedonia, their struggle for autonomy, as well as their opposition to the creation of a Macedonian nation-state in the 1990s.

Conclusion: The Sound of Silence

This paper has explored the extent to which the National Museum in Beirut and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Freedom and Independence address the conflictual past to construct narratives of identity.

The two museums are deeply different. First, National Museum is an archaeological museum, and its collection stops in the 18th century. This is the starting point of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle. Second, the National Museum showcases original artefacts, while the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle contains predominantly reproductions, contemporary portraits and wax vignettes. Third, the National Museum does not seek to establish a narrative history of Lebanon and to explicitly link it to the contemporary Lebanese state, people and territory. Conversely, establishing an unbroken lineage is the aim of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle.

Yet, the overview above shows that parallels are evident in the way the two museums explicitly address past conflicts. In the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, violence is represented as a legitimate tool to achieve freedom and independence. This is not the case in the National Museum, but both museums present a narrative of collective victimhood of the population. In Beirut, this is achieved by presenting the Museum itself as a metaphor of the nation, which was vandalised and scarred by the war. In Skopje, the narrative of victimhood is explicitly conveyed by the tour guide by- for example – designating all national heroes as martyrs. This victimhood holds a powerful promise of revival – or 'renaissance' in the case of Beirut's National Museum. Here, the Museum, like the Lebanese population, is presented as re-emerging out of the ashes of the civil war. In the case of Macedonia, the final gallery, including the Declaration of Independence, represents the culmination of previous struggles for the unification and statehood of Macedonia – however incomplete.

Finally, the two museums are similar in their silence over politically sensitive issues at the roots of contemporary conflicts. In the Lebanese case, the civil war is mentioned as a tragic episode but never discussed in depth. In Skopje, ethnic Albanians are not considered as part of the narrative of Macedonian statehood.

What does this say about the sustainability of the peace process and the functioning of power-sharing in the two countries? On the one hand, the silence over the past may be reproducing the politics of power-sharing by legitimising the existing elites. In particular, many prominent politicians are implicated in the Lebanese civil war, and a critical analysis of the past would question their standing. In Macedonia, the creation of an implicit lineage between the then ruling party VMRO-DPMNE and the long tradition of organisations fighting for independence, legitimised the party's continuing hold on power.

On the other hand, this selective silence may strengthen the communities which engaged in conflict and now participate in power-sharing. In Lebanon, the absence of a state-sanctioned



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narrative of the civil war allows communities to reproduce their fragmented narratives in the private and public spaces through separate schools and specific museums (for example, the Tourist Landmark of the Resistance in Mleeta). The silence over the role of ethnic Albanians in the struggle for Macedonian independence is accomplishing the same function: strengthening the increasing parallelism between Albanians and Macedonians in the state.

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