Conflict in Cities Research Associate Britt Baillie recently conducted a fieldtrip to the Croatian border city of Vukovar. Dr. Baillie’s PhD thesis entitled: ‘The Wounded Church: War, Destruction and Reconstruction of Vukovar’s Religious Heritage’ focused on the fate of Vukovar’s cultural heritage since the siege of the city in 1991. The purpose of the recent fieldtrip was to study the role of the Dudik memorial complex which was erected in 1978 to commemorate the victims of a Second World War mass-grave. This complex was built to embody the notion of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’. Baillie sought to examine how this ‘shared’ memorial complex has been successively re-scripted, re-used and re-interpreted over time.

In 1991, the multi-ethnic city of Vukovar was besieged by the Yugoslav National Army and Serb paramilitary forces in the first major urban battle of the wars which forcefully unmade the former-Yugoslavia. During the siege 1,556 inhabitants of Vukovar lost their lives. Approximately 60% of the city’s built environment was completely destroyed and an additional 30% sustained heavy damage. After the siege, the surviving Croat citizens were forcefully expelled from the city. Serb authorities then declared Vukovar to be a part of the internationally unrecognized state of the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK). In 1995, Croatia gained the majority of the territory held by the RSK by force. Vukovar was the only RSK city which was ‘Peacefully Reintegrated’ into Croatia under the auspices of the UN. Ethnic Croats began to move back to Vukovar in 1998.
UN and Croatian teams have discovered numerous mass-graves dating from the period of the 1991 siege and its immediate aftermath in Vukovar. The Ovčara mass-grave in which 200 hospital patients were executed epitomises the loss that the Croat citizens of Vukovar suffered. However, the ‘Homeland War’ was not the only time that Vukovar underwent cultural or ethnic cleansing. Today, few signs of the city’s Ottoman or Jewish heritage survive and the visible presence of ethnic Serb heritage has been minimised.

During the Second World War, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) under the Ustaše leader Ante Pavelić executed and deported approximately 80% of Croatia’s Jewish population. According to Mile Budak, the NDH Minister of Religion and Education, the state sought to implement a policy of one-third of Serbs killed, one-third expelled and one-third converted to Catholicism. Estimates vary widely and have become a highly political issue; it is thought that between 60,000 to 120,000 Serbs were liquidated in village pogroms and at concentration camps like the notorious Jasenovac.

The majority of Jews and Serbs who were ethnically cleansed from the Vukovar area ended their lives elsewhere. However, 455 alleged Partisan collaborators—predominantly ethnic Serbs—were executed at the site known as Dudik on the northern outskirts of the city. After the Partisans defeated the Ustaše in 1945, the new government of Socialist Yugoslavia exhumed the bodies interred at this site. Family and friends of the victims, local Partisans and concerned citizens began to convene at Dudik on an annual basis to remember the dead.

To encourage ‘Brotherhood and Unity’, the Partisans encouraged Serb families to move (back) to the area around Vukovar. Between 1945 and 1991 the population of Vukovar county increased by 68% due to this policy and the rapid industrialization of the city. To warn against the dangers of ethno-nationalism embodied by the Ustaše, the prominent Serb architect Bogdan Bogdanović designed a memorial complex at Dudik. From start of its construction in 1978 until 1991, this memorial complex served as the venue of a major annual gathering to commemorate the dead and to publically engage in the staging of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’.

The memorial complex was severely damaged during the 1991 siege. During the RSK period authorities continued to host commemorative ceremonies at the complex. Here the notion that contemporary Serbs remained under threat from a revived neo-Ustaše force (equated with Tudman’s new Croatian government) was used to legitimise both the 1991 siege and the RSK control of Vukovar. Once Croatia was given control of Vukovar in 1998, public commemorative practices at Dudik ceased. Part of the complex was converted into a football field by a local Croat team. In 2010, the first annual remembrance ceremony at Dudik since the return of Croats to the city was held by a small group of local anti-Fascists. The complex has not yet been restored or conserved.

This research trip focused on developing a biography of Dudik from its use as an execution ground until present. Dr. Baillie conducted archival research in the Vukovar’s museum and library as well as interviews with local residents, city officials and members of the Anti-Fascist Committee. The aim was to ascertain what patterns could be observed in the use of the monument as well as the discourses surrounding it. Dr. Baillie compared how Dudik is treated/viewed in contrast with the city’s 1991 mass-graves in a conference paper entitled: ‘Problematic patrimony: The role of an ‘obsolete’ memorial in Vukovar’ at the The Heritage of Memorials and Commemorations-12th Cambridge Heritage Seminar, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, 15 April 2011.