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“READY FOR THE HOMELAND”: THE SEMIOTICS OF HATE SPEECH AND MEMORY IN POST-CONFLICT CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural texts in post-conflict societies, focusing on hate speech and identity formation through the lens of cultural semiotics. It analyzes the Ustaša salute “Ready for the Homeland” (Za dom spremni, ZDS) in Croatia, exploring its symbolic function and normalization within institutional frameworks. The study shows how declarations such as the Croatian Homeland War Declaration act as institutionalized cultural texts that legitimize exclusionary symbols like ZDS. These texts embed such symbols into the dominant post-war memory regime, reinforcing polarization and shaping collective identity.

Keywords: Texts, memory, hate speech, symbols, cultural explosion, *Za dom spremni*, Croatia

“PRONTI PER LA PATRIA”: LA SEMIOTICA DEL DISCORSO D’ODIO E DELLA MEMORIA NELLA CROAZIA POSTBELLICA

SINTESI

Questo articolo esamina il ruolo dei testi culturali nelle società post-belliche, concentrandosi sul discorso d’odio e sulla formazione dell’identità attraverso la lente della semiotica culturale. Analizza il saluto ustaša “Pronti per la Patria” (Za dom spremni, ZDS) in Croazia, esplorandone la funzione simbolica e la normalizzazione all’interno dei quadri istituzionali. Lo studio mostra come dichiarazioni quali la Dichiarazione sulla Guerra Patriottica Croata agiscano come testi culturali istituzionalizzati che legittimano simboli escludenti come ZDS. Tali testi incorporano questi simboli nel regime dominante della memoria post-bellica, rafforzando la polarizzazione e plasmando l’identità collettiva.

Parole chiave: Testi, memoria, discorso d’odio, simboli, esplosione culturale, *Za dom spremni*, Croazia

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the symbolic convergence of the fascist-era salute "Ready for the Homeland" (Za dom spremni, ZDS) and the institutionalized narrative of the Homeland War in contemporary Croatia. While ZDS was the official salute of the Ustaša regime during the genocidal Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH), its reappearance in post-1990s public discourse has been both normalized and contested. I argue that the ongoing circulation and legitimization of ZDS in state-affiliated events and nationalist performances are enabled by the broader discursive framework set forth in the Croatian Homeland War Declaration (Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu, 2024). This text is part of a broader discursive landscape that includes other documents, such as the 2018 Dialogue Document (Dokument Dijaloga) which attempts to mediate and modify the meaning of contested historical symbols like ZDS.

Adopting a cultural semiotic approach, I treat both the ZDS salute and the Declaration as interlinked semiotic resources that shape cultural memory and national identity. This raises the central research question: *How does the Homeland War Declaration, as a mythologized institutional text, contribute to the symbolic legitimization and normalization of the ZDS salute in post-conflict Croatia?* By employing the lens of cultural semiotics, I highlight how these contemporary expressions of hate speech are not isolated, but embedded within a broader semiotic and political framework that continues to legitimize exclusionary narratives rooted in the legacy of the genocidal NDH.

To ground the stated argument, I focus on the examples of Marko Perković Thompson's concerts that took place in the summer of 2024 and 2025 in Croatia, which were both implicitly and explicitly endorsed by high-ranking political figures. The cases illustrate how institutional discourse and symbolic practice converge to produce and maintain a normalized, state-adjacent form of historical revisionism.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

In November 2023, an exhibition entitled *Some Were Neighbors* (*Neki su bili susjedi*) that was scheduled to take place in Zagreb was cancelled due to the refusal of Croatian partners to acknowledge the genocide committed against Serbs during World War II by the NDH.¹ This exhibition was

intended to coincide with Croatia's presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and aimed to illustrate the history of the Holocaust through a traveling format. Despite months of preparation, the Croatian institutions involved ultimately refused to acknowledge the genocide committed against Serbs between 1941 and 1945, alongside Roma and Jews. As a result, the American partners, notably the Washington-based United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, opted not to move forward with an exhibition that bore the marks of revisionism as dictated by Croatian government officials (Šimičević, 2024; Damčević, 2024). This international scandal was facilitated by the government of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and the Ministry of Culture and Media led by Nina Obuljen Koržinek, as well as Matea Brstilo Rešetar, the director of the Croatian History Museum and president of the Management Council of the Jasenovac Memorial Site.

Historical revisionism and hate speech directed against Serbs have seen a noticeable increase since Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in July 2013 (cf. for instance Ombudsman, 2024). A contributing factor to this is the lack of oversight regarding minority and human rights issues following Croatia's accession to the EU. This absence of scrutiny has, in turn, diminished the incentive to prohibit or penalize hate speech and symbols associated with the NDH, leading to a lack of consequences for their use. Political scientist Dejan Jović elaborates on these circumstances, explaining that the authoritarian ethno-nationalists consider they have more liberty because of Croatia's EU membership and see it as a crucial step toward the realization of a concrete, factual sovereign state, and not solely a nominal one (Jović, 2017, 29). According to Vjeran Pavlaković (2019, 119), another significant factor is that political elites have sought to mobilize voters by perpetuating fragmented and conflicting narratives of twentieth-century traumas, particularly after the objective of Euro-Atlantic integration had been achieved.

The rise of historical revisionism and nationalist hate speech is prominently reflected in the use of the NDH official salute "Ready for the Homeland" (cf. Brentin, 2016; Damčević, 2023a). ZDS functions as a proxy: its invocation encapsulates and signals broader ideological narratives—namely, the legitimization of WWII-era fascist symbolism and its reintegration into post-1990s Croatian national identity. This salute, which had been banned during socialist Yugoslavia, reemerged during the Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s. Namely, after

¹ The fascist Ustaša movement was a terrorist organization prior to WWII. The Ustaše established the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a Nazi-aligned fascist state, after being brought to power by the Axis Powers in April 1941. The Ustaša regime was responsible for massive atrocities and the implementation of genocidal policies against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croatian antifascists.

WWII, the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito launched a campaign of "repressive erasure" aimed at banishing any remnants of the Ustaša regime. As Lovro Kralj (2019, 172) writes, this involved "a general ban of political rights and public service for the Ustashe and their collaborators". Furthermore, the widespread imposition of the communist revolution included occasional appeals to Brotherhood and Unity (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), one of the cornerstones of the Yugoslav ideology. However, this was less a reconciliatory policy directed toward "dealing with the past", but more an attempt to establish and reinforce the belief that all peoples (*narodi*) contributed to the National Liberation Struggle to ensure that society would move forward (cf. Radelić, 2011).

During the 1990s war, the Ustaša salute was championed by right-wing politicians and groups and became intertwined with the legacy of the NDH by evoking it through its use (cf. Veselinović, 2019). The lack of legal regulation of the salute during the 1990s war, along with its trivialization by various political actors (Đurašković, 2016) facilitated its appropriation by right-wing factions as a symbol purportedly representing the 1990s conflict—an idea that has been perpetuated to the present day. The status of the salute grew increasingly contentious after it was officially approved in the early 2000s—during a coalition government led by Social Democrats and Liberals—as part of the emblem of the Croatian Defense Forces (Hrvatske obrambene snage, HOS), a 1990s paramilitary unit. This institutional endorsement blurred the line between historical condemnation and symbolic rehabilitation, complicating public and legal perceptions of the salute. ZDS is now regarded by many in Croatia and neighboring countries as an emblem of hate speech that advocates for radical right positions, often stirring tensions in Croatian society and politics (cf. Blanuša & Kulenović, 2018).

The Serb National Council regularly documents the presence and spread of hate speech—particularly the use of NDH-era symbols targeting Serbs—in its annual reports (cf. SNV, 2025). The Council functions as a democratically elected political, consulting, and coordinating body focusing on the issues of Serbs' human, civil, and national rights, as well as on issues such as historical revisionism, hate speech, and violence toward Serbs in Croatia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL SEMIOTICS AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZED NARRATIVE

Cultural semiotics conceptualizes identity as dynamic and relational, opposing the notion of a fixed identity (Madisson, 2016; Lorusso, 2015; Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017). This perspective

acknowledges that processes of identity creation and manifestation are continuously redefined and renegotiated through varying interpretations by a diversity of social actors. Additionally, cultural semiotics aids in recognizing the broader socio-communicative functions of hate speech and historically charged symbols, shedding light on how they evoke and reshape cultural memory, forming associations with cultural texts and interpretations. As such, I approach the ZDS salute as a performative symbol, the meaning of which is discursively mediated. Similarly, I treat the Declaration not merely as a parliamentary document but as a regulatory cultural text—one that structures the semiotic environment in which nationalist symbols gain or lose legitimacy.

By analyzing the mutual reinforcement between symbols (ZDS) and institutional cultural texts (the Declaration), I argue that the semiotic legitimacy for hate speech is produced not only through popular repetition but also through its discursive embedding in state-sanctioned texts. This contextual pairing allows us to see how exclusionary practices are maintained and normalized through the convergence of embodied ritual and institutionalized narratives.

As outlined in the introduction, the ZDS salute exemplifies how hate speech and historically charged symbols are embedded in post-conflict memory politics and supported by institutional narratives. Accordingly, the discussion begins by situating the salute within its historical and political context, linking it to broader issues of cultural memory, nationalist discourse, and the normalization of exclusionary symbols in Croatia. This is followed by an analysis of institutionalized cultural texts, namely, the Declaration enacted in the year 2000, and the Dialogue Document's recommendations on contested historical symbols, published in 2018, to illustrate their interactions with cultural memory. The paper further evaluates the socio-political implications of these semiotic interactions. Accordingly, and having outlined the broader challenges of historical revisionism and hate speech in Croatia, the next section delves into the emblematic role of the ZDS salute. This symbol serves as a focal point for understanding the intersections of memory politics, nationalism, and post-conflict identity formation in Croatia.

ZA DOM SPREMNI IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND POPULAR CULTURE

The symbolic politics surrounding the ZDS salute in contemporary Croatia are deeply rooted in two significant historical references: World War II and the 1990s Croatian War of Independence. Yet, Croatia is not alone in grappling with memory politics

and the contentious legacies of its past; various nations face similar challenges (cf. Uhl, 2006; Tamm, 2013). The persistent "obsession with the past" in Croatia has been extensively examined by scholars (cf. Kolstø, 2014; Pavlaković & Pauković, 2019).

Vjeran Pavlaković highlights that while the ideological and ethnic divisions that culminated in widespread violence during the twentieth century are undeniable, they are not unique to that era (Pavlaković, 2019, 121–122). Political and social actors in Croatia have played a significant role in fostering political polarization (cf. Blanuša, 2023). This tendency is echoed in neighboring countries, where "memory entrepreneurs" in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina further incentivize Croatian elites to uphold the status quo, advocating for policies that reflect their interpretations of past conflicts (Pavlaković, 2019, 122). Namely, instead of aiming for unity or formulating policies that would benefit future generations, many leaders rely on symbolic politics to maintain their power and mobilize voters (Pavlaković & Pauković, 2019).

In this context, the ZDS salute has become a prominent symbol, employed in various communicative settings. Examples include its use during football matches (Brentin, 2016), on social media platforms (Damčević & Rodik, 2018), at annual commemorations such as the Bleiburg event (Pavlaković et al., 2018), and even in inscriptions on memorial plaques (Damčević, 2021). A particularly troubling incident occurred in June 2020, when a group of Dinamo Zagreb football fans, part of the Bad Blue Boys ultras,² gathered in the Croatian capital. They lit flares and displayed a banner reading: "We'll fuck Serbian women and children", alongside flags bearing the salute and insignia of the wartime paramilitary unit, the Croatian Defense Forces. Chants of "Kill, kill" accompanied this display, as documented by photographer Nikola Šolić and subsequently reported by Anja Vladisavljević (Vladisavljević, 2020). This provocative incident stirred significant outrage among scholars, minority rights organizations, and the public; however, it did not catalyze any substantial efforts to address hate speech or the public use of Ustaša symbols.

One prominent figure associated with the ZDS salute is the musician Marko Perković, widely known by his stage name "Thompson"—a nickname derived from the American submachine gun he posed with early in his career. He gained fame during the 1990s war with his song "Čavoglave Battalion" (Bojna Čavoglave), which opens with the ZDS salute and features lyrics declaring that Serb enemies will not enter his village as long as Croats remain alive.

In August 2024, Thompson performed two concerts that drew large audiences. These events showcased an array of Ustaša insignia, both by the performer and the audience (cf. Jovanović, 2024).

This trajectory of symbolic convergence escalated further the following year, when the normalization of the ZDS salute reached a new height during Marko Perković Thompson's concert on 5 July 2025 at Zagreb's Hippodrome, the capital's largest open-air venue. The largest such event in Croatia's history, the concert was attended by approximately half a million people and supported by high-ranking government officials, including Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. It openly featured Ustaša symbols and iconography with no legal consequences. While the salute was chanted by the crowd and displayed on clothing and flags, state authorities offered no intervention, signaling not mere tolerance but symbolic endorsement. The event demonstrated how nationalist performance, backed by institutional presence, functions as a form of autocommunication (cf. Damčević, 2021; Madisson & Ventsel, 2016): reinforcing in-group identity through repetition and affect, while shielding exclusionary symbols like ZDS from external critique. More than entertainment, the concert marked the culmination of a long-standing pattern in which historical revisionism is reframed as patriotic memory (cf. Damčević, 2025).

The symbols on Thompson's concert also included T-shirts, hats, and scarves emblazoned with symbols of the paramilitary units from the 1990s war, namely the Croatian Defense Forces. During the war, members of the HOS paramilitary unit were under the control of the radical right-wing Croatian Party of Rights. The soldiers actively used Ustaša symbols to evoke the memory and legacy of the Ustaša regime and the NDH; they used ZDS as their official salute, often accompanying it with the physical Nazi salute, they paraded in black uniforms, sang Ustaša songs, and celebrated the founding of the NDH, which is something they continue to do to this day (cf. Veselinović, 2019; Koren, 2011).

The legitimization of the salute did not end with the concert. In the weeks following the July 2025 event, several high-ranking government officials continued to relativize ZDS in both public and institutional contexts. In addition to Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, the Speaker of Parliament, Goran Jandroković, invoked the "double connotation" argument and emphasized the need to "defend the honor of Croatian defenders" (*branitelji*). MP Igor Peternel declared that "they remain Za dom spremni", while MP Ivan Penava argued that questioning the song "Čavoglave Battalion" calls into

² The term "ultras" refers to a portion of a football club's fanbase that usually consists of extreme supporters, while often containing a violent element. Cf. Dario Brentin's work (2013; 2016) on the intertwining of football and Croatian national identity.

question “the motives, values, and everything else that the Homeland War meant for the Republic of Croatia.” These statements, alongside the selective enforcement of symbolic regulations, point to a continued institutional strategy of symbolic appeasement—one that enables the salute’s public use under the guise of honoring wartime sacrifice. As reported by *Novosti*, this pattern reflects a broader tendency toward selective legality, in which legal standards are inconsistently applied to protect politically advantageous narratives and actors (cf. Opačić, 2025).

Among those actors, the 1990s war veterans occupy a particularly privileged position in Croatian society. Their elevated status stems largely from their alignment with the dominant war narrative, which many view as the core of their post-war identity (cf. Sokolić, 2019; Jović, 2017). Scholar Ivor Sokolić emphasizes how war veterans construct the world around them within the frames of the war narrative and their importance when it comes to “their potential to cause public disruption, their role in the transmission of norms, and their political closeness to the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*)” (Sokolić, 2019, 143). As for the rights of veterans, which were legislated from 1994 onward, scholar Danijela Dolenec writes that significant changes to the legislation were made in 1996, 2001, and 2004. Specifically, “by 2004, the law accorded 37 different material entitlements to this population, most importantly including pensions, disability compensation, paid health and care services, priority in securing housing, child allowance, unemployment benefits, financial help in securing employment, tax cuts, scholarships, guaranteed university entry, and many more” (Dolenec, 2017, 63).

Despite the above incidents,³ neither the ZDS salute nor other symbols associated with the WWII Ustaša regime are formally banned in Croatia. As such, the salute remains a relevant part of post-war memory politics and the rise of historical revisionism. Furthermore, the fact that its presence is consistently downplayed and relativized by politicians and public officials consequently contributes to the lack of long-term measures countering hate speech and related exclusionary tendencies. Under Article 325 of the Croatian Criminal Code (Criminal Code, 2024) individuals can face charges for inciting hatred or offending individuals based on their national or ethnic identity by using such symbols. In Croatia’s “Law on Misdemeanors Against Public Order and Peace” (*Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira*, 2023), neither the Ustaša salute nor the other Ustaša insignia are explicitly listed or

banned. Repeated calls from minority representatives to amend the Law to specifically regulate the use of the salute have gone unanswered. Instead, in April 2023, a proposal was introduced to amend it, seeking to significantly raise fines (up to 4,000 euros) “for the performance, reproduction of songs, music and texts, or carrying or emphasizing symbols, texts, pictures, drawings”, as stated under Article 5 (*Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira*, 2023). While the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia emphasizes the condemnation of fascism and the positive legacy of antifascism, enshrining the values of the antifascist struggle, the reality is that Ustaša symbols continue to surface in public life. Government officials downplay or normalize these symbols, all the while complicating efforts to counter their presence in society.

The symbolic politics surrounding the ZDS salute exemplifies its dual role as a relic of the past and a tool of contemporary nationalist rhetoric. The following section unpacks this complexity by exploring the interplay between hate speech and the semiotic functions of historically charged symbols in shaping public discourse.

BETWEEN HATE SPEECH AND CONTESTED SYMBOL

Defining hate speech is inherently challenging due to the interplay of social norms, historical legacies, and political contexts. Legal interpretations vary significantly, with the US emphasizing freedom of speech through the First Amendment, while European states—particularly those within the EU and the Council of Europe—often employ stricter legal frameworks to regulate such expressions (cf. Greenawalt, 1995; Hare & Weinstein, 2009; Herz & Molnar, 2012; Waldron, 2012; Belavusau, 2013; Brown, 2015). Regardless of jurisdiction, scholars agree on its insidious impact, which lies in targeting individuals or groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality to degrade or marginalize them (cf. Butler, 1997; Gelber, 2019; Langton, 2012; Waldron, 2012; Leader Maynard & Benesch, 2016; Tirrell, 2018).

In post-conflict societies like Croatia, hate speech exacerbates existing divisions, particularly when tied to historically charged symbols such as the ZDS salute. While legal and sociological approaches often focus on intent, harm, or regulation, a semiotic approach offers additional insights by focusing on the communicative function of hate speech—namely, how it operates within broader systems of meaning. Specifically, it reveals how hate speech works to construct group identities, designate outsiders, and reinforce polarizing narratives through

3 For a more detailed overview of other cases cf. Damčević (2023).

symbolic repetition (Damčević, 2023a; Madisson, 2016). This is relevant to better understanding how symbols like ZDS consolidate memories of conflict, reshaping national identity and intensifying societal rifts, particularly in contexts where such symbols historically contributed to division and violence (cf. Thompson, 1999; Kurspahić, 2003; Kolstø, 2009).

Adding complexity is the fact that the ZDS salute not only embodies hate speech through its targeting of minority groups in Croatia but also serves as a historically laden symbol. As such, it is utilized by various political and social actors—such as politicians and war veterans—who attach their preferred meanings to it, thereby reinforcing specific narratives related to the legacies of World War II and the 1990s war. Consequently, the ideological continuum between the Ustaša regime and the veterans of the 1990s war functions as a tool of historical revisionism. Such multifaceted use reflects the intricate relationships between hate speech and symbolic representation in societal contexts.

Understanding hate speech requires not only legal and societal analyses but also an exploration of its cultural and symbolic dimensions. By examining conflict as a generator of meaning, the next section highlights how wars and upheavals catalyze the reinterpretation and proliferation of symbols like ZDS.

CONFLICT AS A GENERATOR OF MEANING

From the perspective of cultural semiotics, conflict emerges as a compelling example of an event where the process of meaning-making becomes particularly intense. This can manifest in various forms—such as misunderstandings between individuals, differing interpretations of the significance of monuments, or even the upheaval of warfare. In each case, conflict serves as a semiotic event characterized by a re-evaluation of existing meanings and the emergence of new ones.

One of the pivotal questions that surfaces in the wake of large-scale conflicts concerns how these events should be remembered, followed by what meanings societies attach to their legacies. Historical examples illustrate how such meanings become solidified and often institutionalized, taking shape in declarations, manifestos, laws, and educational curricula. These artifacts collectively contribute to a society's self-image, functioning as catalysts for vigorous debates and dialogues. However, they can also reinforce symbolic divisions among groups and communities grappling with trauma. During and after conflicts, the roles of hate speech and historically charged symbols become particularly significant. Both can mobilize or divide people, trigger cultural memories, and strengthen boundaries and exclusionary narratives.

Scholars Moeschberger and DeZalia delve into the potentially divisive nature of symbols, asserting that they serve to link to previous generations, evoke intense emotions, preserve cultural narratives that shape societal representations, and offer individuals a framework for understanding their roles within society (Moeschberger & DeZalia, 2014, 2). Symbols can evoke varied recollections and interpretations of the past, influence political discourse, and play a crucial role in how societies confront their traumatic histories (cf. Kolstø, 2016).

Moreover, symbols do not exist in isolation; rather, they are embedded within broader cultural narratives shaped and reinforced by specific social contexts. Their performative function underscores that their use is inherently intertwined with interpretive attempts (Lotman, 1990). As noted by Tamm and Torop (2022, 383), "symbols in discourse function as framing mechanisms through language and can impose a certain order on an experience." Thus, the significance of symbols in the realm of national memory is profound. Any act of remembrance or memory work involves the use of symbols in ways that either solidify, challenge, or redefine their meanings. Just as memory narratives can be reshaped to align with contemporary political needs and agendas (Tamm & Torop, 2022), so too can symbols be reinterpreted in accordance with the evolving dynamics of society.

In post-conflict societies such as Croatia, symbols like the ZDS salute function not only as cultural artefacts but also as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. They condense historical narratives, as exemplified by ZDS, where it connects to both WWII and the 1990s war. This dual role amplifies its potency as hate speech, embedding it within societal attitudes and behaviors. The salute does not merely signify past associations; it actively shapes and reinforces contemporary nationalist ideologies. By operating as a mnemonic device and a rallying point for nationalist rhetoric, ZDS reaffirms exclusionary narratives through marginalizing minority perspectives and embedding the dominant war narrative within public and political discourse. To better understand how such symbols gain renewed meaning and social force in post-conflict settings, it is helpful to turn to the concept of cultural explosions and their role in shaping dominant war narratives.

CULTURAL EXPLOSIONS AND THE MYTHOLOGIZATION OF WAR

In his work, Juri Lotman examines the center-periphery dynamic to illustrate how individuals and communities structure their relationships with what is perceived as alien or the Other. This center-periphery model is a fundamental aspect of what Lotman terms the semiosphere—a global cultural

sphere essential for the existence of thought. The semiosphere facilitates meaning-making processes as it encompasses memory and information (Lotman, 2005; 1990, 123–214; cf. Lorusso, 2015, 88–98).

At the heart of this discussion is the idea that the center of a culture represents what is familiar and "ours", aligning with the self. In contrast, elements that do not resonate with this self-image find their place on the periphery, effectively excluded from the cultural center. Examples of this exclusion manifest in various forms, such as linguistic purism, efforts to distance a community from perceived Others (cf. Kordić, 2010), renaming streets and public spaces, the destruction of monuments, and the development of educational curricula that promote a preferred and idealized interpretation of historical events (cf. Pavasović-Trošt & Mihajlović-Trbovc, 2020).

Events like wars disrupt the established center-periphery dynamic, intensifying the processes of meaning-making. Lotman describes this destabilization as a cultural explosion—a sudden, unforeseen shift that compels a reorganization of culture and society (Lotman, 2009). This reorganization can unfold gradually or abruptly, with different cultural layers—such as politics, language, education, and law—evolving at varying paces. In times of war, all layers are typically affected, leading to a re-hierarchization of cultural codes, narratives, customs, and rituals. During such upheaval, we may witness the erection or removal of monuments, the establishment of new myths, and the revival of symbols and slogans from past eras amid an ongoing crisis of meaning (Abrams & Gardner, 2023). Accordingly, the 1990s war in Croatia can be viewed as a cultural explosion, with the ZDS salute emerging as one of the key symbols during this period.

When we observe war as a cultural explosion, we see it as an event that fundamentally disrupts the normal functioning of a society and its established center of dominant meanings. As a result, the normative center ceases to serve as the starting point for interpreting and creating texts. The influx of information—through media, propaganda, and collective narratives—significantly increases the information load, creating a pressing need for society to reorganize this information to restore equilibrium. However, this rise in information also brings heightened unpredictability, which Lotman emphasizes to illustrate his anti-deterministic perspective on history (Lotman, 2009). By adopting the concept of "bifurcation" from Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (1984), Lotman describes a critical juncture where a particular system—here, society and culture—reaches a point of "choice" between two possible scenarios, each akin to the toss of a

coin. At this bifurcation point, the new direction the system may take remains unpredictable, with chance emerging as a decisive factor (Lotman, 1990, 231).

This interplay of increased information and unpredictability is intricately linked to the creation of new meanings during wartime. As societies receive a flood of information, they find themselves in a landscape rife with uncertainty and ambiguity, where established frameworks of understanding may no longer hold. Consequently, similar circumstances can yield vastly different interpretations of the conflict, shaped by which information—and thus which meanings—is prioritized within the newly formed center, while other perspectives are relegated to the periphery as unacceptable. As a result, the narratives societies construct can shift rapidly during war, creating new myths and collective memories in response. This dynamic can reinforce existing meanings while also paving the way for new insights, sometimes rejecting anything perceived as a threat to this newly established order.

Lotman identifies three stages of the cultural explosion (Lotman, 1990, 143–150; cf. Lotman, 2009; 2013), which I apply here to the context of war: the moment of the explosion itself, the realization of the explosion in societal consciousness, and the retrospective (re)assessment of the explosion in our memories. He articulates three core elements that characterize this process: inertness, saturation, and generation. Inertness, which has a two-fold significance, refers both to the temporal lag in the center's ability to respond to disruptive texts and to the semantic incompatibility between those texts and the center's existing system of codes. In other words, new symbolic forms—emerging from the periphery during periods of upheaval—are initially unintelligible to the cultural core, which lacks the interpretive frameworks to process them. This reflects a moment of confusion or disorientation: the center is flooded with unfamiliar meanings but remains structurally unequipped to decode them. In the context of war, where symbolic systems are destabilized, this inertness underscores the urgency to develop new cultural codes to navigate uncertainty and restore intelligibility. Lotman describes the subsequent phase as saturation, followed by generation, the stage where societies begin to adapt to the diverse influx of texts (Lotman, 1990, 143–150). As these texts are integrated and a degree of stability returns to the center, society embarks on producing new texts. These can encompass all manner of meaningful units, including laws, regulations, guidelines, customs, myths, narratives, declarations, and dictionaries, among others.

The stabilization process becomes particularly noticeable in the post-conflict phase, where the primary focus shifts to maintaining identity coherence while mitigating heterogeneity and disruptions (Lotman, 1990, 128; cf. Lorusso, 2015, 67–75). Societies, groups, and individuals often articulate their identities and pivotal events through national laws, declarations, personal narratives, and biographies. The formation of victory and victimhood narratives, specifically, illustrates how these narratives construct and uphold distinct national identities. To solidify the preferred memory and interpretation of the conflict, unpredictability is supplanted by a sense of destiny. This new order absorbs all meanings into a singular narrative, effectively sidelining alternative scenarios from the realm of meaning-making. Ultimately, all texts deemed irrelevant to the newly established center are cast to the periphery, reinforcing the prevailing order.

Understanding how cultural texts emerge, adapt, or resist transformation in the aftermath of conflict is relevant for grasping the symbolic power of documents like the Croatian Homeland War Declaration. As argued above, moments of cultural explosion generate a need for stabilization through meaning-making practices. In this context, institutional texts do more than record historical facts—they function as mechanisms for restoring order, filtering peripheral symbols, and redefining cultural memory. The next section examines how the Declaration operates as such an institutionalized cultural text: it codifies specific interpretations of Croatia's war history, regulates which symbols are legitimized, and contributes to the consolidation of cultural memory.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY AND THE REFRAMING OF SYMBOLISM

Lotman considers a "text" as being both the aggregate of cultural expressions and as a text in itself (Lotman, 1990, 11–81; cf. Semenenko, 2012; Lorusso, 2015; Tamm & Torop, 2022). In this context, "text" is defined in the broadest sense as any meaningful unit that provides accessible expression and correlates meaning, guided by an intention of meaning (Lorusso, 2015, 14). Thus, virtually anything that conveys meaning to an individual, group, or society—be it an advertisement, an object, a performance, a ritual, a movement, or even a slogan—can be considered a text. Consequently, attention is drawn to the ways these texts are utilized in societies, including their production, purposes, the memories they evoke, and their reception among different social groups. Texts such as laws, regulations, guidelines, declarations, and curricula serve as models of meaning that significantly influence individual actions and choices (cf. Schönle & Shine, 2006).

A prime example of such a text is the parliamentary Croatian Homeland War Declaration, which stands as the most significant institutionalized statement regarding Croatia's national identity in the post-war period. Enacted in 2000, the Declaration was a compromise between the newly elected center-left coalition government and hard-line nationalists who had lost power following the death of Croatia's first president, Franjo Tuđman, in 1999. At that time, the coalition government prioritized Euro-Atlantic integration, including EU and NATO membership, which necessitated full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). This requirement complicated matters and incited strong domestic political opposition, particularly from war veterans' organizations that accused the government of criminalizing the Homeland War, a term predominantly used in Croatia to refer to the 1990s conflict (cf. Koren, 2011; Ljubojević, 2019).

While one objective of the Declaration was to reconcile cooperation with the ICTY with the prevailing narrative of the war as clean, just, and defensive, this endeavor ultimately backfired. Rather than reducing social polarization and fostering open dialogue about the war legacy, the Declaration aimed to impose a singular interpretation of the war and its meanings, articulating a conclusion without resorting to concrete research (Koren, 2011). A particularly striking excerpt from the Declaration exemplifies this, asserting a uniform and unambiguous interpretation of the war and imposing it on the Croatian people: "[...] considering that the fundamental values of the Homeland War are unambiguously accepted from the side of the Croatian people as a whole and from the side of every Croatian citizen [...]" (Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu, 2000). The fact that the Declaration represents an institutionalized parliamentary interpretation of the Croatian War of Independence presents significant challenges in establishing a constructive approach to the war's legacy. Specifically, this sanctioned interpretation necessitates its tacit acceptance by all citizens, thereby defining state identity and hindering alternative perspectives. As Schönle and Shine write (2006), such texts encode messages for insiders while excluding others, focusing on preserving existing information rather than generating new insights. This dynamic fosters a collective identity, constructing a cohesive "We" for the national community.

Lotmanian semiotics perceives texts as carriers of collective memory, positing that culture itself is a shared memory of a community (Lotman & Uspensky, 1978, 213). Thus, the mnemonic function becomes a crucial aspect of any text, enabling it to connect with other texts and associations, fostering



Figure 1: The Ustaša salute on a memorial plaque erected in Jasenovac in November 2016, commemorating 11 HOS soldiers killed in combat in 1991 and 1995. The plaque was subsequently relocated to a Homeland War memorial park outside the nearby town of Novska (Photo: Vjeran Pavlaković).

the creation of new meanings or reinforcing existing ones. Lotman elucidates this intertextual capacity by explaining that:

The sum of the contexts in which a given text acquires interpretation and which are in a way incorporated in it may be termed the text's memory. This meaning-space created by the text around itself enters into relationship with the cultural memory (tradition) already formed in the consciousness of the audience. As a result, the text acquires semiotic life. [...] Nowadays, Hamlet is not just a play by Shakespeare, but it is also the memory of all its interpretations, and what is more, it is also the memory of all those historical events which occurred outside the text but with which Shakespeare's text can evoke associations. (Lotman, 1990, 18–19)

In contrast, institutionalized texts like the Declaration tend to reinforce existing meanings rather than generate new ones. These texts can become mythological, aiming to preserve specific cultural identities and interpretations. On an individual level, myths help organize the recipient's understanding of the world; as Lotman (1990, 153) notes, "Myths always say something about me." Collectively, myths uphold worldviews, ideologies, and meanings that hold significance for society. However, this can also be problematic, as mythological texts may solidify into fixed narratives—much like the Declaration has—that obstruct open dialogue about difficult legacies. In the case of the ZDS salute, the Declaration's framing of the 1990s war as a righteous, defensive struggle contributes to the relativization of the salute by embedding it within the "patriotic" narrative of that conflict. This framing allows controversial symbols to be reinterpreted not through their historical legacy, but through their wartime use in the 1990s, effectively downplaying their fascist meaning. The institutional myth, then, enables the symbol to persist in public space, while shielding it from critique. The implications of such institutionalized texts for a national community are profound, often requiring tacit acceptance from citizens without permitting space for questioning or challenging the established narrative.

Another institutional text that contributes to the discursive management and normalization of the ZDS salute is the Dialogue Document (Dokument Dijaloga), issued in 2018 by the Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes (cf. Dialogue Document, 2018). Although less frequently referred to than the Declaration, the Dialogue Document plays an important role in extending and operationalizing

the state's semiotic regulation of contested symbols. It emerged in response to the public outcry over the installation of a memorial plaque near the WWII Jasenovac concentration camp that bore the ZDS salute—an act that sparked domestic and international condemnation and briefly destabilized the Croatian government (Cvijanović, 2018; Koren, 2019; Damčević, 2021).

In the Dialogue Document, the Council addressed the ZDS salute directly, describing it as a "prima facie disputed insignia of hate", acknowledging its origins from the NDH regime. Yet, it simultaneously introduced a conditional exception for its use during commemorations of the 1990s war, effectively creating a state-sanctioned loophole based on a faulty "double connotation" argument (cf. Kostanić, 2025). Although the use of the salute during the 1990s war evoked the legacy of the Ustaša regime, the exception—justified on vague historical and emotional grounds—was supported by reference to the Declaration, which was used to legitimize its use by war veterans during the conflict (Dialogue Document, 2018, 25–26). While framed and presented to the public as a compromise, this stance risked further misuse and reinforced the symbolic overlap between WWII-era fascism and post-Yugoslav nationalism.

Much like the Declaration, the Dialogue Document has not fostered public dialogue, nor has it resulted in coherent legal guidelines. Instead, it functions as an ideological text that preserves the dominant wartime narrative while avoiding substantive engagement with Croatia's fascist past (Cvijanović, 2018). Though never formally enacted, its rhetorical alignment with the Declaration illustrates how multiple institutional texts work in tandem to legitimize exclusionary memory frameworks and symbols. These intersecting texts reveal how institutional narratives not only regulate official memory but also condition the symbolic status of charged expressions like the ZDS salute.

Rather than treating the salute as an isolated provocation, the next section examines how its continued public use is embedded—and partially legitimized by—dominant cultural texts. In this sense, the salute is not simply a relic of the past, but a semiotic product shaped by the very narratives that publicly disavow its historical associations.

ZA DOM SPREMNI AND THE NARRATIVE AUTHORITY OF THE STATE

The meanings of hate speech and historically significant symbols are profoundly shaped by the specific communication contexts in which they are invoked. A pertinent example of this is the ZDS salute, which was primarily utilized to evoke

the legacy of the NDH during the conflict of the 1990s. In the absence of legal regulation, the salute became intricately linked with the war and the victorious narratives that emerged in its aftermath. As previously discussed, both the conflict and its repercussions are characterized by an increase in meaning-making; war influences various aspects of society, prompting communities to reflect on their experiences and their implications for identity and self-image.

The potency of the ZDS salute lies in its simplicity and its role as a semiotic condenser (Lotman, 1990, 111). It can permeate multiple cultural layers and serve as a unifying cultural code across diverse historical and social contexts. Furthermore, it possesses the capacity to adapt to new contexts—such as the wartime environment of the 1990s—while generating fresh layers of meaning that remain consistent with its “inner form” (Lotman, 2019, 163; Tamm & Torop, 2022). For instance, during the 1990s, ZDS was appropriated by certain Croatian military units as an alleged rallying cry for national defense (Veselinović, 2019). Croatia’s first president Franjo Tuđman’s relativization of the Ustaša legacy further strengthened its relativization (cf. Đurašković, 2016). This reframing allowed the salute to retain its ideological charge—simultaneously mobilizing affective unity and exclusion—while shedding its overt association with WWII fascism. More recently, performances by Marko Perković Thompson and state-endorsed commemorative events have further layered its meaning: the salute is invoked as a symbol of wartime sacrifice and national pride, yet its historical roots continue to evoke division and reinforce the consistently increasing rise of historical revisionism in Croatia. This adaptability has been integral to the intertwining of the salute with the 1990s war and, subsequently, the Declaration.

While symbols can indeed acquire new meanings, it is crucial to understand that existing meanings do not simply vanish. Symbols do not gain legitimacy on their own; they must be actively legitimized (cf. Cvijanović, 2018). In the case of the ZDS salute and the associated hate speech, it is essential to recognize that its use has predominantly sought to evoke the legacy of the NDH and target minority groups, often downplayed and relativized by government officials. This normalization process has reinforced the salute’s association with the NDH over time. Consequently, criticism of the salute becomes perceived as an attack on the dominant interpretation of the war (cf. Damčević, 2023b), creating a vicious cycle that can only be broken through the engagement of political actors willing to constructively address Croatia’s war legacy, rather than exploiting it for voter mobilization.

The implications of this dynamic for a post-conflict society are significant, as they can foster an environment conducive to nationalist hate speech. Nationalist rhetoric thrives on an “in-group” versus “out-group” mentality, which socio-political circumstances can exacerbate, encouraging division and hostility. When societal narratives are infused with fear or resentment toward perceived enemies, groups and individuals may feel justified in expressing or endorsing extremist views. This highlights the danger of institutionalized cultural texts, such as the Declaration; when enacted and endorsed by the state, it establishes a singular and only acceptable narrative of the past.

The ZDS salute serves as an example of how symbols can resonate deeply within the socio-political fabric of a post-conflict society. The interplay of memory and national identity, combined with the absence of comprehensive legal frameworks, facilitates the emergence of nationalist narratives. When government officials fail to constructively address these issues and, in some instances, endorse them, it significantly hampers the development and implementation of proactive measures in education and policymaking. In the educational sphere, for example, Croatian history curricula have been criticized for presenting sanitized accounts of the NDH legacy or omitting systematic discussions of fascist collaboration (cf. Mihajlović-Trbovc & Pavasović-Trošt, 2017), which limits critical engagement with contested symbols like ZDS. On the policy level, the government’s decision to permit the memorial plaque bearing ZDS near Jasenovac—and the absence of a legal ban on the salute’s public use—illustrates the reluctance to confront the symbol’s legacy through legislative means. Such omissions hinder efforts to mitigate the spread of hate speech and promote inclusivity by challenging dominant narratives.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This paper explores the implications of exclusionary historical narratives, particularly through the lens of the “Ready for the Homeland” salute—a symbol that has resurfaced in contemporary Croatian politics and public discourse. By situating the analysis within the framework of cultural semiotics, I demonstrate how the ZDS salute operates not only as a symbol of national identity but also as a tool for hate speech against minority groups, perpetuating historical traumas and reinforcing divisions within society.

Cultural semiotics emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, illustrating how symbols and historical narratives are constantly renegotiated by various social actors. The salute, which evokes the NDH’s legacy, signifies a broader struggle over how national identity is constructed and maintained

in post-war Croatia. The normalization of this salute in public domains—from sports events to political speech—illustrates how hate speech can be enshrined in cultural practices and narratives without significant legal repercussions. Moreover, the rise of nationalist rhetoric and hate speech reflects a fragmented dialogue over historical memory. Political elites often exploit these narratives to mobilize voter support, sidelining minority voices and hindering efforts to confront and address past injustices. The state-sanctioned narratives surrounding the 1990s war, exemplified by the Declaration, further complicate the landscape by imposing a singular, glorified interpretation of the conflict that marginalizes alternative perspectives.

The analysis reveals the complexities of meaning-making in post-conflict societies, where symbols like the ZDS salute serve as focal points for broader societal tensions. The interplay of memory, identity, and historical interpretation not only shapes the political landscape but also impacts community cohesion and the prospects for dialogue around sensitive historical issues. Combating hate speech and the manipulation of historical narratives in Croatia requires multifaceted approaches that engage with the complexities of national identity,

memory, and representation. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of hate speech, symbols, and the prevailing narratives of the past can pave the way toward more constructive engagements with history, fostering a climate that encourages inclusivity and mutual understanding rather than division and hostility. Only through such efforts can societies come to terms with their past and cultivate a more equitable and just future for all citizens.

Future research could explore the comparative dynamics of similar cultural symbols in other post-conflict societies, examining how they evolve across different socio-political contexts. In the Croatian context, more attention should be dedicated to the reception and perception of the ZDS salute and associated hate speech among minority communities, including the exploration of meanings they attached to the Declaration. Finally, longitudinal studies could assess the effectiveness of educational and legal interventions aimed at mitigating hate speech and the use of symbols such as ZDS. Such studies would provide valuable insights into how enduring national symbols are either recontextualized or supplanted within evolving societal frameworks, contributing to more inclusive memory practices in post-conflict settings.

»ZA DOM PRIPRAVLJENI«: SEMIOTIKA SOVRAŽNEGA GOVORA IN SPOMINA
V POSTKONFLIKTNI HRVAŠKI

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POVZETEK

Prispevek raziskuje semiotične dimenzije sovražnega govora in spomina v postkonfliktni Hrvaški, s posebnim poudarkom na spornem pozdravu »Za dom pripravljeni« (Za dom spremni, ZDS). Namen je preučiti, kako kulturni teksti delujejo v procesu pogajanj o kolektivnem spominu in identiteti, zlasti kadar se simboli iz fašističnih zapuščin rekonstekstualizirajo v sodobnem diskurzu. Metodološko se raziskava opira na kulturno semiotiko za analizo ZDS kot simbolnega označevalca v institucionalnih in popularnih okvirih. Preučuje, kako uradni teksti, zlasti Deklaracija o domovinski vojni, delujejo kot legitimizacijski mehanizmi, ki vgrajujejo izključevalne simbole v prevladujoči povojni spominski režim. Analiza poudarja, kako takšne institucionalizirane pripovedi ustvarjajo kulturni prostor, v katerem razdvajajoči simboli krožijo s spornimi, a hkrati normaliziranimi pomeni. S tem, ko ZDS umešča v širše procese oblikovanja identitete, članek pokaže, da imajo kulturni teksti odločilno vlogo pri oblikovanju politike spomina v postkonfliktnem obdobju, pri krepitvi polarizacije in utrjevanju ideoloških meja. Ugotovitve poudarjajo načine, kako se državne naracije prepletajo z nacionalističnimi praksami pri vzdrževanju simbolnega nasilja, kar dodatno otežuje demokratično delo s spominom na Hrvaškem.

Ključne besede: teksti, spomin, sovražni govor, simboli, kulturna eksplozija, Za dom spremni, Hrvaška

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