



*Citation for published version:*

Clarke, D, Bull, AC & Deganutti, M 2017, 'Soft Power and Dark Heritage: Multiple Potentialities', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 660-674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1355365>

*DOI:*

[10.1080/10286632.2017.1355365](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1355365)

*Publication date:*

2017

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *International Journal of Cultural Policy* on 25 July 2017, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1355365>.

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# Soft Power and Dark Heritage: Multiple Potentialities

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## Abstract

While positively connoted tangible cultural heritage is widely recognized as an asset to states in their exercise of soft power, the value of sites of ‘dark heritage’ in the context of soft power strategies has not yet been fully explored. This article offers a theoretical framework for the analysis of the multiple soft power potentialities inherent in the management and presentation of sites of past violence and atrocity, demonstrating how the value of these sites can be developed in terms of place branding, cultural diplomacy and state-level diplomacy. The relationship between dark heritage, soft power and the search for ‘ontological security’ is also explored, highlighting how difficult pasts can be mobilized in order to frame positive contemporary roles for states in the international system. Drawing on this theoretical framework, the article offers an analysis of the case of the Soča valley in Slovenia and the presentation of the site of the First World War battle of Kobarid in a dedicated museum. Through this case study, the article underlines the particular role of dark heritage for the national self-projection of a new and small state in the context of European integration.

## Word Count

8392

## Keywords

Soft power, dark heritage, cultural diplomacy, memorial diplomacy, place branding, ontological security

## Funding details

This work was supported by the European Commission under H2020-EU3.6 (Project ID 693523: Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe).

## Biographical Notes

Dr David Clarke is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies at the University of Bath. His current research focuses on the politics of memory, and on cultural diplomacy. He is co-editor of *Remembering the German Democratic Republic: Divided Memory in a United Germany* (2011) and co-coordinated the AHRC-funded project 'Developing a New Framework for Understanding the Role of Cultural Products in Cultural Diplomacy' (2012).

Professor Anna Cento Bull is Professor of Italian History and Politics at the University of Bath. Her research focuses on legacies of violent pasts, in particular on the aftermath of terrorism in Italy. Her recent publications include *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (2007), *Ending terrorism in Italy* (with P. Cooke, 2013) and *Modern Italy: A Very Short Introduction* (2016).

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All three authors are researchers on the Horizon 2020 project Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe (UNREST).

# Soft Power and Dark Heritage: Multiple Potentialities

## Introduction

Sites associated with modern military conflict, mass violence and atrocities are today an integral part of the tangible heritage of many societies (Logan and Reeves 2009: 1), alongside more positively connoted cultural resources such as cathedrals, art collections or cityscapes. The management and presentation of such heritage is often discussed in terms of the role of these sites in the national memory culture, conceived in terms of the national community's attempt to manage its own identity in positive and productive ways, even in the face of such dark histories (e.g. Niven 2002; Carrier 2005). Although attention has been paid increasingly in recent scholarship to the impact of 'transnational' developments in memory cultures, the focus of these investigations has been the way in which certain narratives, models and approaches for dealing with histories of violence have transcended national borders (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015). As yet, insufficient emphasis has been given to the multiple and interconnected ways in which the management of such sites might contribute to a country's engagement with the rest of the world and the consequences that such engagement might have for the state in the international system. Although recent publications by Tim Winter (2014; 2015) have pointed to ways in which states have sought to build and maintain relationships via 'heritage diplomacy', the heritage Winter discusses is very much that of a positively connoted shared culture. Other authors have explored the consequences of (failed or successful) management of sites of 'dark heritage' (Biran, Poria and Oren 2011) in the context of 'place branding' (MacDonald 2009; Kobayashi and Ziino 2009: 111), or have noted how debates over the memorialization of sites of battles or atrocities can provide a catalyst for reconciliation between states (Logan and Witcomb 2013; Beaumont 2016), or indeed for diplomatic disputes (Young 2009: 60). Nevertheless, current research has not yet formulated a systematic theoretical conceptualization of the relationship between the management of dark heritage and the mobilization of 'soft power' (Nye 2011) in the context of international relations that would take into account the multiple potentialities of such sites and the relationships between those potentialities.

This article will propose that sites of dark heritage contain multiple potentialities in terms of their contribution to the state's soft power, defined (in contrast to the 'hard power' of force and coercion) as a state's ability to influence and attract others in the world in a number of beneficial ways (Nye 2011: 81-109). By setting out a new theoretical framing of the multiple forms of soft power that such sites can promote, it will seek to set a new agenda for research that recognizes that sites of war and atrocity are not simply a 'risk for city- or nation-branding strategies' (Girßmann 2015: 69), but rather a potential resource through which various kinds of soft power initiative are currently pursued. While the heritage managed at such sites may refer to terrible acts of violence and experiences of human suffering, there are potentially a number of benefits to displaying, promoting and instrumentalizing these sites in multiple ways that are aimed at foreign audiences of different kinds, yet current research lacks a comprehensive approach to understanding the nature of such initiatives in terms of their motivations and outcomes.

In order to address this gap in current research, this article will argue that the soft power benefits promised by the management of sites of dark heritage are of the following four kinds: Place branding as a means of promoting 'dark tourism' with its concomitant economic benefits; Cultural diplomacy as a variety of public diplomacy, aimed at promoting positive perceptions of the nation among foreign publics; state-level diplomacy, in which heritage is mobilized to attract attention to the state in question, and to reinforce positive relationships with other individual states; and, finally, what we will refer to as the 'domestic

dimension to “soft power” (Cai 2013: 140) in terms of the relationship between domestic memory culture and internationally projected image. As will become clear, although these various potentialities of soft power in relation to dark heritage sites can be isolated for the purposes of classification and analysis, they also interact and, in an ideal scenario, become mutually supporting; but this by no means rules out the possibility that different soft power priorities might come into conflict at such sites, particularly given the multiple actors involved at multiple levels. Our case study, the Kobarid museum and the surrounding landscape of the First World War’s Soča front in Slovenia, also leads us to consider the particular benefits that can accrue at these different levels in the case of small states. In the case of Slovenia in particular, we find a small and relatively new state that is part of the European Union and that has to negotiate a niche role within this supranational entity. In addressing these issues, this investigation will also contribute to the recent turn towards a consideration of the role of memory in international relations (Bell 2006; Langenbacher and Schain 2010), as well as highlighting links between soft power, memory, and place that have so far remained under-explored in the relevant scholarship. In doing so, it will seek to open up a new area of enquiry relevant not only to scholars of international relations, tourism and heritage, and memory studies, but also to policymakers and heritage professionals.

### **Place branding and dark tourism**

Place branding can be understood as the attempt to market a particular location for the purposes of attracting inward investment, customers for its export products or visitors for its tourist industry, and therefore has a clear economic impetus. Place branding can focus on the local, regional or even national level (where the term ‘nation branding’ is more commonly used), and can take place in a coordinated, top-down fashion in the form of national branding strategies, or in a less coordinated way by multiple state and non-state actors at various levels. This distinguishes the branding of place from the branding of a commercial product: ‘Place branding involves multiple stakeholders, often with competing interests; unlike product branding, place branding is seldom under the control of one central authority.’ (van Ham 2008: 133)

Place branding rarely works from an entirely clean slate. External publics are likely to have some pre-conceived notions that constitute a more or less defined ‘brand image’ (Arnholt 2007: 5). For some places, it may well be the case that the most salient fact that others are aware of, especially outside of the country, is that they were the site of a battle or an atrocity. Indeed, some locations are synonymous with such events (e.g. Ypres, Auschwitz, Srebrenica). The widespread practice of ‘dark tourism’ (Lennon and Foley 2004) or ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton 1996) represents an important economic factor for some locations, yet this ‘commodification of death for popular touristic consumption’ (Stone 2013: 307) needs to be balanced against the other functions of these sites, including burial, commemoration, religious observance, and education (Ashworth and Hartmann 2005: 11). The marketing of dark heritage has the potential to bring visitors into local businesses (hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.) with a significant economic impact. This is particularly the case where the heritage in question can be described as wholly or partly ‘extraterritorial’ (Beaumont 2016), that is to say that a foreign public has a particular historical stake in the events in question, either because they are survivors or veterans of an atrocity or a conflict, or because they are literal or metaphorical descendants of those who were directly involved (e.g. Australian tourist ‘pilgrimages’ to various sites of World War One and World War Two battles, or Israeli youngsters visiting concentration camp sites in Europe).

Understood in broad terms as the ‘power to attract’, soft power in this context means the ability to make relevant foreign publics aware of the site in question, to address their

conceptions of the role of the historical event that took place there and their expectations of any potential visit, and thereby to offer an experience at the site that will address their various needs, while also taking into account potentially competing local needs. However, as with other forms of soft power, the ability of any one of the potential domestic or external actors involved to 'wield' (van Ham 2010: 67) that power in any unmediated way in order to produce a pre-determined outcome must be in question. In addressing our case study of the Kobarid museum and its surrounding memorial landscape of the former Soča front, we will seek to understand how the interacting agenda of actors with a stake in such place branding have led to specific (and changing) presentations of the site over time, and to assess these in terms of their soft power implications.

### **Dark heritage sites and cultural diplomacy**

Public diplomacy is normally defined in terms of those policies implemented by a state in order to create positive and beneficial impressions among the publics of other states. Where this is achieved through the promotion of particular cultural products (music, literature, fashion, etc.) or is undertaken by cultural institutions such as museums, orchestras, or opera companies, the term cultural diplomacy is generally applied (Mark 2010: 43). There is a consensus that cultural diplomacy works best where states rely on networks of autonomous (although often state-funded) institutions to engage with foreign publics on their behalf (Cull 2010: 13-14; Gienow-Hecht and Donfried 2010), and memorial museums at sites of dark heritage represent one variety of such institutions. We will argue that dark heritage sites can be framed by various actors in ways that project positive images of the state in which these sites are located; if not in terms of the events themselves (which remain terrible and are acknowledged as such), then certainly in terms of way in which the state in question deals with that heritage in the here-and-now, and in terms of how it draws conclusions about the future based on those past events.

Given our focus on multiple actors elsewhere, it will also be important to acknowledge that it is not merely state-level foreign policymaking elites who may seek to project a specific role for Slovenia through the Kobarid memorial and the Soča front (Wehner and Thies 2014: 416). Increasing competition at the sub-national level has given rise to various forms of para-diplomacy on the part of local actors. Border areas, in particular, can be very active in establishing transnational linkages, especially at times of deep political change and/or when they feel legitimised by supra-national political structures like the EU. As Lecours (2002: 103) argues, '[p]olitical supra-national structures such as the EU legitimize, as a result of their transformation of state sovereignty, the bypassing by regional governments of central institutions.'

Specifically, we will see how the EU practices its own forms of supranational cultural diplomacy in the region, promoting its own goals of peace and economic and social integration. Since 2007, the EU has developed an agenda to promote culture in its external relations (EU 2014: 20) and has aspired to exercise soft power in its own right. As Isar (2015: 505) argues, within the EU 'non-state actors have been key policy entrepreneurs of this new agenda, in a pattern rather distinct from the manner in which cultural diplomacy is elaborated by national governments.' Ang, Isar and Mar (2015: 378) in turn state that 'the EU's policy settings may provide the current benchmark for the adoption of more cosmopolitan ideals in cultural diplomacy.'

Cosmopolitan ideals have also inspired the EU's approach to historical memory and dark heritage. Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen (2016) have observed three potential modes for the presentation of historical conflict: the antagonistic, the cosmopolitan, and the

agonistic. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, they define antagonistic heritage as heritage that upholds sharp distinctions of friend and foe, refusing to recognize the other's view of history and maintaining a historical sense of enmity. The mode of cosmopolitan memory is often regarded as an antidote to such antagonistic conceptions, in that it tends to focus on victims of historical suffering and invite identification with that suffering, while simultaneously downplaying the complicity of ordinary people in the violence that caused it. In the cosmopolitan mode, all are victims of historical 'evil', but that 'evil' remains largely unexplored. By contrast, an agonistic memory discourse is counterhegemonic and tries to re-politicize the past and the relation of the past to the present through the unsettling of established identity positions and relations. This mode of remembering gives voice to all parties in a conflict, contextualizes victimhood and perpetration, and engages with people's emotions and passions insofar as they can facilitate critical reflection and self-reflection. In post-conflict societies, agonistic memory and dialogue can promote the transformation of previous enemies into adversaries sharing the same democratic space. Whereas the public sphere in many post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovenia, experiences an antagonistic memory culture between different societal groups that is highly politicized in the domestic context (Mark 2010), the EU explicitly favours a cosmopolitan approach as the best way to foster peace and reconciliation. In this context, it may be strategically advantageous to promote a more cosmopolitan view of selected aspects of the nation's dark heritage when addressing international (especially European) audiences and/or when aligning with EU values and norms; although this does not rule out the possibility that foreign publics may themselves experience a markedly antagonistic memory culture in relation to that same heritage.

### **State-level diplomacy and dark heritage**

Drawing on role theory in international relations, we will argue that the benefits that states can draw from such positive perceptions of their management of dark heritage relate to perceptions of their roles in the international system.

In the early 1970s, K. J. Holsti proposed that we conceive of each state's international role as being constructed in the interaction between 'role conception', i.e. how states see their own role in the international system, 'role prescription', i.e. how other states see their role, and 'role performance.' Role performance refers to the actual actions that each state undertakes on the international stage, from the limited range of options available to it given its own view of itself and its awareness of others' views (Holsti 1970: 240). Pertinent to any study of the function of memory in such role construction is also Aggestam's notion of 'role set.' This refers to the many and sometimes contradictory roles a state perceives itself as playing, or is perceived as playing, but which taken together give it an identity in the international system (2004: 67-8). At any given time, different role conceptions and expectations may come to the fore, while the perception of the state's identity, both internal and external, remains intact. In this article, we will examine how our case study, the site at Kobarid and the associated Soča front, has been co-opted to the development of the 'role conception' of the Slovenian state in the post-communist world. We will argue that, by means of intermediary heritage institutions, states like Slovenia can seek, for example, to promote a positive image of themselves in terms of their commitment to peace, reconciliation and related values, but may also project for themselves a particular role in their region or the wider world in relation to those values.

The visiting of memorials, cemeteries and (increasingly) memorial museums at sites of battles or atrocities, is now a feature of many state-level diplomatic interactions (e.g.



summits, official state visits), particularly where the violent past in question directly involves the nations who are engaging in dialogue. What Matthew Graves (2014) has termed ‘memorial diplomacy’ can involve such joint visits to memorial sites, with the laying of wreaths and the making of speeches, but also joint memorial projects. Through such actions, state representatives symbolically express their shared construction of the past, which implies both shared values (e.g. commitment to peace) and a shared view of their relationship to each other. Memorial politics can ‘underline the solidity of alliances forged in war and renewed in times of peace’, but may also ‘set the stage for the *rapprochement* of former belligerents’ and serve as a ‘pretext for the establishment or restoration of bilateral relations between governments, the first step in the reconciliation between nation states’ (Graves 2014: 177). However, as Graves also notes, this dominance of elite actors, in the form of state representatives, is increasingly accompanied by action on the part of ‘devolved parliaments, regional authorities and decentralized public administrations or municipalities [...], museums and other institutional caretakers of public memory’, but also by a range of civil society groups and even individual citizens (2014: 171).

Such visits and rituals are highly public and highly symbolic in nature, and as such constitute a kind of mutually signalling of the nature of the relationship between the states in question, both for their own consumption but also for that of other parties. For small states in particular, who experience more marked asymmetries of power in their relationship with others, the mobilization of dark heritage sites potentially promises the opportunity to highlight their preferred understanding of their relationship to their interlocutor, which is symbolically assented to by their alter where its representatives consent to participate in rituals located at dark heritage sites.

As Christopher S. Browning has claimed in relation to the process of nation branding (2015), the quest to establish a stable national role conception that is likely to be recognized and accepted by others through the national self-projection also serves a second important need: namely, that of ontological security. A growing body of scholarship argues that states are not only existentially challenged by ‘the possibility of physical threat from other actors and global entities, but also [by] the prospective transformations and developments that call into question a state or group’s identity’ (Innes and Steele 2014: 16). Such identities need to be discursively maintained through the construction of a consistent ‘biographical narrative’ for the state (Steele 2014: 527), yet where violent national pasts cannot be incorporated into such a coherent narrative, they represent a potential threat to the state’s ability to formulate a positive identity for itself in the international community, which in some cases can lead to denial or avoidance (Zarakol 2010). Conversely, dealing successfully with a difficult past can lead, as the case of Germany paradigmatically demonstrates, to a positive sense of one’s role in the world (Welch and Wittlinger 2011). In the case of Slovenia, the focus of the Kobarid site is, as we will show, particularly fruitful, in that allows Slovenia to present itself as the guardian of a heritage of war around which both a domestic and an international consensus can be constructed, whereas other elements of Slovenia’s history (especially its experience of the Second World War) would be subject to significantly greater internal contestation.

### **Multiple potentialities of soft power at dark heritage sites**

While it is possible that a particular site may serve only one form of soft power, for instance by attracting tourists while playing no role in cultural or state-level diplomacy, it is also the case that such sites can serve all of these functions in inter-related ways. The ideal in terms of

potential positive outcomes would be that place branding, cultural diplomacy and state-level memorial diplomacy are mutually reinforcing.

In the rest of this article, we will seek to map the dynamics of such interactions in the particular case of the Kobarid museum and the surrounding memorial landscape of the Soča front, which is at once a tourist destination, a site that seeks to promote international reconciliation between foreign publics, and a significant destination for visits by foreign state representatives. At the same time, we will situate these dynamics in relation to our fourth dimension of soft power in terms of Slovenia's ongoing struggles over the meaning of its past and the relationship of that past to its present and future identity, a terrain that remains dominated by antagonistic contention at the domestic level.

In summary, this article will show how dark heritage is a potential soft power resource, especially for a new and small state like Slovenia, which faces particular challenges in 'receiving recognition from the rest of the world for who [it] claim[s] to be' (Bátora 2005: 6). Nevertheless, as with other forms of soft power, it will become clear that the involvement of competing agents and multiple audiences makes such sites of dark heritage no more 'wieldable' in terms of achieving planned outcomes than we would expect in the case of other heritage resources.

The case study has benefitted from extensive fieldwork, including a number of interviews with museum guides and heritage curators in Kobarid, as well as analysis of visitor books, which helped establish the multiple factors accounting for the origins and subsequent development of this area as a major heritage site. The research was carried out as part of a project funded by the EU and entitled UNREST: Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe.

### **The construction of Kobarid and the Soča valley as dark heritage sites in pre-independence Slovenia**

The Soča or Isonzo valley is located on the border between Slovenia and Italy. During the First World War this was the site of twelve battles fought by the Austro-Hungarian and the Italian Army. During the twelfth battle at Kobarid (Caporetto), 8 kilometres from the Italian border, the Italian army suffered a humiliating defeat that led to the death or wounding of 40,000 of its soldiers and the capture of over 280,000 Italian prisoners (Fabi 2009; Falls 1966; Macdonald and Cimprič 2011; Schindler 2001; Thompson 2008). These twelve battles 'left deep scars in the physical landscape' (Saunders et al. 2013: 49) in which 'the traces of military action and the multiple overlapping legacies of the war's aftermath are still visible' (61). Among these legacies of war are trenches and military barracks, graves and cemeteries with the bodies of soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian, German and Italian armies, chapels and churches, including a Russian Orthodox chapel built by Russian prisoners of war in memory of more than 300 fellow nationals killed in an avalanche, as well as commemorative monuments built after the war. The name of Caporetto itself remains embedded in the Italian national psyche and continues to be widely used to signify a devastating debacle.

Despite the intrinsic unique relevance of this border area, the Soča valley was largely ignored as a heritage site by both historians and public institutions from the aftermath of the war until Slovenia's independence in 1991. Yet the impact of the war on Slovenes was no less seismic than for many other nationalities: 'the post-1918 official amnesia of World War I and the Soška front stands in stark contrast to the obvious fact that World War I was a seminal and tumultuous experience for Slovene soldiers, civilians and their political leaders. Its tremendous costs were very clear in both human suffering and economic costs' (Kranjc 2009: 217-18). As Kranjc argues, this was partly due to the fact that the Soča valley was

occupied by fascist Italy after the war and turned into a landscape of graves and monuments in memory of the Italian dead. There were other reasons, however, which accounted for the prevalent amnesia, including the difficulty for the inter-war Yugoslavian Monarchy to commemorate soldiers who had fought for Austria-Hungary against the Serbs, a factor which persisted in Tito's Yugoslavia. The Second World War later further dislodged the memory of the Great War. Slovenia was dismembered and divided between Italy, Germany and Hungary while the ensuing civil war between the pro-Tito Liberation Front and the Slovene collaborators of the fascist and Nazi occupiers – the so-called *domobranc*i – led to the latter being summarily executed or fleeing abroad after the partisans' victory. Tito's Yugoslavia then opted to remember the heroic partisans' war which marked the birth of the Communist regime, disregarding the previous conflict.

It was only after Tito's death in 1980 that historians started to pay attention to the Great War, while on the Soča front itself a myriad of individual collectors started creating private museums and even selling military objects to interested buyers. Interviews with founders and curators of the Kobarid museum established that in 1989 a local politician in the Kobarid area, Zdravko Likar, conceived the idea of setting up a museum of the First World War in the town open to the public. His primary and explicit aim was to capitalize on the thousands of Italians who visited Kobarid every day in order to buy cheap petrol, meat and cigarettes, enticing them to stay longer and visit a museum whose focus would be explicitly on the twelfth battle in which so many Italian soldiers had lost their lives. Likar's second aim, as he himself stated, was political rather than touristic and commercial, in so far as he was convinced that Slovenia would soon acquire independence and this would lead to its re-establishing good relations with Western Europe, starting with neighbouring Italy. Likar had already established close ties with the Slovenian minority in the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and saw these links as a potential springboard for cross-border cooperation (Pagavino 1989).

In short, considerations of place branding and tourism played a major role in the decision to launch Kobarid and the surrounding area as a dark heritage site of international standing and relevance. The relevance of the term Caporetto for the entire Italian nation was well known to locals, given that Kobarid was the site of an Italian Ossuary commissioned and inaugurated by Mussolini himself in 1938 that already attracted visitors from that country. In this sense, Kobarid was very clearly constructed as an 'extraterritorial' heritage site (Beaumont 2016) and, indeed, continues to function as a site of pilgrimage for many Italian visitors, who often come to the museum in search of traces of ancestors involved in the battles and record the purpose of their visit in the visitor book. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of the museum project, its instigators had recognized the potential of the site in terms of cultural diplomacy as a means of enhancing cross-border relations.

The museum opened in 1990 as a private, non-profit venture. Its permanent exhibition deliberately presented an anti-war message in the cosmopolitan mode now favoured by EU institutions (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016), focusing on the suffering and plight of soldiers irrespective of which side they fought for. As interviews with curators established, controversial issues such as the flight and surrender of thousands of Italian soldiers to the enemy after the defeat of the twelfth battle were deliberately not dealt with, not least in order not to antagonize or upset the hoped-for Italian visitors. Similarly, the Italian fascist occupation of the Kobarid area is not part of the main exhibition on the First World War but relegated to two rooms dealing with the history of the town. In this section, the issue of the Communist partisans and of the collaborators with the fascist occupiers is not explained or probed. As the museum went on to attract growing numbers of visitors, it effectively became the defining factor in the branding of the town: Kravanja (2014: 102) has argued, '[w]hen the

Kobarid Museum started to develop the story of the WW1 in the 1990s, Kobarid got an entirely new identity. The town started to be named after the museum and not vice versa’.

The early development of the Kobarid Museum before Slovenian independence clearly demonstrates that local actors had recognized the potential of the site in terms of place branding in a touristic context, while also recognizing the future potential of the Museum and the wider memorial landscape in relation to cultural diplomacy. Following Slovenian independence, however, the Slovenian state began to take a strong interest in Kobarid as a resource for cultural and state-level diplomacy.

### **The Soča front’s new role in cultural and state-level diplomacy**

As early as 1992, the Kobarid museum gained national recognition when it was awarded the Valvasor Prize by the Association of Museums of Slovenia. In 1993, the Museum was one of the finalists for the European Museum of the Year award. In the same year, it received the Council of Europe Museum Prize. These awards in turn marked a significant period of growth in the number of visitors, with international tourists greatly outnumbering domestic ones. The success of the museum, whose founders had also started to develop outdoor sites linked to the First World War in the surrounding area, began to attract the attention of the Slovenian state. Ten years after the opening of the Kobarid museum, the government began to take an active interest in the site and above all in the memory of the First World War, funding the creation of a cultural foundation in the Soča Valley (the Pot Miru Foundation). As it is stated on the website of the Foundation:

In order to preserve, restore and present the historical and cultural heritage of the First World War in the Soča Region, the Slovenian Government adopted a ten-year programme in 2000. On its initiative, a foundation to implement the programme was established. The non-profit Walks of Peace in the Soča Region Foundation was established on 1 December 2002. (Pot Miru n.d. a)

Kravanja has explained this decision in terms of the state’s own interest (2014: 93): ‘after a decade of successful promotion in Europe with a remarkable WW1 story and a strong anti-war message, Kobarid became an interesting political medium for the state of Slovenia’. Specifically, he argues (2014: 104) that by promoting the memory of the First World War Slovenia ‘was able to detach itself from the “Yugoslavian” history of the WW2 and started to present itself with a Europeanised version of history’. However, we would also stress the domestic dimension of prioritizing the memory of the First World War at the expense of that of the Second World War. By this point, Slovenia had become embroiled in memory rifts around the role of partisans and collaborationists during the Second World War, with the latter demanding a reappraisal of their aims and stance and denouncing the mass executions carried out by the partisans after the war (Luthar und Luthar 2010). The highly politicized nature of this dispute (Šumi 2012: 158-160) over the proper commemoration of those killed in the Second World War and its aftermath has taken on an antagonistic mode rather than an agonistic one, with the result that the transformation of former enemies into adversaries sharing the same democratic (agonistic) space is proving difficult to achieve. In this context, no coherent national self-image based on the memory of this period is possible, which in turn means that that memory cannot offer a coherent foundation for Slovenia’s self-projection in the region and more widely. Kobarid and the Soča front, in contrast, can be promoted as a history that offers the possibility of consensus without threatening to further ‘poison’ (Cox 2005: 138) contemporary domestic politics.

The site has proved to be extremely versatile as a resource for furthering Slovenia's foreign policy goals and promoting its own role conception in the region and in the EU more widely. In a 2015 official publication, the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly states that the country's foreign policy priorities include: good relations with Russia; strong ties with central European countries; cross-border cooperation with Italy (in light of the large Slovenian minority across the border), but also with Croatia and the Balkan countries; multilateralism, international peace and cooperation; and a stronger, more integrated, efficient and transparent European Union (Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). The Soča front can be mobilized in pursuit of all of these goals, as it provides a space in which Slovenia can interact with foreign publics (as tourists) and foreign elites (as official visitors) and reinforce its association with the positive values of peace, reconciliation, cross-border collaboration and multilateralism.

As well as becoming actively engaged in promoting the Kobarid site through the Pot Miru Foundation, the state has used the site for conducting high-level diplomatic interactions. Today the Kobarid museum and related Soča front is one of five sites privileged by Slovenian governments for state-level visits. On repeated occasions, foreign Prime Ministers and Presidents, especially from Italy and central European countries, are taken to visit the museum in order to reflect publicly on the destruction wrought by war as well as the desirability of peaceful relations.

In terms of relations with Russia, the front includes the presence of a Russian Orthodox chapel and Russian graves, repeatedly visited by President Putin in diplomatic encounters with Slovenia. Slovenia-Russia relations were first established in 1992 and in the last ten years have intensified, while Russia is an important trade partner (Gower 2013). Such diplomatic encounters have been aimed at fostering good bilateral relations, promoting dialogue with the EU and, more recently, sending out a clear message about the necessity of ending the current EU sanctions against Russia for its actions in the Ukraine crisis since 2014. The pivotal role played by the Russian chapel on the Soča front for Slovene-Russian relations is highlighted by Benedejčič (2016). As he points out, an annual memorial service is held at the chapel. However, whereas in the 1990s commemorative events were mainly informal,

since 2000 the list of participants at the annual commemorations has become a veritable 'who's who' roll call not only on the Slovenian, but also on the Russian side [...]. In 2015, despite the tensions in relations between Russia and the West, the chapel was visited by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and in 2016 the Russian President Vladimir Putin was invited to mark its centenary. (Benedejčič 2016: 1158-9)

As far as the second of Slovenia's foreign policy priorities is concerned, Kobarid's status as the site of a series of battles that saw the involvement of all central European armies can be highlighted in order to emphasize Slovenia's role in promoting good relations between central European states. A visit to the Soča front therefore underlines the common past shared by central-eastern Europe as well as its present unity of purpose. In terms of relations with Italy, as already mentioned, Kobarid was the site of a battle that involved a major defeat for the Italian army, as well as hosting a major Italian ossuary, where every year a ceremony is held in memory of the dead. Since 1991, the museum has presented itself as another place where the battle can be remembered and it is not a coincidence that Italians make up its largest group of visitors after Slovenes. In 2007 the museum welcomed the Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, who stated that '[w]e built Europe so that tragedies like the one that took place at Caporetto will never happen again' (Bongarrà 2007). As for building bridges

with Croatia and the other south-eastern European countries, the Soča valley is the site of graves and cemeteries of Balkan soldiers killed in the First World War, including Muslim Bosniaks. In June 2012, an official ceremony marked the unveiling of a monument in honour of fallen Bosnian soldiers. The ceremony took place at Log pod Mangartom, where the President of Slovenia Danilo Türk welcomed two members of the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniak Bakir Izetbegović and the Croat Željko Komšić. On that occasion, Izetbegović delivered a strong message of peace and reconciliation:

This Ceremony too is an opportunity for us to testify that at places like this the history lessons are best learned and for us to send the messages of peace, to our region before all which still has not buried all of its dead from the wars of the 1990s, but to Europe too with the hope and belief that the 21st Century we shall spend without wars and bloodsheds. [sic] (Izetbegović 2012)

As also shown by the above quotations, the Kobarid museum and the Soča valley align with the aim of international peace and cooperation, as the emphasis of both the museum exhibition and the presentation of the multi-national graves scattered around the area is on wartime suffering and the folly of war. The promotion of the site in the context of cultural diplomacy, aimed both at visiting tourists and at other foreign publics, seeks to position Slovenia as a nation dedicated to the promotion of peace and reconciliation across formerly contested borders within a region scarred by multiple conflicts during the twentieth century. The rhetoric around the ‘memorial diplomacy’ (Graves 2014) practiced during various state visits by foreign leaders seeks to reinforce Slovenia’s role in this respect. However, while internationalism or cosmopolitanism ‘is embedded in the framework of Slovenian foreign policy thinking’ it should also be noted that this is very much in line with the priorities of the EU, which assumes ‘that there are cosmopolitan norms and values that transcend the particularistic claims of discrete political communities’ (Zupančič and Hribernik 2011: 38). Clearly, by adopting the Soča front as a resource for the cultivation of its soft power, the Slovenian state is promoting a role conception for itself that is compatible with the EU’s efforts to promote its own values across borders. In this respect, as Zupančič and Hribernik argue, small states like Slovenia may emphasize the contribution of their soft power strategies to such an agenda ‘since there are certain niches in the framework of the EU that can be filled up by such states’ (2011: 38). However, the EU itself has also sought to intervene directly with its own policy at the Soča front in ways that call into question Slovenia’s ability to successfully cultivate this ‘niche.’

### **Constructing the Soča front as a borderless heritage site**

The EU has provided funding and support for the historical heritage sites along the Soča valley thanks to its Cross-Border Cooperation Programme between Italy and Slovenia, especially in the period 2007-2013. Specifically, the programme funded the project entitled ‘Pot Miru – Via di pace (Walk of Peace) – Historic Trails of the First World War’, a series of walking trails running from the Alps to the Adriatic. Jointly supported by the Pot Miru Foundation in Kobarid, the Walk of Peace planned to ‘create a unique cross-border cultural route connecting the existing trails among the historical legacies, tracks and cultural heritage of the different regions’ (CBC Programme Italy-Slovenia 2007-2013 n.d.). The aims of the project were both commercial, to promote tourism in the area, and cultural. From the EU perspective, there was also an explicit wish to enhance cross-border relations and a European

sense of belonging. There are also plans to establish a European Peace Memorial Park on the trail, thereby showcasing the EU as a positive force for peace.

In many ways, the motivating forces driving the EU to actively engage with the memory and heritage of the First World War in the Soča valley are similar to those of the Slovenian state. The message of peace and reconciliation arising out of the terrible suffering caused by the war is a shared one, made even more poignant in view of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. Yet, through its Cross-Border Programmes, the EU is also pursuing its own supranational agenda and this can lead to tension with a newly sovereign state like Slovenia.

Over the last few decades, cross-border cooperation has been used as a strategic instrument of the EU that seeks to change the way borders should be conceived: 'from being dividing lines of separate spaces they have turned into the reason for co-operation' (Christiansen, 2014: 68). Already in the 1980s new forms of multi-level governance involving the European Commission and the regions were being developed (Bullmann 1994; Jones and Keating 1995; Heinelt 1996). From the 1990s cross-border cooperation became part of the EU transnational strategy of cooperation and integration, involving also private and local actors, which facilitated the possibility to transcend national boundaries. More recently, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), has become a strategic tool to facilitate transnational cooperation and soften the borders between the European state-members

This new form of governance has contributed to the erosion of the self-contained nation state (Christiansen and Jörgensen, 2000; Magone, 2007), since the traditional indivisible sovereignty of nation-states has been replaced by a multi-layered, 'network governance' (Filtenborg and Johansson 2002). Boundaries are blurred by 'direct contacts between sub-state actors of various types as well as the inclusion of non-public sector organizations in cross-border institutions' (Blatter, 2004: 533). In the case of EGTC, the nation-state is no longer the only actor. This situation may cause frictions between the sub-national, the national and the supra-national level.

The Primorska area (or the Slovene Littoral) where Kobarid is located, has been the arena of an intense cross-border activity between Italy and Slovenia. In particular, the European Commission created three Interreg programming periods (1989–1993; 1994–1999; 2000–2006) to reinforce cross-border/transnational co-operation. As already mentioned, the historical and cultural heritage related to the First World War along the Soča river benefitted financially from the Cross-border Cooperation Programme Italy-Slovenia 2007-2013. Specifically, the Walk of peace project promoted educational and cultural activities in an area extended between the Carnic and the Julian Alps, which is due to be further developed as far as the Adriatic Sea.

Cross-border cooperation projects have partnered Slovenia with the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region rather than with Italy as a whole. As Nadalutti (2012: 194) argues, while the state of Slovenia has benefitted from cross-border activities, this has meant that the whole Slovenian nation has to some extent been treated as if it were on a par with the Italian regions taking part in the Cooperation Programme. Interreg 2007-2013 also introduced the Regulation 1082/2006 on 'European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation' (EGTC – the Upper Adriatic Euroregion) which enabled local entities to undertake cross-border projects. However, given that the members of the EGTC are considered equal in terms of status, Slovenia was once again put on the same level as Italian regions. This is the reason why the country was reluctant to accept the agreement to build a 'small' Euroregion instead of a bigger one, which would also have included Stiria (Austria) and Hungary. Signs of tension appeared when in 2005 Slovenia failed to attend the first meeting for the creation of the EGTC and the prime minister Janša declared that the country should enter the Euroregion as a state (Nadalutti 2012: 189).

In the EU-driven process of regional integration, we therefore see Slovenia insisting upon its status as a nation state, pushing back against the implication that it is a mere region of the wider EU. These tensions between the EU's strategy of promoting regional integration and the desire of the Slovenian state to remain a sovereign actor with its own clearly defined identity within the EU and the world more widely are reflected in the way EU-funded projects related to the heritage of the First World War in the Soča valley are advertised on official Slovene sites. For instance, the site of the Slovenian Pot Miru Foundation in Kobarid underlines the role of Slovenia in establishing and funding its activities, while the role of the EU is downplayed (Pot Miru n.d. b). SLOVENIA.SI, the official site that promotes the country with the brand 'I feel Slovenia', advertises the Walk of Peace as follows:

Walk of Peace in the Soča Region foundation is an important member of the National Committee for the Commemoration of World War I Anniversaries, funded by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and headed by the Minister of Defence. (SLOVENIA.SI n.d.)

Despite the fact that the EU funded 850,000 Euros out of a total budget of 1 million for the Walk of Peace and contributed financially to several other projects, the site never mentions the EU, even though it refers to 'the values of cross-border cooperation' and the importance of 'promoting the European commitment to peace'. Similarly, when the Slovenian president Danilo Türk visited the Walk of Peace in 2012, he did not mention the EU cross-border cooperation programmes. However, he made reference to his wish to create a Peace Park as 'the place to cherish common European values of peace, coexistence and cooperation for the future when marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of events related to World War I'. He added that he had discussed this with the Presidents of Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia as well as other countries whose citizens had fought in the Soča battles (Office of the President of the Republic of Slovenia 2012).

Despite the priorities of Slovenian foreign policy remaining aligned with the values of the EU, the Slovenian state is clearly at pains to stress its own agency in promoting those values. While it has a strong interest in participating in the Interreg programmes (not least the presence of autochthonous Slovene minorities in neighbouring countries) it is wary of allowing the EU to co-opt the Soča front to the EU's normative agenda, preferring instead to stress its own niche role in the promotion of that agenda. While, as Zupančič and Hribernik have argued, '[a] small state like Slovenia can [...] contribute most to said normative power by aligning its foreign policy to help promoting human rights, as well as the spread of democracy' (2010: 41), Slovenia's emphasis on its own active role in promoting such values via the commemorative landscape of the Soča front serves to emphasise its own agency and mitigate the impression that it is merely riding on the coat-tails of the EU's regional agenda. In this sense, the Slovenian state seeks to maintain its sense of ontological security as a distinct and purposeful actor in the region, whose agenda emerges from a clearly defined national narrative, drawing on the heritage of Kobarid and the Soča front to do so.

## **Conclusion**

We began this article by making the claim that sites of dark heritage have multiple potentialities in terms of the exercise of soft power in the context of international relations and that these potentialities had not yet been fully explored by current research. In order to address this deficit, we proposed that the use of sites of dark heritage for the purposes of soft power needed to be understood in four distinct yet potentially interconnected ways. Our study of the Kobarid museum and the related memorial landscape of the Soča front has



demonstrated how these four soft power potentialities have evolved and interacted at one site that is particularly rich and complex in terms of its historical associations and its present status. We have demonstrated through this case study that the place branding, cultural diplomacy and state-level diplomacy all frame this site in specific, yet ultimately interrelated ways, which can be understood both in terms of the national memory culture of Slovenia and in terms of the Slovenian state's desire to promote a distinct role for itself, in this case in the context of the EU, which allows it to maintain a clear sense of identity in the international community and thus bolster its sense of ontological security. The emphasis on the First World War in the Slovenian context is particularly noteworthy in respect of this history's consensus-building potential as a 'cosmopolitan' memory, which avoids any agonistic engagement with the country's civil war during the Second World War, but also leaves this latter conflict the subject of antagonistic contestation in the domestic political sphere. At the same time, the more cosmopolitan narrative of Kobarid, focused on peace, reconciliation and cross-border cooperation allows Slovenia to present itself as a niche advocate for the normative values of the EU. Nevertheless, we have shown how the Slovenian state has struggled to defend its niche role in the promotion of such normative European values through the management of its dark heritage, emphasizing its own agency in the face of apparent attempts to co-opt the Soča front into the EU's broader cross-border regional policy. In defending its active role in the mobilization of dark heritage in the region, Slovenia affirms a particular role conception that emerges from a national historical narrative and thus underpins its wider sense of ontological security. This tension is a product of Slovenia's status as a small and relatively new state in the context of the European Union, yet also points to the fact that, when it comes to the mobilization of dark heritage in the service of soft power, the nation state is no longer the only game in town. Processes of regional integration and globalization may well impact on the ability even of larger states to instrumentalize their own dark heritage in the service of their own soft power agenda. However, the consequences of this development remain to be investigated through further case studies.

What is clear, however, is that the various potentialities of sites of dark heritage as resources of soft power can be mutually reinforcing in productive ways. The Kobarid museum and the surrounding memorial landscape of the Soča front address foreign publics at multiple levels and in different ways, yet there is little evidence in this case study that the evolution from place branding to cultural diplomacy to state-level memorial diplomacy was anything more than an *ad hoc* affair. As with other forms of soft power (Arnholt 2007: 74), what has been lacking in the Slovenian case is a clearly developed strategy that draws in the various stakeholders in a systematic way and seeks to maximize all of the potential soft power benefits of the site in a coordinated fashion. This is not surprising, given the unresolved issues related to the memory of the interwar period and of the Second World War. While tangible dark heritage of the kind investigated here was once regarded as representing a negative legacy of violence, conflict and even of shame, states are becoming increasingly aware of the soft power potentialities that we have outlined in our discussion. Those potentialities might be more fully realised by policymakers and heritage professionals, however, through the development of more integrated multi-level approaches. Arguably, working through their difficult pasts might help states to develop more effective strategies.

In terms of the research agenda that this article has sought to open up, we would also argue that more attention needs to be paid among scholars of international relations, heritage and tourism, and memory studies to the soft power potentialities of sites of dark heritage in order to fully understand their function in contemporary society. In this article, we have proposed a model for approaching these multiple potentialities that provides a basis for further research in this area.

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