

MAPPING COMMEMORATIVE CULTURES, BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

CASE STUDY: Bosnia and Herzegovina

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In July of 1995, Bosnian Serb forces systematically slaughtered 8,372 Bosniak (Muslim) men and boys in the UN Safe Zone of Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. This horrific episode of violence has been formally ruled genocide by multiple international courts. July 11th, the day Bosnian Serb troops under the command of Ratko Mladić entered the Srebrenica enclave, is recognized around the world as the official Day of Remembrance for Srebrenica's victims. In the Srebrenica community of Potočari, where the Memorial Center and Cemetery for the victims of the genocide is located today, this tragedy is commemorated annually by a week-long program of events to mark the anniversary of the genocide, as well as through year-round projects and initiatives. However, in the neighboring towns of Bratunac and Kravica, where some of the worst atrocities of July 1995 were carried out, wholly different commemorative events are organized by the genocide's perpetrators, descendants, and sympathizers, in order to advance their own contradictory narratives. In juxtaposing the official commemorative program in Potočari, the celebration of the so-called "Day of the Liberation of Srebrenica" in Bratunac, and the memorialization of Serb victims "of the patriotic and defensive war" in Kravica, we are confronted with very different approaches to both history and commemoration.

1. Background

In March 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the most ethnically diverse of the six former Yugoslav republics, declared independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.¹ This was opposed by the republic's ethnic Serb citizens, who had declared themselves the "Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina," later known as the Republika Srpska (RS), under the political leadership of Radovan Karadžić and the military command of Ratko Mladić. With the full support of the Milošević regime and the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), the RS authorities launched a war of aggression against the newly sovereign BiH, which lasted from April 1992 to November 1995.² The majority Bosniak Muslim region of Podrinje on BiH's eastern border with Serbia was a special target of this campaign of violence. Here, Bosnian Serb forces unleashed a wave of terror and destruction, burning homes and villages, and forcing the residents to flee their homes. Refugees from across the region flocked to the small town of Srebrenica which was under the control of Bosnian forces.³ With a growing humanitarian crisis in the vastly overcrowded enclave, the UN Security Council declared Srebrenica a safe zone under the protection of the United Nations in April of 1993. UN Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) were dispatched to the enclave and set up their headquarters in a former battery factory in the nearby village of Potočari.⁴ This international presence, however, failed to prevent the worst crime on European soil since the Second World War: the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995.

On July 11th, 1995, Ratko Mladić led the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) into the UN Safe Zone of Srebrenica. In just over a week, Bosnian Serb forces deported over 25,000 Bosniak women, children, and elderly from Srebrenica, and systematically slaughtered over 8,372 Bosniak men and boys, many of whom are still missing. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, the VRS embarked on a sophisticated cover-up operation⁵ which entailed the burial, exhumation, and reburial of victims' remains in a wide network of primary, secondary, and even tertiary mass graves across eastern Bosnia. These are the facts which would be established in years to come by the world's most esteemed legal and investigative bodies. Both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined that the intent of the perpetrators and the scale of the crimes that took place in Srebrenica in July 1995 constituted genocide.

Nevertheless, systematic denial of the genocide in Srebrenica persists to this day. Often, the narratives of genocide deniers dispute the number of Bosniaks that were killed, the

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circumstances of their deaths, and their identities. Revisionists claim that the death toll from July 1995 is lower than half the figure of 8,372 which has been substantiated through DNA evidence and judicial investigations. They also argue that rather than being unarmed victims of systematic executions, those who did die in Srebrenica died as armed combatants in a military conflict, or of such causes as exhaustion. Attempting to delegitimize the court proceedings which confirmed these facts is yet another staple discourse in the denial of the Srebrenica genocide. In extreme – although not rare – cases, not only is the genocide denied, but it is also openly celebrated, with its main perpetrators celebrated idolized as heroes.

In order for the country to progress towards a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous future, the truth must be acknowledged and accepted. This truth includes not only the historical facts which have been thoroughly substantiated by international courts; it also includes the individual experiences and suffering of Srebrenica's survivors, for whom denial of the genocide is a perpetual source of emotional trauma and arguably, a continuation of the genocidal violence itself.

2. The Official Commemoration of the Events Organized in and Around Srebrenica During the Week of July 11th

In post-conflict societies, the commemoration of traumatic events is integral to a variety of rehabilitative social processes. However, in the absence of empathy and factual consensus, commemorative practices can also be maliciously hijacked for political purposes, used to promote divisive ideologies, and wielded to inflict harm. In this respect, the events organized in and around Srebrenica during the week July 11th offer a unique case study of the ways in which commemorative practices can be used to foster healing cultures of remembrance, but also, to sow dangerous cultures of division with portend to renewed violence.

POTOČARI: REMEMBERING THE VICTIMS OF THE SREBRENICA GENOCIDE

Around the world, July 11th becomes synonymous with the Srebrenica genocide. Every year, during the week of July 11th, the Srebrenica genocide is commemorated locally, domestically, and globally through a variety of practices. In Srebrenica itself, the annual commemorative program is localized and public – organized and led by genocide survivors and the relatives of victims, but also open to and attended by thousands from around the country and across the globe.

Since 2005, the three-day Peace March (*Marš Mira*) has marked the beginning of the official commemorative program. The march retraces the 110-kilometer (70 mile) route along which thousands of Bosnians fled Srebrenica in 1995 in the hopes of reaching the free territory of Tuzla, in what came to be called the Death March. Each year, thousands of individuals participate in the Peace March to honor the victims of the Srebrenica genocide, including survivors of the original Death March as well as supportive citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and foreigners from around the world. The March reaches its final destination, the Srebrenica Memorial Center in Potočari, on July 10th. Its arrival is preceded by a column

of motorcyclists who ride from across BiH to escort the column during the final leg of its journey and is greeted by an enthusiastic crowd lining the road outside the Memorial Center Cemetery, where the victims of the genocide – many of whom were killed along the route of the Death March itself – are buried.⁶

The official commemoration ceremony for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide takes place every year on July 11th. At this ceremony, the remains of the victims who have been found and identified over the course of the year are laid to rest in the cemetery of the Srebrenica Memorial Center in Potočari. This highly publicized event is attended by the victims' families as well as thousands of mourners from around the world who come to pay their respects to the genocide's victims. In addition to the funerary rites performed during this ceremony, the official commemoration program includes a number of other commemorative elements, including musical performances and temporary artistic exhibitions as well as conferences, panel discussions, and addresses dedicated to honoring Srebrenica's victims and the ongoing fight against revisionism and hatred.

BRATUNAC: CELEBRATING THE "DAY OF THE LIBERATION OF SREBRENICA"

During the same week in July that Srebrenica's victims are remembered and honored, competing events are organized by those who wish to promulgate an alternative narrative of the Srebrenica genocide. The most notable event takes place regularly in the neighboring town of Bratunac, where many of the victims of genocide were detained, tortured, and killed. On July 11th, at the same day of the annual collective funeral, extremist members of Bosnian Serb society gather to celebrate what they call "The Day of the Liberation of Srebrenica". In and of itself, this event represents an audacious and harmful act of historical revisionism which seeks to present the horrific July 1995 genocide as a military victory for Bosnian Serbs. The date July 11th, 1995, is thus commemorated by these nationalist elements as the day when "Srebrenica was liberated, and Serbs began returning to their looted and devastated apartments and destroyed property".⁷

At this event, Serbs from the Podrinje region gather not only in collective denial of the judicially established narrative of the Srebrenica genocide, but also in open celebration of the genocide's perpetrators as well as the end-result of the genocide itself: the murder and displacement of thousands of their neighbors. In recasting this atrocity as a watermark of Serb honor, the architects of the genocide are lauded as national heroes. Ratko Mladić – a convicted war criminal currently serving life in prison for genocide as well as numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity – is the most celebrated at this event, where his face can be seen on posters and other memorabilia.⁸

The Bratunac-based association Eastern Alternative plays an active role in the organization of this event, as well as sowing division and denial in the region year-round.⁹ Openly antagonizing the region's Bosniak population, most of whom are survivors of genocide or relatives of victims, this organization has led numerous initiatives in recent years to further the 'counter-commemoration' of the Srebrenica genocide, including placing plaques and propaganda glorifying the genocide's perpetrators in public space.

KRAVICA: MEMORIALIZING THE SERB VICTIMS OF THE “DEFENSIVE AND PATRIOTIC WAR”

On the afternoon of July 13th, 1995,¹⁰ members of the RS military and police forces trapped between 1,000 and 1,500 Bosniak men and boys in an agricultural warehouse in the village of Kravica. They proceeded to throw hand grenades and fire machine guns inside the warehouse, ultimately killing all those inside except for a lone survivor, who managed to escape. Today, however, visitors to Kravica, located just 15 kilometers from Srebrenica, will not find so much as a plaque commemorating the well over a thousand lives lost in here in one of the most horrific acts of the Srebrenica genocide. Since April 2022, the Municipality of Bratunac ordered desecration of the Kravica agricultural cooperative – the warehouse where this violence was committed. This destruction of the infrastructure of genocide plans to remove evidence of the killing of captured Bosniaks under the premise of further reconstruction of this agricultural space.¹¹

Additionally, not far down the road from this site of execution, is a large concrete cross – the central monument of the memorial to Serb “victims of the defensive and patriotic war and Serb victims of the Second World War from the Birač and Srednje Podrinje region of Republika Srpska.”¹² Built with the support of the regional branch of the Serb War Veterans Association, the monument was originally scheduled to be opened in August of 2002; however, the opening ceremony was officially moved to July 12th – one day after the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide – despite the fact that the alleged massacre with which the monument is most often associated is claimed to have been carried out on January 7th, 1993. Subsequently, Serbs have gathered at the cross on July 12th each year to commemorate some 3,500 Serb “defenders and civilians” from the region, who were supposedly killed during the war. This number is wholly unsubstantiated, as are the majority of the allegations regarding the circumstances of the purported killings.

The decision to reschedule the opening of the monument (and commemorative events around it in the years since), to July 12th, demonstrates that honoring Serb casualties is not at all the primary function of the memorial or its associated commemorative practices. Rather, it serves to undermine and contest the commemoration of genocide in Potočari, and to advance a negationist historical narrative in which the systematic slaughter of an unarmed civilian population is represented as a military victory – a “defensive” and “patriotic” act – to be celebrated, and its perpetrators, as “innocent” heroes who suffered “terrible torment.”¹³ In speaking about the memorial, Miloš Milovanović – former president of the local veterans’ association which commissioned the monument and commander of a paramilitary unit which participated in the Srebrenica genocide – has frequently disparaged the annual commemoration of the Bosniak victims in Potočari as “propaganda, created to portray the Serbian people in a bad light.” He claims that “the Muslims are lying and are manipulating the numbers and exaggerating what happened. Far more Serbs died in Srebrenica than Muslims”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the dual dedication of the monument to both the Serbs killed in the “defensive and patriotic war” of the 1990s and those killed in the Second World War is consistent with broader trends in Serbian historical revisionism.¹⁵

3. SMC & PCRC: Commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide Through the Practice of Civil Society Organizations

The Srebrenica Memorial Center (SMC) is at the forefront of commemorating the July 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, not only through the aforementioned annual commemoration on July 11th, but through a range of activities year-round which aim to memorialize the victims of the Srebrenica genocide as well as promote historical facts through exhibitions and educational resources. In close partnership with the SMC in these initiatives is the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC). PCRC is a Sarajevo based grassroots peace-building organization, which aims to give young people alternatives to the divisive narratives which continue to sow ethnic, religious, and nationalist divisions within the country and wider region. In their work, they focus on promoting the principles of human rights, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. In this way, they empower the young people of BiH to counteract the divisive nationalist rhetoric and self-serving political agendas which continue to impede this country's progress towards a more just and prosperous society.

Within this framework, coming to terms with the country's difficult history and combatting deleterious historical revisionism is central to PCRC's mission. For this reason, PCRC works closely with the Srebrenica Memorial Center to commemorate the Srebrenica genocide, but also other atrocities perpetrated in BiH, such as the Siege of Sarajevo¹⁶ and Tuzla Massacre¹⁷. One of the most important examples is the Srebrenica Youth School¹⁸ which PCRC began in 2020 to engage young people in the commemorative process and the fight against divisive narratives. The Srebrenica Youth School is a week-long educational event organized at the Srebrenica Memorial Center for young activists, artists, and students from across the Western Balkans and the world. The school's program includes multiple master classes, keynote speeches, and workshops designed to promote learning, dialogue, and critical thinking in the process of dealing with the past. Through a multifaceted and multimedia approach, PCRC seeks to educate young people on the judicially established facts of the Srebrenica genocide as well as impress upon them the consequences of mass violence and the need to prevent its reoccurrence. The Srebrenica Youth School fosters important skills which empower students to reject division and violence as well as build strong, inclusive communities which respect truth and value diversity.

In addition to the Srebrenica Youth School, PCRC has orchestrated a number of initiatives and exhibitions in partnership with the SMC to commemorate the Srebrenica genocide. PCRC has been especially instrumental in the implementation of the project "MEMENTO: Fragments of the Srebrenica Genocide," an oral history project and photography exhibition that showcases objects donated by Srebrenica genocide survivors and victims' families for permanent viewing and preservation at the Srebrenica Memorial Center. Each object is paired with a portrait of the person who donated it and a personal testimony detailing their life and their fight to survive during and after the Srebrenica genocide. The project consists of a photo exhibition, photobook, audio testimonies of survivors, and a mobile application.¹⁹ PCRC also designed and implemented the recent exhibition ABSENT HOME at the Memorial Center, which documents everyday life in Srebrenica and the greater Podrinje region through a visual representation of the consequences of genocide, including issues of return and reconstruction of family homes. The project includes an artistic installation, a documentary video, and a set of research and

advocacy tools created to facilitate dialogue around the need to work better and harder toward a more sustainable return of pre-war inhabitants and the reconstruction of their homes.²⁰

Additionally, in 2020, PCRC facilitated the permanent relocation of the participatory public monument ŠTO TE NEMA to Srebrenica. ŠTO TE NEMA was created by the artist Aida Šehović as a nomadic monument assembled every year on July 11th by volunteers and visitors in public spaces around the world. The temporary memorial consists of traditional Bosnian coffee cups (*fildžani*) which have been donated by genocide survivors and local families in and around Srebrenica. During the monument's assembly, each cup is filled with freshly brewed Bosnian coffee, and centrally placed as a symbolic reminder of the victims of genocide who will never again return to their families to partake in the important family custom of drinking coffee together. Beginning with just 932 cups in 2006, the ultimate goal of the project was to collect a total of 8,372 cups – one for each of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide – at which point, the monument would be permanently relocated to Srebrenica.²¹ With the help of PCRC in partnership with the SMC, this goal was achieved in 2020. On the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, ŠTO TE NEMA was assembled in front of the Memorial Center in its final iteration by PCRC team members, interns, and volunteers.²²

4. Lessons Learned

Examining the different ways this historical episode is remembered and commemorated in the neighboring communities of Potočari, Bratunac, and Kravica offers an instructive vignette of the dual-capacity of commemoration – it's potential to serve as a catalyst for psycho-social healing and renewal, but also, as a mechanism for the continuation of violence. The commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide in Potočari represents a variety of approaches, including those centered around art, education, and social practice; however, these diverse initiatives are all united in their common goals of providing solace and justice for the survivors of genocide as well as promoting truth, recognition, and peace in Bosnian and Herzegovinian society. Meanwhile, in the neighboring town of Bratunac the celebration of the “Day of the Liberation of Srebrenica” on July 11th epitomizes harmful commemoration practice. Rather than commemorating victims on either side of the conflict, this event functions exclusively to legitimize a political ideology and regime which is the scion of the very forces and structures responsible for the genocide of Bosniaks in the region in July of 1995. In nearby Kravica, similar commemorative events are organized on this same date, at the site of the memorial for the Bosnian Serb “victims of the defensive and patriotic war.” The memorial and commemorative activities in Kravica are specifically designed with the opposite intentions of promoting false and divisive narratives of the Srebrenica genocide.

5. Best Practice Examples

In the aftermath of political violence, there can be no meaningful progress towards dealing with the past or a shared culture of remembrance where the experiences of survivors go unrecognized and their voices unheard. Providing public space for survivors to share their past experiences as well as present concerns is essential not only to the individual rehabilitation of survivors themselves, but also for the forward progress of society. Amidst the numeric data and judicial rulings which characterize genocide research, it is imperative that the humanity and identity of those individuals with first-hand experience of genocide remain at the center of our understanding. Only through individual narratives can we begin to appreciate the enormity of the loss and human suffering which are the most devastating consequences of mass violence.

This effort is supported by a number of institutions and initiatives which aim to educate the public and encourage wider engagement with the factual narrative of the conflict at the local, regional, and global levels. For example, Gallery 11/07/95 offers a variety of educational tools to facilitate understanding of the genocide in Srebrenica.²³ “Mapping Genocide” is an interactive study of genocide comprised of maps which offer a detailed description of Srebrenica genocide through texts, drawings, photographs, and videos. Another example is the joint research project by PCRC and SMC, entitled “Genocide in Srebrenica through Legal Judgements”²⁴ which presents information from the legal investigations and judgments of international and domestic courts. The SENSE Agency’s interactive narrative “Srebrenica: Genocide in Eight Acts” similarly serves as a dynamic historical archive, which is comprised of eight segments, each containing a selection of court exhibits, including more than 200 key documents, video recordings, and photographs.²⁵

Art has unique potential as a medium to facilitate this kind of open and reconciliatory dialogue through its ability to approach difficult themes and emotions in a way that transcends ordinary boundaries of communication. Artistic representations of violence and human suffering create a space for reflection which is both cathartic and universal. Thus, by involving artists in their efforts to promote common understandings of history, institutions are more readily able to reach elements of society which might otherwise be reluctant to engage with these difficult and contentious topics. Successful examples in this context include Gallery 11/07/95 which includes photographs, testimonies, and a film library depicting the lives and suffering of the survivors of the Srebrenica genocide. Additionally, the collaborative project “Ab Uno Disce Omnes,” which employs different media to link science and art, shedding light on the process identifying Srebrenica’s victims.²⁶

Ultimately, all of this work to create the foundations for a shared culture of remembrance around the genocide in Srebrenica is carried out with the aim of preventing future violence. With regard to this underlying objective, approaches which engage young people are perhaps the most critical. With by far the most to lose from the continuation of the present political and social climate, young people are society’s best hope for bringing about meaningful change in the form of a shared culture of memory and inclusive national identity. This is exactly what the Post-Conflict Research Center aims to achieve with its annual Srebrenica Youth School²⁷ and Peace Festival²⁸ events, which empower young people to initiate positive change for a better future and take part in building a society characterized by equal opportunity, without prejudice. Amidst the rise of divisive ethno-nationalist narratives, these initiatives aim to promote empathy and truth-telling among young people while nurturing their unique capacity as peacebuilders and problem solvers in order to strengthen the democratic and inclusive values of our society.

6. Recommendations

The Post-Conflict Research Center is committed to finding innovative strategies to combat the pernicious forces of denial and division behind the commemorations in Bratunac and Kravica which continue to inflict tremendous harm on Bosnian society. Based on this institutional experience, PCRC makes the following recommendations for commemorative practice and mitigating strategies to promote lasting peace in post conflict societies:

- Commemorative practices should emphasize the individual identities of victims in order to provide greater solace to their surviving loved ones and avoid reducing the toll of the violence to mere statistics.
- Survivor narratives of mass violence should be at the center of commemorative work. It is not until the experiences of these individuals are acknowledged that society can progress, and justice be realized. Furthermore, their stories singularly communicate the realities and human cost of conflict, as well as provide valuable insights into human resilience.
- A facts-based approach is also essential to commemorative practices in divided societies. This includes creating an environment where truth is respected as separate and superior to political ideologies, and where destructive revisionist narratives are widely condemned. Establishing a factual consensus is the first step to establishing the moral consensus necessary to put an end to the celebration of violence and glorification of perpetrators.
- Commemorative activities should emphasize inclusivity and collective healing, abstaining from practices such as collectivizing blame and celebrating enemy losses as military victories. In order to achieve progress and lasting peace in post-conflict societies, it is necessary to acknowledge the full extent of human suffering, to identify the individuals and structures responsible for this suffering, and to move forward with inclusive identities which allow space for diversity, solidarity, and remorse.
- Initiatives should recognize the uniquely cathartic and unifying potential of art, by collaborating with artists and incorporating a diverse array of artistic mediums into their commemorative practices.
- Innovative and multi-media approaches should be employed in order to effectively reach the widest possible audience. This entails utilizing modern technology and innovative mediums as means of truth-telling and commemoration, in order to ensure the relevance and efficacy of commemorative initiatives in the contemporary context.
- Engaging young people, as the future of the nation, is paramount to all commemorative and peacebuilding activities in post-conflict environments. This can be achieved in formal educational settings – including through curriculum, classroom initiatives, and teacher training – as well as informal education and institutional work which engages young people on the topics of human rights, dealing with the past, peacebuilding, and transitional justice. Youth centric commemorative and peacebuilding practices should focus on encouraging critical thinking and inter-group dialogue, as well as fostering capacities to identify, respond to, and prevent atrocities.

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