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## Memory after Ethnic Cleansing: Victims' and Perpetrators' Narratives in Prijedor<sup>1</sup>

Although war crime courts have compiled ample evidence about the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs organised by Serbian forces in the municipality of Prijedor at the beginning of the 1992–95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the criminal events are still remembered in thoroughly different ways by the victims' and perpetrators' communities. This paper reconstructs the trajectory of war memorialisation through commemorations organised by both victims' groups and local Serb officials. While the victims generally agree with the narrative of the ICTY, the Serb officials deny the systematic persecution of non-Serbs. Though both historical narratives have altered slightly over time, this resulted from the interaction between the two memory cultures, rather than the court judgements.

Keywords: ethnic cleansing, war, Bosnia and Herzegovina, collective memory, commemorations, mnemonic community, ICTY

### Spomin po etničnem čiščenju: narativa žrtev in storilcev v Prijedoru

*Čeprav imajo sodišča za vojne zločine zbrano obsežno dokazno gradivo o etničnem čiščenju Nesrbov, ki so ga v občini Prijedor na začetku vojne v Bosni in Hercegovini (1992–1995) izvajale srbske sile, se skupnosti žrtev in storilcev v mestu zločinskih dogodkov še vedno spominjajo popolnoma različno. Članek rekonstruira pot memorializacije vojnih dogodkov na podlagi analize komemoracij, ki so jih priredili tako skupnosti žrtev kot srbski krajevni občinski uradniki. Medtem ko se žrtve na splošno strinjajo z narativom v sodbah, srbski uradniki večidel zanikajo sistematično preganjanje Nesrbov. Čeprav sta se zgodovinska narativa obeh strani s časom malce spremenila, je to prej posledica interakcije med obema kulturama spominjanja kot razsodb sodišč.*

*Ključne besede: etnično čiščenje, vojna, Bosna in Hercegovina, kolektivni spomin, komemoracije, mnemonična skupnost, ICTY*

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## 1. Introduction

Prijedor, a provincial town in north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), became known worldwide for the camps where Serb forces held local non-Serbs captive in the early stages of the 1992–95 war in BiH. In fact, it was the divulging of the camps' existence and inhumane conditions in which the inmates were kept, revealed by a group of international journalists, which caused public outrage in Western societies, eventually leading to the establishment of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)<sup>2</sup> (Scharf 1997). Though the Tribunal in The Hague and the War Crimes Chamber of the Court of BiH convicted 28 individuals so far, creating a detailed account of the events in Prijedor, conflicting interpretations exist among the local public. The officials of Prijedor Municipality, dominated by Serbs, avoid acknowledging the systematic persecution of non-Serbs during the war, while the members of the victims' ethnic groups generally agree with the findings of the courts. However, both victims' and Serbian official narratives have altered slightly over time, as the analysis below demonstrates. In the following sections, I systematically examine the interaction of these conflicting memories within Prijedor's "commemorative arena" (Duijzings 2007).

The dominant paradigm within the memory studies discipline holds that the "content" of collective memory comes out of the process of social interaction (Olick 2003, 6). Thus the content of memory, as a repository of narratives about the past, changes over time, since new meanings are added to previous memories (Olick & Robbins 1998; Jurić Pahor 2007). As collective memory is an intra-group process, it unites the remembering collective or mnemonic community (Zerubavel 2003, 4). By engaging in mnemonic practices, an individual confirms and "practices" his/her belonging to the community, and by constant repetition of this process the lines of the community are demarcated. Thus the collective memory is intrinsically connected to and an indispensable part of any conception of collective identity. While those in a hegemonic position design what is usually called the "official memory", a group that feels excluded or alienated from the official stance may become cohesive enough to "mobilise its counter-memories into an oppositional narrative" (Ashplant et al. 2004, 21). In this way the shared memories function as differentiation makers between social groups (Olick & Robbins 1998, 111).

I chose to analyse commemorations following Connerton's suggestion that "if there is such a thing as social memory, we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies" (1989, 71). I was guided by the analytical framework which differentiates commemorations by examining which social group, through which institution (such as an official body or civil society organisation) promotes which particular narrative, addressed to which arena (such as the local community or the transnational public) (Ashplant et al. 2004, 16–17).

In order to reconstruct the pattern of memorialisation, I searched through both Serbian and Bosniak media,<sup>3</sup> predominantly newspapers, on the particular memorial days from 1996 until today, collecting a representative sample of 124 news-items. The articles were examined with a twofold aim: to collect factual information on commemorative practices, and to reconstruct what historical narratives the “commemorative entrepreneurs” promoted. In analysing the narratives as presented in media reports, I applied method of media frame analysis (Scheufele 1999), focusing on several key elements: the naming and labelling of the events, actors and places; the “emplotment”, or how elements are given meaning through their integration into a narrative plot (Ricoeur 1984); and how the narratives allot guilt and responsibility to the actors. The analysis made on the basis of newspaper articles was complemented with interviews with the organisers of the victims’ commemorations and observations made upon the visit to memorial sites.

## 2. Adjudicated Narrative of the Events

In the following section, I present the narrative of the events that unfolded in Prijedor in the spring and summer of 1992, as adjudicated by the ICTY. The narratives of the observed judgements generally concur, with differences appearing only at the level of details.

The outcome of the first multi-party elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in late 1990) were “little more than a reflection of an ethnic census of the population” (ICTY 1997, §64), meaning that the major parties were ethnically defined. In the case of Prijedor it resulted with the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) dominated party winning a narrow margin over the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS).

In the situation when Slovenia and Croatia had gained independence in 1991, Bosniak and Croatian representatives in Bosnia opted for separation from the rump Yugoslavia, while the Bosnian-Serb party opposed it. The SDS, led by Radovan Karadžić, claimed to have the right to secede what they perceived as “Serbian” territories of BiH and to incorporate them into a country that would gather all Serbs in one state – Greater Serbia. The SDS claimed as “Serbian” not only the municipalities where Serbs constituted the largest group, but also those where they would have been in the majority had there not been genocide against Serbs in the Second World War. Prijedor fell into the second category. As BiH independence became imminent, the SDS, supported by military forces from Serbia, began establishing physical and political control over the municipalities where it had not already gained control by virtue of elections (ibid., §101). Through a well-organised campaign, the Serb forces swiftly took over power in Prijedor on the April 30, 1992, facing no resistance (ibid., §137). Non-Serbs<sup>4</sup> were forced to leave prominent positions in public institutions and the economy, they were fired from their jobs, their children were barred from schools, and

they were prevented from travelling outside the municipality (ibid., §150). In subsequent weeks, the Serb forces attacked Bosniak-dominated villages within the municipality, where self-defence has been organised (ibid., §139–144), and the villagers were captured: the men were generally taken to the Omarska and Keraterm camps and the women to the Trnopolje camp.

On the May 30 “a small group of poorly armed non-Serbs /unsuccessfully attempted/ to regain control of the town of Prijedor” (ibid., §151). The resistance was swiftly crushed by the Serb forces. The non-Serbs were then ordered by radio to mark their homes with white sheets thus indicating their surrender, and were subsequently systematically taken to the camps. “After the cleansing of Prijedor any remaining non-Serbs were required to wear white armbands to distinguish themselves” and their “disappearance became an every-day experience” (ibid.).

Officially, the Omarska and Keraterm camps were “provisional collection centre[s] [*sabiralište*] for persons captured in combat or detained on the grounds of the Security Services’ operational information” (ICTY 2001, §17). All the staff involved in the running of the camps were strictly forbidden to provide any information about them.

The Omarska camp was located inside the Ljubija iron-ore mine, and held around 3,000 prisoners at one time, primarily men, but also 36 to 38 women (ICTY 1997, §155). The conditions at the camp were atrocious: the prisoners were held in large numbers in very confined spaces which were kept enclosed even in the summer heat; they received only one poor meal a day (on the way to which they were beaten), were often denied or given faulty water and were restricted in the way of lavatories (ibid., §157–161). Not only were the detainees kept in inhumane conditions, but “an atmosphere of extreme mental and physical violence pervaded the camp” (ICTY 2001, §45). Prisoners were called out for interrogations, during which they were ruthlessly beaten and abused (ICTY 1997, §163). In the evenings, groups outside of the camp were free to engage in sessions of brutal violence against the inmates and rape of women. A separate small “white house” was “a place of particular horror” (ibid., §166), which was “reserved for especially brutal treatment of selected prisoners,” often ending in murder (ibid., §156). The situation in the Keraterm camp, a ceramic factory at the outskirts of Prijedor, was even worse (ibid., §168–170).

The Trnopolje camp was designated for women, children and older men, situated in a former school building and local cultural centre of the hamlet. It was “at times at least, an open prison,” and actually served as a gathering centre for civilians who were to be deported (ICTY 1997, §176). The conditions were insanitary, inmates were forced to camp outdoors in makeshift shelters, and hunger and dysentery were constant (ibid., §177). The Serb soldiers informed the inmates “that they were being held there for their own protection against Bosniaks extremists” (ibid.). There were no organised interrogations in the

camp, but beating and killings did occur, as well as regular rapes, including that of young girls (ibid., §175).

By September 1992 the Serb officials had closed the camps: the majority of the inmates were deported to other parts of Bosnia (outside Serb control) or to third countries, while many men were summarily executed. The approximate number of overall death toll of non-Serbs is close to 3,900 (Tokača 2012, 179).

### 3. Commemorations in Prijedor

By the delineation created by the Dayton Peace Agreement, Prijedor remained part of the Serb dominated entity<sup>5</sup> – the Republika Srpska – allowing continuity of political institutions in the municipality. The Serb leaders maintained the war-time official position that the camps were actually

collection centres [*sabirni centri*] which assisted in the transportation of the inhabitants who did not recognise the [Serb] local government, and due to their lack of loyalty to it asked for resettlement to other countries, which in the context of armed conflict demanded a special arrangement for their transport (Jović 2001, 24).

In addition, they completely obliterated from the public memory the systematic campaign of discrimination and persecution of non-Serbs, to which the camps were only the functional element. Since virtually all non-Serbs were effectively “cleansed” from the Prijedor municipality, immediately after the war there was nobody to remember the Prijedor camps at the sites where they operated.

The emergence of victims’ commemorations is directly connected to refugee return. While the first visits of Bosniak refugees were obstructed (Kahrimanović 2006, 11), the coming into the power of a less nationalistic political option in Prijedor changed the policy regarding their return (Sirječić 2004, 38). By the early 2000s Prijedor was often cited as an example of good practice regarding refugee return (Maričić 2004c, 10) and was perceived by foreign diplomats as an example of multi-ethnic peaceful coexistence (Maričić 2004b, 2). Nevertheless, beneath this seemingly peace-building success story lay deep divisions regarding perceptions of the recent past.

#### 3.1 The Pattern of Victims’ Commemorations

The first commemorations organised by victims took place in 2003. Since then, commemorative events grew in number, forming a yearly repetitive pattern. Put in chronological order, they narrate the victims’ perspective of the events in Prijedor: the May 24, the attack on the Bosniak villages and opening of the Trnopolje camp; the July 21, the especially brutal massacre of men in Keraterm camp; August 6, the day when British journalists visited the Omarska camp, which led to its



closure; and August 21, the execution of the detainees who had been transported from the camps at a mountain cliff. All of these commemorations are organised by victims' families and former detainees, with no institutional support. Outside the commemorative days, apart from the withered flowers there are few physical reminders at these sites – Bosniak victims' memories were (and largely remained) "invisible" in the region of Prijedor.

I will base my analysis of victims' narratives on the example of the most prominent and the largest commemorations organised by the victims' community – the one at the site of the Omarska camp. On these occasions, the organisers would lay wreaths in front of the "white house", the place where the most severe tortures and killings took place, while survivors (and occasionally peace activists) would make speeches. Compared to many other commemorations, it stands out since no high profile religious or political representatives are present. The praying of the Al-Fatiha is individual or in smaller groups, and is neither collective nor organised by the Islamic community (unlike at many other commemorations). The event has never had a stamp of an official institution and no national or ethnic symbols are present. Only on three occasions have Bosniak and Croat members of the state Presidium been present, but they have made no political speeches. The only representatives of the Prijedor institutions are the local Bosniak politicians, one of whom was a former detainee himself. No prominent Serbian politician has ever attended. Therefore, this and all other "Bosniak" commemorations in Prijedor are genuinely grassroots affairs. In addition, they are predominantly financed through the private donations of the former inhabitants of the region, who are scattered around the world by the war, and themselves apparently will never return.

It should be noted that Prijedor is geographically outside the entity where the Bosniaks are in the majority – the Federation of BiH. In practice, this means that the Bosniak victims have had no institution in their municipality or entity that would be sensitive to their need for memorialisation. Differently from the Srebrenica memorial ceremony, where the international community has fully supervised a memorial to Bosniak victims within the Serb-dominated entity (Duijzings 2007), there was no such "memorial intervention" in the case of Prijedor.

### 3.2 The Victims' Narrative

The victims describe Omarska camp as a site of extermination, drawing symbolical historical parallels. They name it "the first concentration camp [*koncentracioni logor*] in Europe after the Second World War" (Katana 2010, 2) and "a factory of death" (*Dnevni avaz* 2006, 3). Bosniak journalists have compared it to Auschwitz (Katana 2009, 3) and the Holocaust (Ahmetašević 2004, 35).

The aim of the camp is described as the imprisonment and liquidation of individuals simply because of their ethnicity. As one of the female interns stated:

“nobody could mistakenly think that Omarska was just a badly run prison. It was a criminal enterprise, which deliberately functioned with the aim of destroying the minds, bodies and souls of the people who were held captive” (Zgonjanin 2005, 3). Reading Bosniak newspapers and magazines, one is hardly able to understand that the two camps (Omarska and Keraterm) were formally established as “interrogation centres” (ICTY 2001, §17), as claimed by war-time Serb officials.

A significant part of the victims’ narratives is the participation of the local Serb population in the crimes, and the general “silent approval” the Serb public gave to the persecution of non-Serbs. They often remarked that local population must know where the remaining mass graves are. The victims also drew attention to the fact that many of the direct perpetrators still have not been prosecuted and are employed in the police and security forces; while many war-time officials, including the members of the Prijedor Crisis Staff which founded the camps, still hold prominent public positions.

Drawing from longitudinal media reporting, one can observe how the persecution of the non-Serbs has been framed in various ways. It was initially Bosniak (and international) journalists and commentators who named the events in Prijedor as “ethnic cleansing”, “extermination” and “genocide”. The narrative of the detainees who survived focused primarily on their suffering in the camp, the ruthless behaviour of the guards and the brutality of the tortures which they endured. Sometimes they narrated about the systematic discrimination of non-Serbs in Prijedor, such as harassment and dismissal from work. Occasionally, they would frame Serbian conduct as “pure fascism”.

In reporting about the events related to Prijedor, Bosniak media often reproduce photographs of emaciated detainees that foreign journalists took upon their visits to the camps in August 1992. This sent a subliminal message, drawing parallels to the well-known images from the Nazi concentration camps. For comparison, among 74 articles in the only Serbian newspaper that reports on the commemorations (*Nezavisne novine*), there is not a single photograph from 1992.

### 3.3 Denying While Acknowledging

In the period immediately after the war, the best way to describe the reaction of the local Serb officials to any initiative to remember the fate of non-Serbs in Prijedor is “offensive denial”. For instance, in 1996 a group of international peace activists wanted to visit a humanitarian organisation in Prijedor and plant a “tree of peace”. Upon the call by mayor Milomir Stakić, on the local radio, “to prevent the visit of Bosniak fundamentalists”, some local Serbs violently attacked the group, while the local (Serb) police did not react (Tabaković 1996, 8). At that time, the mayor was the same as the one who established the camps in 1992, and who was eventually convicted before the ICTY to a 40-year sentence.

However, over time the denial changed from an “offensive” to a more passive one. Since the start of his mandate in 2003, the incumbent mayor, Marko Pavić, constantly navigated his position between formally acknowledging the camps’ existence, and actually denying the systematic persecution and killing of the non-Serbs in the Prijedor municipality. This is reflected in his reactions to the many appeals to turn the “white house” in Omarska into a memorial, for which his authorisation is needed. While generally supporting the idea that everybody has a right to commemorate, he asserted that the creation of the memorial would disturb otherwise the good multi-ethnic relations and the high ratio of returning refugees (Kovačević 2005b, 6), implying that a memorial to Bosniak victims would “hurt Serbs’ feelings”. He opposed the creation of an Omarska memorial made in a civil petition (cf. K. 2005, 5), which was quite cynical given that no such decision was made when memorials dedicated to Serbs were erected. Furthermore, the Municipality sponsored memorials of this kind (M. 2002, 5). At the same time, he protested that a memorial to Serbs killed in Sarajevo has not been erected and stating that this was a condition for the construction of an Omarska Bosniak memorial (cf. Keulemans 2007, 31).

Aside from the political games regarding the memorial, mayor Pavić has avoided openly speaking about the camps. Once he responded to a foreign journalist: “You and I don’t know what happened in Omarska and Trnopolje. I wasn’t there, and neither were you. /.../ Until it is established who are the perpetrators and who are the victims, the people in Omarska do not want memorial centre. Only after the history is established may the place be marked” (ibid.). By that date, however, twelve individuals had been convicted before the ICTY, and five of them had pleaded guilty. Several trials have come to closure since then, but they did not alter the mayor’s position. It should be also noted that the incumbent mayor was the war-time head of the local postal service, which financially helped the Serb take-over of the municipality (ibid.); hence, his claim of not knowing what had happened in the camps is more than dubious.

The complexity of the clash between the Bosniak victims’ and Serbian official perception of the past is better understood when we examine the deeper layers of collective memory. May 9, the Day of Victory against Fascism, is one of the rare holidays that is celebrated in both entities of BiH.<sup>6</sup> However, the date has been additionally commemorated as Detainees’ Day [*Dan logoraša*] in the Federation of BiH, making a symbolical connection between the fascism of the Second World War with the “Serbian fascism” of the 1990s. Hence, for the former detainees, this is one more temporal *lieu de mémoire* on which they have regularly visited the sites of the Prijedor camps. For mayor Pavić this was “political provocation” since he regarded as offensive the parallel between the two fascisms (B. 2011, 8).



### 3.4 The Serb Commemorations in Prijedor

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The day when the SDS took over the local government and declared the “Serbian municipality of Prijedor”, April 30, has been celebrated as Prijedor Municipality Day from 1993 to 2003. For instance in 1997, “Prijedor’s Liberation Day”, as it was then named, was marked with a commemorative Mass to the “fallen soldiers of the fatherland wars” and the laying of wreaths to both the Serbian soldiers from the last war and the Partisans from the Second World War. At the commemorative ceremony in the local parliament, Milomir Stakić recalled the day “when Serbian rule was established without spilling a drop of blood” (D. 1997, 4). Therefore, during and immediately after the war the local Serbs regarded April 30 as the day they should be proud of. After mayor Stakić was indicted, the celebrations were less lavish, but still the Municipality invested more than 50,000 € to build a memorial in the city centre dedicated to the fallen Serbian soldiers (M. 2002, 5).

In March 2003 Bosniak members of the local parliament initiated the change of the official holiday, arguing that April 30 was the day when “democracy was torn down and when persecution, torture and killing of Bosniaks and Croats started” (Kovačević 2005a, 11). Eventually, the issue ended up before the Constitutional Court of Republika Srpska, which ordered the date to be changed since it was discriminatory, not representing all three “constituent nations” – that is Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs (Z. 2005, 14). Bosniak representatives suggested that the pre-war official holiday – May 16, the Day of liberation of Prijedor from fascist occupation in 1942 – should be re-enacted (Maričić 2004a, 12). That year local Bosniaks organised an unofficial commemoration in front of the monument to local partisan heroes, thus claiming the inheritance of the heroic Partisan anti-fascist tradition.

For a few years Prijedor did not have a public holiday, until May 16 was re-enacted as an official holiday in 2006. Though Serbian politicians were otherwise practising the (re)memorialisation of the (Serbs’) suffering during the Second World War, it seems that in this particular case they were reluctant to adopt an old anti-fascist holiday just because the initiative came from Bosniaks, but even more so, because it annulled the memorial culture they had created since 1992. Mayor Marko Pavić gave a reconciliatory tone to the first old-new commemoration by stating that “as in the years before the last war, we are again gathered in freedom, peace [and] unity” (K. 2006, 12). Nevertheless, the pattern of the commemoration sent another message: by laying wreaths to both Partisan and Serbian fallen soldiers, the local officials again turned a presumably non-national common commemoration into an exclusively Serbian one.

Here some contextual background is needed. The region beneath the Kozara Mountain, where Prijedor is situated, bears strong traces of the Second World War trauma (cf. MacDonald 2002, chapter 5). Here, the Serbian population was

forced into a mass exodus, and many of them perished in the nearby Jasenovac concentration camp, the largest place of extermination within the quisling Independent State of Croatia. While the official history in Tito's Yugoslavia narrated this persecution in the framework of the Partisan anti-fascist struggle (Karge 2009), the Serb nationalistic narrative framed it in ethnic terms, as a genocide against Serbs (Marković et al. 2004). Indeed, the Serb population massively supported and participated in the Partisan forces (Hoare 2011), and contemporary Serb officials have a fully legitimate right to remember it. However, by commemoratively tying the Partisan forces to the Serbian Army from the last war, they not only piggyback on the glorious tradition of the Partisans, they also attach to them the meaning of Serbian freedom-fighters. Hence the Serbian narrative understands anti-fascism as a predominantly (Serbian) national, not an ideological (anational) project.

The same year when the old/new municipal public holiday was enacted, the local Serb Organisation of the Families of the Interned and Fallen Soldiers and Missing Civilians, together with the local Serb veterans, started memorializing May 30 as the "defence of Prijedor" from the attack of Bosniak paramilitaries – the "Green Berets" (*Nezavisne novine* 2006, 14). Though it is not an official holiday, the mayor and a range of higher political officials regularly attend this event, giving it prominence. This is a perfect example of an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm 1992), never celebrated beforehand and obviously created as a substitute for the earlier day of Prijedor's "liberation" in 1992. The organizers of the commemoration saw it as a reminder "that other ethnicities in Prijedor also possessed an army," which supported certain political goals (*Nezavisne novine* 2006, 14). Therefore the narrative frames the events in Prijedor as a civil war between equal armies which had conflicting political aims. Even more, the narrative clearly blames Bosniaks for starting the conflict, and implicitly justifies the Serbian conduct afterwards, as in the words of the Serb victims' representative: "the first gunshot demanded an identical reply and the tragedy unfolded" (Bulić 2008). Though the Serbian crimes remain unmentioned, they are nevertheless excused: "Bosniaks have to take responsibility that they, consciously or not, in practice started the spiral of violence that continued from then on," as a member of the RS Government stated at one of the commemorations (*Glas Srpske* 2012). Here the narrative emplotment tries to imply that the Green Berets' attack caused the subsequent Serb violence. In other words, it implies that the establishment of the camps was the consequence of Bosniak conduct, as if Bosniaks brought their fate on themselves. This interpretation of events obviously contradicts the narrative of the ICTY judgements, as a representative of the Bosniak victims noted: "by May 30 the three death camps have been already up and running, while Bosniak towns / ... / were already razed" (Kovačević 2009, 9).

In addition, by laying wreaths to the "defenders of Prijedor" and the Partisan heroes on May 30, the Serb officials put the local Bosniaks (Green Berets) from

the last war, and the Ustasha fascists from the Second World War, in the same cohort of enemies, building a “continuum of Serb suffering” in the collective memory. This historical parallelism helps Serb representatives reject the narrative of ethnic cleansing policy from the 1990s, as adjudicated by the ICTY and supported by the victims.

### 3.5 The White Armbands

Generally there have been no changes in the victims’ narratives about the Prijedor events. However, over the years of constant appeals for the acknowledgement of the crimes that happened to them, Bosniak victims been transformed into engaged activists. For the victims it was essential to prove not only that they suffered in the camps, but also that it was a part of a systematic campaign of persecution with genocidal aims. The victims’ associations therefore planned a series of commemorative events in 2012 under the title “Genocide in Prijedor – 20 years” (Padalović 2012). Mayor Marko Pavić refused to give consent to the public events unless the word “genocide” was erased from the tile of the commemorations (ibid.). As a sign of protest, one of the activists (whose father and brother were both killed in Omarska) silently stood on Prijedor’s main square with a white ribbon tied around his arm. The white armband harks back to the order (immediately after crushing of the non-Serb resistance) issued on Radio Prijedor that Bosniaks hang white cloths on their houses and wear white armbands in order to distinguish themselves and declare their surrender, as narrated in several judgements (ICTY 1997, §151; ICTY 2001, §14).

The “White Armband” initiative proved to be very self-conscious. In their proclamation they declared that the act of Serbian officials in 1992 “was the first time since 1939, when Nazis ordered Polish Jews to wear yellow armbands with the David star, that the members of certain ethnic group were marked for extermination in such a way” (Katana 2013, 5). By making a historical parallel to the Holocaust, they supported their claim that the events in Prijedor should be entitled genocide.

Further, the organisations initiated a global campaign to wear white armbands on May 31 as a sign of solidarity with the discriminated victims of Prijedor and in a protest against genocide denial. That year and the next, civil and peace activists from the region, and around the world, responded to the appeal by publicly wearing the armbands, photographing themselves and posting it on social networks. In Bosnia, generally only the population in the Federation of BiH responded, while citizens of Prijedor generally ignored the whole affair (ibid.). Still, it should be noted that a few brave activists (ethnic Serbs, for that matter) from the town joined the civic initiative “Because it concerns me” [*Jer me se tiče*] (Oslobođenje 2013), as well as several human rights organisations across the Republika Srpska.

Despite the formal ban, the initiative managed to organise several commemorative performances that year and the next. For instance, the day before the Omarska commemoration, the activists silently walked across Prijedor's centre holding schoolbags with names of 102 children who were killed in the municipality, after which they formed a large word 'genocide' with the schoolbags laid on the pavement (Arnautović 2012). Similarly, on another occasion they laid 266 white body-bags used for exhumed human remains with the names of 266 women and girls who had been killed (Katana 2013, 5). After realising that they were unable to forbid these public performances, local officials decided to ignore the events. Upon a journalist's request for a comment on White Armband Day, Mayor Pavić commented that it is "yet another gay parade" (*Nezavisne novine* 2013), obviously considering it to be unfounded political exhibitionism.

These events were the first occasions when the victims' narratives were physically present in the town of Prijedor. Previously, the victims' commemorations took place for the most part away from the public eye, especially that of the local Serb public: the Omarska mine complex is outside the Omarska village; Keraterm is in the Prijedor outskirts; Korićani Cliffs are in the wilderness of the Mountain Vlašić; while the commemoration in Trnopolje is held at the centre of the village, but the settlement is small and secluded. It is in these ways that the White Armband initiative tries to pierce the omnipresent silence about, and avoidance of, those victimised by the Serbs in Prijedor.

## 4. Conclusion

When we analyse conflicting narratives about the past in Prijedor, we may observe how they both deviate from the narrative of the ICTY judgements, though in quite different directions and scope. The judgements leave no room for suspicion that the take-over of the Prijedor municipality, the subsequent military activity and formation of the camps was anything but part of a well-conceived plan that aimed at the ethnic cleansing of the Prijedor area. However, though several indictments charged individuals with complicity in genocide, thus far no judicial panel has found proof that what happened in Prijedor fits the legal definition of genocide. It remains to be seen what will be the judges' decisions on this question at the end of the trials of the political and military leaders of the Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić.

On the one hand, the narrative of the Serbian officials consistently denies or ignores the fact that the policy of persecution against non-Serbs did take place. Where the narrative admits that some criminal events did occur in the Prijedor camps, they are framed as reactions to the armed attack of local Bosniaks, hence as defensive measures.

On the other hand, in the Bosniak victims' narrative, the accusation of ethnic cleansing by the Serbian side is often intertwined with blame for committing

genocide. The two are perceived as different stages within the same continuum, as if ethnic cleansing is a “milder” form of genocide. The two are however similar, but not insignificantly different types of crimes. Both ethnic cleansing and genocide may involve the same criminal acts, such as murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, imprisonment, torture, rape and persecutions on political, racial and religious grounds. Nevertheless, genocide is aimed at destroying the unwanted group as such (ICTY 2009, Article 4, §2), while ethnic cleansing targets “superfluous” individuals with the aim of purging them from a territory (Lieberman 2006). This would be an irrelevant legal detail, had not the term “genocide” obtained emotionally potent symbolism (cf. Cushman 2004). In the legacy of international Holocaust memorialisation (Rothberg 2009) genocide became “the crime of crimes”, creating the impression that other types of crime are somehow a “lesser evil”. Therefore, not even those victims who generally support the ICTY narrative, agree fully with the judgements.

Certain variations in the narrative are, however, noticeable over time. Immediately after the war the Serbian narrative celebrated the take-over of the municipality as a victorious event; subsequently the Serbian officials, at least declaratively, admitted that crimes did take place in the camps (by recognising victims’ right to a memorial); and finally, the narrative turned back to legitimising Serb war-conduct, not as a victory, but as a necessary defence in the civil war situation. Nevertheless, the constant feature of Serbian interpretations is that all of them deny the systematic persecution of non-Serbs in the municipality. Maybe precisely this constant denial has led victims’ associations to increase their insistence that the camps were only part of the systematic policy of discrimination, which was fascist in nature, and acquired a genocidal aim. Therefore, it seems that changes in the narratives are the outcome of their mutual interaction, rather than a result of the ICTY judgements. Still, the two positions towards the court’s narrative – the victims’ insistence on a certain interpretation (genocide) of the crime and the almost complete lack of acknowledgement that the crime of persecution did take place – stand on different moral grounds. While the former is a matter of interpretative nuance, the later is a matter of denying proven facts about the crimes.

The discipline of memory studies devotes major attention to the influence of social interactions within a mnemonic community on the (re)creation of the “content” of the collective memory. While the usual approach focuses on the divisions between the “official” and “oppositional” or “counter memory”, this paper focuses on their mutual interaction. It finds that the dialogue between the “dominant” and the “dominated” memories affects the content of the both memorial narratives, invariably of their different hierarchical positions.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is an abbreviated part of the doctoral thesis "Public Narratives of the Past in the Framework of Transitional Justice Processes: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", which will be defended at the Faculty of Social Sciences (FDV), Ljubljana, as part of a junior doctoral fellowship funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS).
- <sup>2</sup> The official title of the institution is the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991; however, the shorter version is internationally accepted.
- <sup>3</sup> International and local analysts agree that the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina is ethnically fragmented (cf. IREX 2001; IREX 2013), meaning that the media have an evident ethnic prejudice or rather a clear ethnically profiled audience.
- <sup>4</sup> The discriminatory measures targeted all non-Serbs which, in the municipality of Prijedor, were predominantly Bosniaks.
- <sup>5</sup> The term "entity" is used here and below for both the quasi-independent political units of Republika Srpska and the Federation of BiH, which together constitute BiH as a state.
- <sup>6</sup> The state of BiH does not have law on public holidays, due a lack of consensus over the issue as to which days should be celebrated (Bošković 2011). Instead each entity celebrates its own holidays, reflecting conflicting perceptions of the past and concepts of statehood.
- <sup>7</sup> In Serbian (and not only Serbian) discourse nationalist sentiments are strongly connected with homophobic attitudes (Stakić 2011). In such a setting, naming an event "gay parade" conveys the intention of putting it in a negative context.

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