

# “Nothing Much Has Happened Here”: Memory, Denial, and Identity Among Postwar Youth in Republika Srpska

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## Abstract

*Twenty-five years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the memory of the conflict still constitutes a contested arena in which ethnonational movements build narratives of belonging and to legitimize their political projects of nation-building. This article draws on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the municipality of Gradiška, a Bosnian town administratively located in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-aligned entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The article discusses the role that different strategies of denial carried out by RS institutions play in the relationship young adults have with the past and constructing their individual and collective identities.*

**Keywords:** Bosnia & Herzegovina; Republika Srpska; postwar identity; youth; memory; denial

## Introduction

This article investigates how *postwar youth* living in the municipality of Gradiška<sup>1</sup> engage with the narratives of denial promoted by the institutions of Republika Srpska (RS)—the ethnically Serb-aligned entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Initially understood as a mere political tactic used by members of the Serb elite to reject war crimes accusations sustained by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), observers have lately pointed out how denial, over the years, became an integrated part of the public discourse in RS.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, the goal is to understand the role that different denial strategies (Cohen 2013) play in the way young adults remember and represent the war in BiH (1992-1995) and on the other, by showing how institutional messages of denial are perceived, incorporated, or rejected, I aim to shed light on the influence that ethnonationalist politics of belonging have on forming individual and collective identity in postwar youth.

This line of investigation builds on two intertwined premises: the first is that denial constitutes a complex phenomenon that needs to be understood as part of broader work on memory that political institutions in RS have been carrying out in order to sustain and legitimize their nation-state project (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012 [1983]). The second is that denial constitutes, first and foremost, a practice (Bourdieu 1977) that unfolds beyond the mere political statements and develops along with the systematic effort RS institutions make in redefining the past to create and strengthen symbolic boundaries of belonging.

The relationship between denial and the construction of collective memory is a two-way process. On the one hand, denying criminal activities means providing interpretations of the past where Republika Srpska appears as the exclusive legitimate actor capable of protecting the interests of the Serb people of Bosnia. On the other hand, denial constitutes the apex of a more profound process of silencing that aims to marginalize the recollection of experiences that can challenge the symbolic framework on which narratives of national belonging are built and sustained. In other words, what RS's war narratives deny is the actual presence of controversial and contested aspects of the same past, which are excluded from any official representations, and most importantly, silenced (Trouillot 1995) from the public sphere.

Drawing on the theoretical concept of generation as a collective group of individuals that, born within the same period, was exposed to the inputs of specific sociocultural context (Mannheim 1970), I use the category of *postwar youth* to define the generation of Bosnian citizens born in the second half of the 1980s (age group 20-35 years old), and raised in the aftermath of the war in BiH. Today, this generation constitutes the first group of adults not exposed to the Yugoslav socialist system (Palmberger 2016), but who instead grew up in a social context extensively characterized by different forms of ethnonationalism (Kurtović 2011) and political sectarianism (Bose 2002). Twenty-five years after the end of the conflict, postwar youth represent the result of social engineering and peace-making (Chandler 2000 and 2008), which finds its political and jurisdictional framework in the internationally crafted Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). Signed in November 1995 by the wartime leaders of BiH, Croatia, and Yugoslavia,<sup>3</sup> the DPA not only stopped the conflict in the country but also set the jurisdictional framework of a new BiH: a federal-state defined by its three constituent nationalities (Bosniak, Croat, and Serb) as well as two ethnically aligned territorial entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – FBiH, and the Republika Srpska – RS), and the self-governing Brčko District (Bieber 2005). The research that sustains this article is purposely located in RS, the Serb-aligned entity of BiH, whose institutions, since the end of the war, have been characterized by a high level of genocide denial and consistent declarations of independence from the state of BiH. This article asks: What are the mechanisms that characterize institutional denial in RS? How does denial relate to the collective representations of the past? What are the roles that silence and denial play in youth's understanding of the past in the development of their individual and collective identities?

The article draws on 13 months of fieldwork in Gradiška,<sup>4</sup> a Bosnian town located in the northern part of the country and administratively under the jurisdiction of Republika Srpska. Methodologically, this analysis relies on the traditional anthropological toolset (participant observation, in-depth interviews). While most of the interviews were carried out among the Serb community of Gradiška, a marginal—although consistent—group of my contributors either identified as Bosniak or rejected forms of ethnic identification. In addition, the study is supported by archival research focused on two data sources: local newspapers and documents provided by the online archive of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup> The decision to conduct archival work was motivated mainly by the lack of literature on Gradiška during

the wartime period (1992–1995). The material coming from these different kinds of archives was instrumental to the creation of a timeline that would assist in navigating the social, symbolic, and historical landscape in which my target group was living, so as to understand the extent of the violence the town and its population had suffered during the war.

My relationship with the town of Gradiška dates back to the end of 2016 when I had the opportunity to spend ten months in the area as an international volunteer at *Udruženje Most* (“NGO The Bridge”), a local NGO which mainly focused on youth-related issues.<sup>6</sup> The knowledge gained during my previous studies in the area, and my time as a volunteer in *Most*, convinced me to develop a research project that would analyze the relationship that young adults in Gradiška have with the memory of the conflict in BiH. When back in the area in March 2018,<sup>7</sup> I decided to visit my former colleagues and tell them about my plans for the research project. Meeting at a local bar, we immediately started catching up while drinking coffee. When I began describing my project, a close friend looked hard at me and said: “I honestly do not get the point of your research. We do not talk about the war. I have known him [indicating another friend] for ages, but I have never asked what his experience was at that time. Moreover, people do not talk about it here.”<sup>8</sup> A few of the others at the table nodded as a sign of support.

The next day, having had the opportunity to think over what had happened at the bar, I considered the impact those words could have on the development of my research, mainly because the idea that “people do not talk about it” did not entirely fit with my previous experiences in Gradiška. As the conversation went on, “they do not deal with it” developed as a sort of pushback against the political system and society. Perhaps this was suggestive of a broader problem, in that the collectivity was unwilling to confront recent history and that politics was purposely silencing and hiding behind an institutional narrative of denial. Nevertheless, based on my own experience in RS, I believe that the phrase “they do not talk about it” was not wholly accurate. The war constitutes an essential topic in childhood memories, and it often appears as an explanatory framework of reference in daily talks, jokes, and public comments. While, to some degree, their comment is interpretable as a mechanism of generational distancing from the symbolic and experiential burden of the war (Palmberger 2013), I argue that my friends’ description of “those who do not deal with it” bears complex moral sets of guilt, victimhood, embarrassment, and shame that appear to affect the collective as much as the individual level of belonging.

Returning to Gradiška in September 2018 to conduct my fieldwork, I began to see that the lack of debate and discussion extended well beyond my close circle of acquaintances, but was also sometimes explained by a different common narrative, which revolved around the idea that “in Gradiška, nothing much happened during the war.” The relationship between these intertwined narratives is important. Part of my interest was because they represent a self-justifying logic which seemed to legitimize the *status quo* and to diminish any effort of public confrontation on the topic: “we do not talk about it *because* nothing happened”; “nothing much has happened *so, what*

*should we talk about?"* At the same time, these narratives are used comparatively to describe Gradiška—and its past—as something distinct from the typical representations of violence and suffering that characterize the images of war: “if I were expecting to find stories of war—my informants seemed to say—this was not the right place *because nothing much has happened.*” To fully understand the meaning of this statement, it is critical to keep in mind that while individual memories are always linked to present conditions and future desires (Green 2004; Palmberger 2016), representations of the past are also constantly embedded in a socio-political context that is never neutral. This is also where the production of history constitutes a site of conflict in which different dynamics of power are displayed (Trouillot 1995).

### **From Institutional Denial to the Creation of the Local Past**

In the first section, I describe the reasons that qualify the relationship between youth and memory as critical to the development of postwar identities in postwar BiH. In the second part, I provide an analysis of the structure that characterizes *institutional denial* and describe the role that hegemonic narratives of denial promoted by RS institutions play in the process of self-representation of postwar youth. Subsequently, I question the socio-political dynamics behind the official commemorative system in the municipality of Gradiška and investigate the relationship between institutional forms of denial and the public representation of the war. In the final section, the article investigates the memory of two events that belong to the initial stages of the war in Gradiška and focuses on how specific episodes of violence are silenced from the public sphere.

My first example tries to pinpoint the beginning of the war. It is critical to point out that wartime in Gradiška began almost a year before what historians indicate as the beginning of the war in BiH (April 6, 1992). It is closely related to the escalation of military confrontation in Western Slavonia between the Croatian forces and the Yugoslav People’s Army (*Jugoslovenska narodna armija – JNA*) in May 1991.<sup>9</sup> Gradiška soon developed into a strategic outpost for the organization of military activities of the Yugoslav/Serb forces, due to its geographic location: the Bosnian bank of the Sava River, the natural border between Croatia and BiH. From September 1991, its proximity to the frontline exposed the town as one of the targets for Croatian airstrikes; at the end of the same year, Gradiška appeared in the front page of the Serb newspaper *Glas Srpske* as “the most endangered town in BiH” (*Gradiška najugroženiji grad u BiH*).<sup>10</sup> The second example is found in the memory of the military attack the town suffered on the night of August 8, 1992, when a military battalion of the Croatian Army (*Hrvatska vojska – HV*) crossed the Sava River in the area of the nearby village of Bok Jankovac.<sup>11</sup> While official commemorations today portray the episode as the heroic defence of the city, the last part of the article analyzes several controversies that surround the memory of those days. In the days following the attack, acts of retaliation were carried out by members of the paramilitary forces who assaulted the village of Orahova<sup>12</sup>—a predominantly Muslim area—leading to the death of eight individuals and the destruction of several houses. On the same day, other Bosniak citizens were murdered in the local market square.<sup>13</sup> The theoretical and methodological concerns raised by

this limited account of the wartime in Gradiška gather around whether these stories were unknown to my contributors, or were they instead “just” omitting them? If so, why? My argument is twofold: I suggest that statements such as “nothing much has happened here” are used by postwar youth as a rhetorical device to portray their individual and collective *self* as distinct from the symbolic framework of violence and ethnic hatred that characterize the representation of the war in BiH (Kaufman 2001). I also suggest that these statements constitute the first result of the socio-political process of silencing traces of a past that could locally dispute the broader narrative of Serb victimhood and its centrality in the RS’s project of nation-building.

Thanks to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) work, we know that power organically operates to make history by silencing determined voices and facts, as well as by marginalizing and eliminating counternarratives from the public and historical sphere. Drawing on the work of Stanley Cohen (2013), my analysis underlines the tension between two different ways of understanding denial. On one hand, forms of denial that are “deliberate, intentional and conscious,” also described as “lying, concealment, deception,” at the organized level take the name of “propaganda, disinformation, white-wash, manipulation, spin, [...]” On the other hand, denial can be understood “as an unconscious defense mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality” (2013, 4–5). In contemporary RS, these two dynamics work organically to legitimize the existence of RS itself and qualify the ethnically divided environment as constitutive of the social and political postwar life.

### **Youth and Memory in Postwar BiH**

The analysis presented in this article builds on the premise that memory plays a pivotal role in developing social ties and a collective sense of belonging. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1997), Paul Connerton claims that remembering (1989), as much as forgetting (2008), “is an individual practice as much as it is a collective one” (1989, xx). The theoretical challenges faced in the study of memory are often pending between the role institutions and group dynamics have in the personal understanding and representation of the past, and the agency displayed by the individual as an actor entangled in a matrix of localized practices and cultural meanings. The study of individual memories (Portelli 2010; Green 2004), on the other hand, has shown how the practice of storytelling is usually confined within a specific social and historical framework where we are hardly alone, but more likely exposed to messages and involved in practices institutionally designed, aimed at reminding us of our being in society.

The choice of young adults that grew up in postwar BiH builds on two intertwined elements, mainly, the level of reliability and consistency of their memories. As children during the war, this generation often bears confused, irregular, unreliable, blurred, or simply non-existent first-hand memories. Drawing on Alessandro Portelli’s work, I argue that “rather than being a weakness, [...] errors, inventions, and myths [that characterize youth’s representation of the past] lead us through and to their meanings” (2010, 3). The goal of this investigation is not to weigh the historical consistency of individual memories but to analyze memory in its relational nature and to qualify

the impact that institutional narratives of the past have on individual and collective representations of the self. As Monika Palmberger points out, “memory should be understood as a narrative that is selective and situational in character, and a product of past experiences, present needs and future aspirations” (2016, 201). Remembering the past is primarily a narrative performance where the individual is given the “possibility for reflexivity and change,” and where the principle of continuity with the past is negotiated and sometimes even contested. “It is this field of tension between collective and personal, and between persistence and change that is central in the discussion of generational positioning” (Palmberger 2016, 6).

In the last two decades, Bosnian youth have been at the center of critical anthropological contributions addressing postwar BiH. The extensive work conducted in the area of Mostar (Carabelli 2018; Palmberger 2016 and 2011; Hromadžić 2011 and 2015) has described the tension between a new generation of citizens and ethno-national categories of belonging legitimized by the process of democratic transition represented in the Dayton Peace Agreement (Hromadžić 2015). This literature often shows the ability that new generations have in redefining the ethnic landscape of the town (Carabelli 2018), and in challenging the spatial forms of postwar governmentality (Hromadžić 2011). Although these ethnographic accounts represent a critical contribution to the anthropological literature on you in post-conflict BiH, my research explores a socio-political context which, I believe, presents substantial differences. While Mostar is legitimately described as a city where political and social life is divided along ethnic lines (east/Bosniak, west/Croat), the political and demographic changes of the last twenty-five years have transformed Gradiška into a predominantly Serb town. Even though the Serbs represented the majority before the beginning of the war, the last national survey conducted in BiH shows how, between 1991 and 2013, the number of citizens representing themselves as a “Bosniak” or “Croat” has halved.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, since it is administrative under the jurisdiction of Republika Srpska,<sup>15</sup> the town has been subjected to an exclusive and unidirectional process of symbolic recodification of the public space. In Gradiška, today, symbols of Bosnian statehood are extremely rare, and usually replaced by Serb national emblems and institutional practices where the connection between local authorities and the Orthodox Church is often displayed as organic.<sup>16</sup> While Sabrina Ramet (2002) has pointed out the role that religious elite played in the second half of the twentieth century in pushing religious communities to seek political recognition and nationality status, it is important to stress that the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in RS has grown exponentially in the last two decades, occupying a prominent role in the life of a secular institutions such as the public education system. In April 2018, the Serb Representative at the Tripartite Presidency of BiH Milorad Dodik,<sup>17</sup> publicly endorsed a national (RS) law that would transform religion into a compulsory subject of high school programs. In his statement, Dodik openly described the close relationship between religion and school as organic and instrumental to Srpska’s national identity: “the Serbian Orthodox Church is a very important part of our national identity, here in Republika Srpska and in Serbia, and we must work together.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Institutional Denial: Rewriting the Past, Designing the Present**

From an institutional point of view, I would argue that denial is instrumental to the creation of an ideological platform in which Serb victimhood is erected as a core element of the hegemonic discourse on war, which the Bosnian Serb elite has been developing to justify the project of nation-building and the continuous claims of secession from the state of BiH. Often labeled as an ‘alternative’ or revisionist approach towards history (Cohen 2013), denial is an integral part of the creation of new narratives of the conflict in which war crimes perpetrated by the Bosnian Serb forces (*Vojska Republike Srpske* – VRS) are either erased, downplayed, reinterpreted, or justified as ordinary military warfare. By providing alternative narratives of the war, institutional denial contributes to shaping the collective understanding of past events, functioning as a symbolic and moral lens for constructing individual and collective memories.

In April 2019, Milorad Dodik was an invited guest of honor at the conference “Srebrenica, reality and manipulations” (*Srebrenica, stvarnost i manipulacije*). At the press conference, he openly stated that “Bosniaks are trying to build a myth around Srebrenica. That is a fake myth; that myth does not exist.”<sup>19</sup> Although two international tribunal courts have officially defined what happened in the Srebrenica in July 1995 as genocide,<sup>20</sup> Dodik’s words were not unexpected or surprising. This statement constitutes the latest in a long tradition of public declarations that RS institutions have made to deny the genocidal nature of the atrocities committed in the Podrinje region by the Army of Republika Srpska after the fall of the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica (Wagner 2008).

The massacre of Srebrenica is a critical element in understanding how RS strategies of denial work in their process of rewriting history and observing, more specifically, the political dynamic through which Serb institutions build patterns of identitarian belonging. Internationally known as the theatre of “the worst atrocity that happened in Europe since the end of World War II” (Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan 2016, 48), Srebrenica has become the symbol of genocide, and more generally of the violence perpetrated by the Army of Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske* – VRS) during the war. In postwar BiH, however, Srebrenica is also the epitome of contested narratives and memories of the conflict in the 1990s. While the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has already exposed the criminal responsibilities of central figures of the Serb political and military elite, different forms of denial are still popular among the Serb population of Bosnia and characterize the current RS’s institutions’ official positions and those of politicians.

I argue that institutional denial in RS operates according to two intertwined dynamics: first, through the creation of parallel knowledge, built by independent commissions whose aim is to investigate and revise the discoveries made by the international community and, second, by publicly imposing “an alternative narrative of victims and perpetrators in the wartime enclave of Srebrenica” (Wagner 2008, 238), creating a symbolic framework where ideas of ethnonationalism belonging and nationhood are promoted and re-defined through the political re-codification of the recent past. As Stanley Cohen describes (2013), denial rarely implies fixed positions and strategies,

but is instead a multifaceted and fluid process mostly instrumental to the perpetrators' sociopolitical goals. Sarah Wagner and Lara Nettelfield (2014) were among the first scholars to present a compelling description of the strategies of denial that RS's political elites have implemented in the years that followed the massacre:

[They] first argued that the *Bosnian Army itself had committed the massacres*. Later, [...] that the violence in Srebrenica *was justified retaliation* for the Serb civilian casualties, victims of the Bosnian Army. [Finally] that the *number of casualties* resulting from the fall of the enclave was equal to the number of Serb civilian casualties in the Podrinje region, an argument that, while not only inaccurate, was intended to misrepresent the nature of the war. (Nettelfield & Wagner 2014, 253)

In the last two decades, institutional denial in RS has proven itself an active process aimed at reframing what happened during the conflict and, ultimately, to rewrite the past by calling into action state instruments such as tribunal courts and ad hoc commissions. The history of RS-led commissions on Srebrenica constitutes an integral part of institutional denial: in sixteen years (from 2002 to 2018), Bosnian Serb authorities have instituted four different commissions (2002, 2004, 2010, and 2018) and published two reports (2002, 2004), both of which have been rejected and later reviewed.<sup>21</sup>

Darko Trifunović and his team published the first RS Report in September 2002. Many critics have extensively described the document as a blatant example of revisionism and denial. I argue, however, that the Report is critical for understanding how denial works in the formation of collective identity. In its structure and contents, the Report mirrors symbolic pillars of RS politics—specific ideas of nation, people, ethnicity, and religion. At the same time, the Report presents conspiracy theories which have also been playing a part in the delineation of the public debate. Theories which often rely on two elements: on the one hand, they indicate international actors as main characters of a hidden mechanization for the dissolution of Yugoslavia; on the other hand, they legitimize RS as the only form of governance capable of assuring the interests of Bosnian Serbs (Turjačanin, Puhalo & Šain 2018).

Trifunović's work is representative of a double function that characterizes this form of denial. First, the Report aims to create parallel knowledge of the massacre by challenging forensic and criminal investigations. In this case, VRS's systematic violence is challenged by defining Bosniak deaths either as the result of military fights between forces equally represented on the ground or as episodes of personal revenge justified (according to Trifunović) by "years of violence suffered by the Serb population living around the enclave" (2002, 30).<sup>22</sup> The Report seems to intentionally avoid two issues: the first is the fact that the column of Bosniak men escaping from the enclave was only partially composed by members of the resistance, while the central part were civilians—many of whom were teenagers. The second is that the majority of the victims' remains have been found not near sites of combat but in mass graves located in the vicinity of VRS's detention centers and execution sites (Wagner 2008).

Second, the Report legitimizes and spins political arguments of deniability by providing a (pseudo)scientific framework. While Trifunović’s analysis represents a poor attempt to cover RS involvement in the systematic violence that occurred after the enclave fell, it does function as a promoter of messages, ideas, symbols, and interpretative patterns. For example, terms such as “revenge” and “retribution” have grown in importance as pivotal elements for the production of a Serb narrative of victimhood, which is critical in Serb youth’s identity, not just in Srebrenica, but in RS more broadly. During a conversation with Dejan, a young radio broadcaster from Gradiška, these concepts were loudly invoked to describe the unfair treatment and injustice that he perceives Serbs have suffered:

During the war, the media was mostly on the side of our enemies. So your compatriots and many Europeans and Americans considered Serbs some crazy people, savages. [...] Of course, my God, you don’t have an objective picture of the war in Bosnia. [...] Listen, 90% of Serbs cannot be convicted of war. Every side fired. No one answered for the number of casualties when I fled after the fall of Donji Vakuf. Kids were killed! No one was responsible for that. That man is sitting in the government of Croatia now. So, is that normal? The court in the Hague even acquitted Ante Gotovina. They even released Naser Orić!<sup>23</sup> I don’t think it makes sense to talk further. (Interview with D.J. [July 17, 2019])

While the terms of injustice and prejudice that we find in Dejan’s words belong to the broader narrative of war and victimhood presented by RS institutions, this testimony finds its qualifying element in his personal experience of displacement (“No one answered for the number of casualties when I fled after the fall of Donji Vakuf. Kids were killed!”).

In Gradiška, there are two representative communities of war refugees. The first is constituted by the Serb population that left Western Slavonia; the second is the group of people who relocated to Gradiška from Donji Vakuf, after the Serbs declared municipality of Srbobran born during the war and which comprised also part of the territories of Travnik and Bugojno) fell in the hands of the Bosnian and Croat armies in September, 1995. After a few months in the town, some willingness to talk about the war from people with a history of displacement became evident. While participants that spent their childhood in town often express discomfort in sharing their past, former Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) were often very inclined to share their life stories and opinions about the conflict. I argue that IDPs’ willingness to share their stories is due to the level of public recognition of their experience and the symbolic role that it occupies in the formation of postwar collective identity. Individually, experiences of displacement are recognized by my interlocutor as critical for the development of personhood: traumatic experiences, such as psychological suffering, starvation, exposure to armed conflict, are considered unfortunate as well as instrumental to their personal growth. As such, war memories are narrated using a vocabulary that revolves around terms of *sacrifice*, *solidarity* and *success*. As an interviewee explained to me: “We have

been through hell, we made it, now I drive a Mercedes.”<sup>24</sup> Personal success, in this case, is defined as compensation for the extreme conditions collectively and individually experienced, but also as a result of hard work and sacrifice. Collectively, the image of Serb refugees has constituted a central pillar of that political process aimed to legitimize RS as the ‘safe’ and ‘righteous’ homeland of the Serb community of Bosnia: it is through the public recognition of their personal experience as emblematic of Serb suffering, displayed in the form of commemorations, memorials and public initiatives,<sup>25</sup> that young IDPs’ personal stories find their source of legitimation and authority in representing the recent past.

In June 2019, I was introduced to Miloš, a thirty-year-old man originally from Bratunac, now living half-time in Slovenia, where he works as a builder, and in Gradiška, his fiancée’s hometown. That night, we talked about his current life as a commuter and his past in Bratunac. We met again a few weeks later at a friend’s house for a dinner party. That evening, he approached me and asked what I was looking for in my research. Before I could answer, a long-time participant exclaimed: “He should be in your research! You know he is from Bratunac, right? He went through many more things than we did here.”<sup>26</sup> Located next to Srebrenica, the town of Bratunac was one of the main areas in the Podrinje region where mass executions were carried out by the VRS. It did not take long before Miloš started sharing his opinions about Srebrenica: “When it was under the UN protection,<sup>27</sup> Orić with his pals were attacking the Serb villages around. I mean, how many Serbs were killed? 3500?” He asked another man present, Dragan: “Yes, 3500”, he replied. “You see,” Miloš continued, “3500 Serbs died, and I don’t think it’s fair that Orić has never been to jail.” Two elements are critical in this exchange: first, Miloš’s authority as a legitimate witness to the war, which results from the symbolic value of his place of origin and personal experience. Second, the line of topics and political positions that, individually interpreted, reiterate the hegemonic discourse of denial that RS’s institutions have promoted since the end of the war. The number 3500 was first reported in official VRS documents as the total number of VRS members deceased during the conflict in the Eastern Bosnian frontline. This was further claimed by Serb political elite before ICTY, then promoted by RS institutions, and soon became a common symbol of Serb victimhood. While the number represents “an evident falsification of the facts [and] the overall number is three to nine times smaller” (Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 273), it is the diffusion and transmission of its symbolic value that reveals the power of denial in its full complexity.

### **Beyond Remembering: Sustaining the Institutional Monopoly on Public Memory**

So far, I have described public statements of denial and official reports as manifestations of the institutional effort to create a representation of the past in which RS is legitimized as the entire political body of the Serb people of BiH. To have a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic, I believe it is also critical to analyze how institutional work on memory is locally perceived and how institutional practices of remembering contribute to the definition of the local *commemorative arena* (Ashplant, Graham Dawson & Roper 2013).

In RS, initiatives aimed at creating a debate around the memory of the last war (1992–1996) are often left to local NGOs and international organizations that occupy a progressive, although a marginal, place in Srpska’s political arena. During fieldwork, I had the opportunity to spend time with several NGOs working in Gradiška and the surrounding area;<sup>28</sup> among these, *Udruženje Most* was my preferred site. The association is considered a central actor in the local and national NGO network: in 2018, it was awarded as the best NGO in Republika Srpska by the Ministry of Family, Youth and Sports of RS (*Ministarstvo porodice, omladine i sporta Republike Srpske*), and was appointed a few months later as the leading organization for the Srpska Youth Volunteering Program.<sup>29</sup> My interest in *Most* was twofold: first, for its position in the local community, it represented a popular spot for many young people—the research target group. Second, as it is a well-known actor local in socio-political dynamics, I was interested to understand whether the recent conflict and the past more generally constituted a theme in their social and cultural activity.

In October 2018, the association received a request from one of its donors to host and organize the Regional Peace Initiative (*Regionalna mirovna inicijativa u BiH – ReMI*), financed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and USAID. The project, “Constructive use of veteran experience” (*Konstruktivna upotreba veteranskog iskustva – KUVI*),<sup>30</sup> consisted of a series of public talks during which war veterans from all three armies involved in Bosnian conflict<sup>31</sup> shared their experience with high school students, promoting messages of peace and reconciliation. I became aware of the initiative thanks to the president of *Most*, who also asked if I was interested in participating in the organization of the event. I received the news with great enthusiasm which, however, did not last long. The next day, the colleague in charge of the project contacted the local high school director, who politely declined any involvement in the initiative. When I asked what might have been the reason, my colleague explained that “She [was] sorry, but especially at this moment [with the general election approaching] she does not want to get involved in this kind of initiative.” Commenting on my—probably naïve—surprise, she added: “It is not easy... My brother.”<sup>32</sup> I soon understood what happened as the simple result of a display of institutional power, where the authority in charge was not willing to support an initiative that, in the local political context, could create displeasure and issues with the local government.

I brought up this story during a coffee break with a long-time contributor, who rightly pointed out another angle of the story: “Well, it looks to me that even in the association, there is no interest in doing it. With all the volunteers they have, they could try to organize it independently from the school, couldn’t they?”<sup>33</sup> The comment was true: in its ten years of activity, *Most* has hardly ever focused its efforts on programming initiatives that would address any war-related topic, although its projects have aimed to tackle many critical societal issues (economic marginalization, sociability, education). I believe part of this void in the association’s activity concerns the political environment in which NGOs such as *Most* act and conduct their activities. A reasonable portion of its resources are tied—not marginally—to the local political context.

After months of ethnographic study, I would argue that, in *Most*, the main reason for a lack of interest in promoting initiatives such as KUVI follows the same line of reasoning as the school director: talking publicly about the conflict and, more critically, organizing events on this topic promoted by international actors (such as USAID), asks NGOs and volunteers to embark on activities that could endanger their relationship with the public administration, and therefore destabilize their resources and position in the local community.

The Serb leadership's political power over the representation of the war is not only relegated to the marginalization of potentially contested positions, but it is performed through the monopoly that RS institutions have on the process of memorialization and public display of the past. Official commemorations occupy a prominent space in the public sphere of the town: they are recurrent events that involve the active participation of the highest political and religious figures of the city—who occupy a central role in the performative dynamic of the event, which is always documented and broadcasted in the local news. During the year of my fieldwork in Gradiška, I attended nineteen official commemorations, most of them held next to the memorial erected at the city park entrance, while the others took place in the vicinity of memorials built in the villages in the surrounding areas. These events were organized through the Department for Veterans Affairs of the municipality of Gradiška,<sup>34</sup> and other organizations related to it, such as the Veteran Association and different war victims' associations. A long tradition of studies has underlined the role commemorations and war memorials have in constructing new national identities and in shaping postwar socio-cultural landscapes (see Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012 [1983]; Nora 1989; Verdery 2005; Winter 2014). My intention, in this section, is to focus on how these cultural practices are perceived, and their symbolic value understood by postwar youth in Gradiška.

My ethnographic findings suggest commemorations occupy a contested field of perception: symbolically, postwar youth consider the process of remembering the Serb victims of the war as a necessary step towards a more "fair" and comprehensive recognition of their experience. Simultaneously, commemorations are frequently addressed as sources of frustration, distress, and general disaffection towards the world of politics. My participants would often comment on my interest in attending a commemoration with a sarcastic attitude; other times, close friends would mock my participation in these initiatives as a characteristic behavior of a "proper" Serb,<sup>35</sup> pointing out how these occasions were exclusively involving individuals affiliated to the political system. This comment was primarily based on a commonly known dynamic in the political party system where party members' networks are invited to participate in public events such as commemorations. While these invitations are meant to involve individuals paying their respects to war victims, members' attendance is also interpretable as proof of reliability and devotion to the party activity. This dynamic was partially confirmed by one of my contributors, Nikola, a thirty-two-year-old member of the Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka* – SDS). I approached him at the end of the local celebration of the Day of Republika Srpska (*Dan Republike Srpske*).<sup>36</sup> Knowing the reasons for my attendance, he first introduced me to older party mem-

bers, and explained the reason for my presence. Then, switching to English, he commented: “I was out late last night, and this morning at nine they called me: ‘Nikola? Where are you? You need to come!’ That is why I am here.”<sup>37</sup>

This dynamic calls into being a common perception among postwar youth about not just the commemorative system but the practice of public governance more broadly. Participants consistently described political activity as merely instrumental to the realization of personal achievements. They argued that in a social context where state (and state-related) institutions constitute one of the significant sources of employment, being active within a political party constitutes one of the few available opportunities to network, find job opportunities, and pursue personal success:

Parties have money, and they offer them a cool opportunity. They take you to Trebinje<sup>38</sup> for a week, then to Belgrade, Graz... You see how they work; you learn stuff, you are there having fun with other young people, maybe you get laid... Of course they get them. Have you seen Gradiška? How many opportunities do you think these people have? At one point, you start volunteering, being active in the party. And sooner or later you get a job. They do not need an agenda. They control everything. (Interview with L.O. [February 2, 2019])

On one hand, the construction of a collective past appears to rely on the ability of the local institutions to “intentionally present something of its self-understood purposes, and their foundations, aspirations, and apprehensions” (Handelman 1998, 191), while on the other, commemorations are an opportunity for RS political elites to consolidate their power over the ritualization of public life, where they can exercise, and display their ability to control the material and political context by actively structuring the chances that individuals have to access resources and to improve their social and symbolic capital.

### **Conclusions: Remembering and Silencing the Past in Gradiška**

As stated at the start, my research’s main subject—postwar youth—does not always bear clear first-hand memories of the wartime period. However, the study of this generation provides us with an opportunity to question memory in its performative and relational nature (Portelli 2010; Green 2004; Palmberger 2016) and to assess the role that institutions and group dynamics play in shaping collective representations of the past.

In Gradiška, young adults narrate the war by following a plot that is built around episodes that have become symbolic anchors capable of catalyzing their efforts to process the past. The path I describe in this final section starts at the end of 1991, when, after seven months of military confrontation on the other side of the Sava River between the Croatian forces and the JNA, *Glas Sprske* defined Gradiška as, “The most endangered town in BiH (*Gradiška najugroženiji grad u BiH*).” During my research, I repeatedly tried to elicit descriptions of this period from my interviewees. My initial expectation was that I would find memories that would describe the beginning of

the war, wherein could be found evidence of a rupture from people's previous daily lives. More specifically, I expected to encounter memories that would speak to the series of airstrikes. What was gathered from participants, instead, were not stories of bombardments, but stories that pointed to a climate of political uncertainty, and of a community that was hopeful for a peaceful resolution:

At the beginning [the situation] it was a bit...meh. It was not as in Prijedor or other parts [of BiH]. In town, SDA<sup>39</sup> was strong, and other parties were on as well. It was a bit uncertain. You couldn't know how it would work out. (Interview with S.K. [November 12, 2018])

While expressions of socio-political uncertainty often took the place of recounting mortar shelling from the Croatian side, recollections of bombardments were usually misplaced, and placed in May of 1995, when the Croatian Army retook control of Western Slavonia,<sup>40</sup> and thousands of Serb refugees were forced out and relocated in the outskirts of the town. In interpreting this kind of misplacement, I consider the words of oral historian Alessandro Portelli (2010), who argues that displacements and condensations are critical and common dynamics of remembering the past. In investigating the memory of Luigi Trastulli, a factory worker killed by the police in a demonstration in 1949, he describes how,

The more remarkable phenomenon in the collective remembrance of Trastulli's death does not, however, concern the sequence of the events as much as their placement in time and context. Many narrators, including eye-witnesses, believe that Trastulli did not die at an anti-NATO demonstration in 1949, but during the street fights which followed the announcement of the firing of more than two thousand workers from the steel factory in October [...] In this way, the narrators merge the two most dramatic events of Terni's post-war history into one coherent story. (Portelli 2010, 14)

In the case of postwar youth, misremembering the timing of the 1991 bombing in Gradiška allows the subject to build a consistent narrative that adds to the picture of the suffering of the Serb people, represented in the public sphere exodus of Serb refugees from Western Slavonia. Also, to understand the value the 1995 airstrike has in local memories, it is critical to note that, considering the number of IDPs and refugees relocated in Gradiška during the war,<sup>41</sup> for many of my participants, this attack coincides with the motivation for their moving into town and, therefore, today constitutes a critical symbolic pillar of their family stories and personal identities.

From a narrative standpoint, describing the beginning of the conflict in BiH in terms of uncertainty has an additional function. It sets the framework for the exposition of the most symbolic episode of violence suffered by the population of Gradiška during the war: the attack on the town of August 8, 1992, when a military battalion of the Croatian Army—the Berbir Battalion (*Berbir bojna*),<sup>42</sup> crossed the Sava River and took up a position in the small village of Bok Jankovac—four minutes away from the

center of Gradiška. The military attempt failed after a night of fighting, causing the death of sixteen Serb forces personnel and four civilians. The importance the event has in the collective memory of the war is well represented in the annual commemorations that take place at the memorial site erected in Bok Jankovac, which is usually attended by a number of citizens,<sup>43</sup> as well as by the highest political figures of RS.<sup>44</sup> In 1992, the attack received substantial coverage in RS media, including *Glas Srpske* the day after: “Croatian forces attack again” (*Hrvatske snage ponovo napadaju*).<sup>45</sup> The final death count was released only on August 10 and the entire first page of the newspaper was dedicated to the Serb defense of the city, under the headline “Army cleans the territory (*Vojska čisti teren*),” and an article on page five (Ustaša warriors liquidated – *Likvidirani ustaški bojovnici*)<sup>46</sup> illustrates the defensive capability of the VRS forces. On August 12, the newspaper dedicated the front page and two other pages to the funeral of the 16 Serb victims of the attack,<sup>47</sup> commenting on the level of emergency and insecurity the town was experiencing.

Outside the institutional and public sphere, several controversial elements and silences surround the story of the attack and ask to be further investigated. The first of these constitutes a sort of ‘open secret’: the fact that the victims from the Serb side were not official soldiers of the VRS, but members of a local paramilitary group, the Scorpions (*Škorpioni*). In the official representation of the event, this element is completely omitted. Serb victims today are still commemorated as VRS soldiers, and their membership in paramilitary forces hidden behind a symbolic narrative of heroism and suffering, which shadows the presence of paramilitary groups in the area, and their involvement or connection with local military and political institutions. In my interviewees’ memory, the attack constitutes a narrative pillar: it serves as a time indicator and as a way to express the dichotomy of before/after the war. Regardless of the bombing that the town suffered months before, August 8 is symbolically considered the beginning of the war: the failed invasion of the city occupies a central space in the collective memory as a moment of weakness, confusion, and emergency. But it also bears a specific meaning which is instrumental in structuring the collective understanding of the current political context. While institutional commemorations of the attack are focused on the sacrifice and the military effort of the Serb forces to defend the city against a Croatian invasion, local recollections present a slightly different angle of the story which revolves around the name of the brigade, *Berbir*, which was the name of Gradiška during the Ottoman Empire.

Rather than describing the attack as an attempted invasion of the Croatian forces, these accounts stress it instead as a local attempt carried out by the Muslim elite of Gradiška to take control of the city. Some informants argued that the attack was locally planned months ahead by former Bosniak politicians and corroborate their theory by mentioning an arsenal discovered in a village nearby together with a traffic sign with the name “Berbir” printed in capital letters.<sup>48</sup> What is almost always missed and publicly silenced in the remembering of those days is the retaliation that the Muslim community of Gradiška suffered after the public funeral of the Serb victims of the August 8 attack. After the ceremony, Serb members of local paramilitary groups and VRS

reservists raided the predominantly Muslim village of Orahova and other Bosniak houses in local neighborhoods. The news, in this case, was reported by *Washington Post's* journalist Peter Maass on August 22, 1992:

According to more than a half-dozen Muslims, Serb soldiers went on a rampage the day after the victims were buried. [They] executed at least eight civilians, mostly by machine gun, although at least one of the Muslims is said to have been knifed to death. [...] The Muslims' accounts of Serb soldiers rampaging through Bosanska Gradiška like storm troopers are treated as credible by relief officials - and have been implicitly confirmed by Serb authorities [...] 63 explosions of grenades and mortars were reported and eight people were killed [...] most of the dozens of Muslim-owned shops throughout Bosanska Gradiška [...] are either boarded up, burned out or bombed beyond use. [...] The local police apparently did not intervene. [...] Relief officials said Bosanska Gradiška and Čelinac are just two examples of an epidemic of unchecked violence and "ethnic cleansings" still taking place across northern Bosnia. (Maass 2012)

I have tried to understand the reasons behind the silence around what happened in the village of Orahova in August 1992. I visited the village several times during my research in Gradiška, and had the opportunity to interview its community leader, who simply moved away from my questions about those days, telling me that he had already left the country when the village was attacked. During my year in Gradiška, I was unable to find any young adults from this village. No memorial has been erected, and no public commemoration has ever been organized. While I could hear words of regret, shame, and guilt from some older interviewees, the story of Orahova was hardly ever mentioned by the members of my target group. The episodes of violence that followed the attack in Bok Jankovac are not the only ones that have been silenced and erased from the collective memory. The study of documents provided by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) exposes the presence of acts of intentional and organized violence perpetrated against the members of the Bosniak and Croat communities<sup>49</sup> in different periods of the conflict: from December 30, 1991 to January 24, 1992, the local police reported five people killed and several episodes of harassment in the area of Gradiška by JNA reservists.<sup>50</sup>

Trapped outside the public sphere of remembering, the memory of these episodes of violence stand behind a commemorative system that exclusively acknowledges Serb suffering as legitimate. There is also a lack of opportunities to confront the past outside the institutional channels, and different patterns of denial that find in the phrase "nothing much has happened" their form of representation. The degree to which this narrative affects the sphere of sociability in postwar Gradiška is probably best represented by its ability to shape individual stories of discrimination and harassment as exceptions in an overall "sustainable" situation. The image of Gradiška as a town with a marginal, peaceful, and distinct past, constitutes a common representation not only for young Serbs, but it is also shared by the members of the Muslim community, such as Admir:

I've been here during the war and everything. A lot of members of my family have, I don't want to say escaped, but migrated when the war broke out and everything. [...] If I could describe my experience in one word, it would be *solitude*. Basically, in my neighbourhood, pretty much all the kids left. [...] It was kind of difficult later because at one point during the night we had the Serbian army across my home. [Since then,] they were stationed there for two years. [...] You had to be more careful, especially when they would get drunk and they would shoot at my chimney or something. So, as a kid you had to be quiet. But as a kid, you have a different understanding of how things are [...], *you just downplay everything*. However, there were *little things*, like [the fact that] all of my friends moved out. [...] I still went to school and everything. There wasn't shooting here, you know, nothing serious, but things were always tense. [...] As a kid you were traumatized [...] you understood that if you get hit by the bullet you die, that's it for you. (Interview with A.O. [September 23, 2019])

When asked if the idea of Gradiška as a place where “nothing much happened” was an accurate description, he answered:

Like I said, there was one event when Croats were throwing grenades over. I think you can still find the spot [somewhere], yeah. That happened and the bridge blew up. In all ten years, these two things happened. There was a lot of tension, but nothing physical ever happened. No one was shot in the street for... Even though some Croats left during the war, in Gradiška no one was shot. I mean, people on all sides... Not Serbs, obviously, but Muslims and Croats experienced some harassment. If you kept quiet, mostly you would be fine. There was nothing like actual physical murders or whatever. So, in the regard of “*nothing much happened*,” I agree with that assessment. (ibid.)

Admir's words represent the dialectical tension between the recollection of his individual experience and the lack of public acknowledgment of the psychological and physical violence suffered by national minorities in Gradiška and its surroundings. If we suppose memories are the result of a narrative performance through which we make sense of the reality we live in, this testimony reminds us how this process is entangled in a network of possibilities that does not exclusively belong to our will but rather is given by the material and political framework within which we act as social beings.

## Notes

- 1 This article constitutes the first result of my PhD project titled, *Old Memories, New Stories: Political Extremism and Identity in Post-War Bosnian Youth*. The research has been conducted thanks to the academic and financial support of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology – University of Calgary, the SSHRC Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarships' program (2017-2020), and the Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship (2017 and 2018).
- 2 The town is also known by its previous name, Bosanska Gradiška. The name was changed after the conflict, by local authorities. It is significant to note how the current nomination

- omits *Bosanska* (“Bosnian”), as is done with many other towns today in RS.
- 3 Please see Sarah Wagner’s article “Srebrenica’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary from a Distance” published in *Anthropology News*: [https://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2020/10/26/srebrenicas-twenty-fifth-anniversary-from-a-distance/?utm\\_source=hootsuite&utm\\_medium=&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=&utm\\_campaign=&fbclid=IwAR0zEUhosuRS4\\_jDLisNSBGW-x4ZKmWa4UT-HjxANIUB05-zX3MKY6pqLBw](https://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2020/10/26/srebrenicas-twenty-fifth-anniversary-from-a-distance/?utm_source=hootsuite&utm_medium=&utm_term=&utm_content=&utm_campaign=&fbclid=IwAR0zEUhosuRS4_jDLisNSBGW-x4ZKmWa4UT-HjxANIUB05-zX3MKY6pqLBw), accessed October 28, 2020, And Hikmet Karčić “How Denial of Bosnian War Crimes Entered the Mainstream”, published on *Balkaninsight.com*: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/30/how-denial-of-bosnian-war-crimes-entered-the-mainstream/>, accessed September 10, 2020.
  - 4 In November 1995, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was composed of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro. The Yugoslav representative at the Dayton talks was Slobodan Milošević.
  - 5 I conducted fieldwork in Gradiška and its surroundings from September 2018 to October 2019.
  - 6 This corpus of data is composed by the editions of the Serb newspaper *Glas Srpske* from June 1991 to January 1996. Most of the articles collected directly referred to Gradiška, while others commented on the political situation in RS more generally. Thanks to the ICTY online Court Records (<http://icr.icty.org/>), I had the opportunity to analyze trial transcripts and official documents presented before the court in different cases concerning the Gradiška area.
  - 7 In 2016 I participated in the Italian Civil Service Abroad Program. The project was a joint initiative organized by Amesci from Naples, and Udruženje Most. The activities implemented in Udruženje Most revolved around several topics such as the environment, youth, occupation, languages, and international youth mobility.
  - 8 In March 2018 I was able to spend time in BiH thanks to my involvement as assistant researcher on Dr Sabrina Perić’s project *Ilegala: Reading, Radicalism and Paramilitarism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1932–1942*. (<https://www.sabrinaperic.ca/projects>, accessed September 17, 2020).
  - 9 Journal log, discussion with M. and others [April 19, 2018].
  - 10 Historians refer to the conflict that unfolded in May 1991 in Western Slavonia as part of the Croatian War of Independence. In this article, I instrumentally use the term Western Slavonia to refer to the military confrontation that took place in the areas of Nova Gradiška, Okučani, and Novska.
  - 11 Airstrikes are reported in *Glas Srpske* weekly, from September 1991 to January 1992.
  - 12 As of October 2020, I could not find any account of the attack in the literature concerning the Bosnian war. The episode, however, appears in several transcriptions and documents presented before the ICTY ([https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin\\_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm), accessed on October 12, 2020) and it was widely reported by the local newspaper *Glas Srpske* (From August 10 to 12, 1992).
  - 13 The village of Orahova is located in the municipality of Gradiška, approximately twenty kilometres from the city centre.
  - 14 See Maass, P. “Bosnian Serb Retaliation Pins Muslims in Their Homes.” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 1992. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/08/22/>

bosnian-serb-retaliation-pins-muslims-in-their-homes/764cc8a7-e295-4b0f-a2f1-6ccd0246b3aa/, accessed June 30, 2020. See also ICTY case number, 10 IT-99-36-T, Page 20783 Source: <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/brdanin/trans/en/031009ED.htm>, accessed June 30, 2020.

- 15 In 1991, the total population in the municipality of Gradiška was of 59.974 citizens: 35.753 (59,61%) represented themselves as Serbs, 15.851 (26,42%) as Muslims, 3.417 as Croats (5,69%), and 3.311 (5,52) as Yugoslavs. In 2013, the total population counted 51,727 citizens, of which 41,863 (80,93%) were Serbs, 7,580 (14,65%) Bosniaks, and 826 (1,597%) Croats (Agencija za Statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine 2013, 59).
- 16 The level of autonomy of the two entities and their functions is a topic widely analyzed by the scholarship on postwar BiH. See Bieber (2005), and Bose (2002).
- 17 A graphic example of this can be observed at the BiH border checkpoint. Only a few metres away, facing the cars arriving in Gradiška, a 4x3m banner stands in front of the Orthodox Church, and welcomes the drivers with the message: ‘Добро дошли у Републику Српску – Welcome to the Republic of Srpska’. Behind it, the triband flag of Republika Srpska flutters, hanging atop of a three-meter pole planted in the Orthodox Church’s property.
- 18 The presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of a three-member body, where each is representative of a constituent people of BiH (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks). The mandate of the office (4 years) is by each representative. For a more specific analysis, see Bieber 2005.
- 19 Mladen Lakić, *Bosnian Serbs to Introduce Mandatory Religious Education*, published in *Balkan Insight* (April 12, 1918): <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/12/bosnian-serbs-mull-for-mandatory-religion-classes-04-11-2018/>, accessed August 24, 2020.
- 20 The conference appeared on many online newspapers, both local and international: <http://ba.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a337752/Dodik-Bosniaks-are-trying-to-build-a-myth-around-Srebrenica.html>, accessed June 30, 2020.
- 21 In 2004, at the end of the case against Bosnian Serb General Radišlav Krstić, the ICTY court officially defined the massacre perpetrated in Srebrenica as a genocide: <https://www.irmct.org/specials/srebrenica20/>. For a more comprehensive analysis see Wagner 2008, and Nettelfield, and Wagner (2014).
- 22 For a broader understanding of the reactions that the international community and Bosnian political elite had towards the publication of Trifunović’s Report, see ‘Bosnia: New Bosnian Serb Report Denies Srebrenica Massacre’ (<https://www.rferl.org/a/1100678.html> Last accessed January, 2020).
- 23 Trifunović states: “Considering that a number of Serbs were killed by Muslim neighbours in a very cruel way in 1992 and 1993, there must have been summary executions for the purpose of personal revenge” (2002, 30).
- 24 Ante Gotovina and Naser Orić are respectively the former Lieutenant General of the Croatian Army, and the Military Commander of the ARBiH forces in Srebrenica.
- 25 Interview with D.A. [November 2, 2018].
- 26 Concerning the community of refugees from Western Slavonia, on the 2nd of May, yearly, an official ceremony in memory of the exodus and is attended by the highest authorities of RS. <https://gradiska.com/vijesti/gradiska/drustvo/pomen-za-stradale-24-godine-od-egzodusa-srba-iz-zapadne-slavonije.html>, accessed on September 15, 2020.

- 27 Journal log. [July 3, 2019]
- 28 Srebrenica was declared a UN safe area in April 1993. See Both and Honig (1996).
- 29 The other organizations that I observed are *Kvart* from Prijedor, and *Oštra Nula* from Banja Luka. In both cases, I was able to interview their presidents and I conducted participant observation in several public initiatives that they organized.
- 30 Source <https://micromreza.com/index.php/vijesti/zanimljivosti/4731-volonterski-servis-republike-srpske-seli-se-u-gradisku>, and <http://gradiska.tv/nagradjeni-najbolji-volonteri-u-gradisci-2/>, both accessed on August 20, 2020.
- 31 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/konstruktivna-upotreba-veteranskog-iskustva/25431332.html>, accessed May 25, 2020.
- 32 The initiative involves representatives from the Army of Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske* - VRS), the Croatian Defence Council (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane* - HVO), and the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine* - ABiH). Source: <https://www.oocentar.org/konstruktivna-upotreba-veteranskog-iskustva/>, accessed September 5, 2020.
- 33 While the first part of the conversation was in English, the second one was in BCS: “Brate moj... Nije lako.” Journal log. [October 10, 2018]
- 34 Journal log. Conversation with L. [January 8, 2019]
- 35 The actual name of the department is *Odjeljenje za boračko-invalidsku zaštitu* (Department for the protection of veterans and the invalid).
- 36 They would mock me with the ironic phrase “*Ti si pravi Srbin!*” (literally, “*You are a proper Serb!*”).
- 37 The official day of Dan Republike Srpske is January 9, and it is celebrated with a military parade that takes place in Banja Luka, the capital of RS. In Gradiška, the celebrations take place the day before. Sources: [http://gradiska.com/vijesti/gradiska/drustvo/povodom-9-januara-dana-republike-srpske-polozeni-vijenci-i-sluzen-parastos.html?fbclid=IwAR32rNmXFvJ5ruNhBPhaBpK-IE7\\_RyH6EV22A3TXvebLW8wG1Nz2LcG1oKU](http://gradiska.com/vijesti/gradiska/drustvo/povodom-9-januara-dana-republike-srpske-polozeni-vijenci-i-sluzen-parastos.html?fbclid=IwAR32rNmXFvJ5ruNhBPhaBpK-IE7_RyH6EV22A3TXvebLW8wG1Nz2LcG1oKU) and <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnian-serbs-celebrate-contentious-republika-srpska-day-/30368355.html>, accessed June 17, 2020.
- 38 The use of English in this case was instrumental in creating a line of communication from which the other party members were excluded. Journal log, discussion with N.Š. Notes on January 8, 2019.
- 39 Trebinje is the location where SNSD youth party association traditionally holds its yearly meeting and political camp.
- 40 SDA stands for Stranka demokratske akcije, the Bosniak party founded by former president of BiH Alija Izetbegović.
- 41 The military offensive carried out from May 1 to 3, 1995 by the Croatian Army is known as Operation Flash (*Operacija Bljesak*). See Mirković 2018.
- 42 According to the last national survey, out of the 51.727 living in the municipality Gradiška, only 17.771 citizens live in the same place where they were born. The number of people from the Federation of BiH amounts at 5.536, and 4.486 moved to the municipality from a former Yugoslavian country. See Agencija za Statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine 2016.
- 43 The Berbir Battalion (*Berbir bojna*) was a military group composed of Bosniak soldiers which was active in 1992; the group was under the direction of the Croatian Army. Its exist-

ence is confirmed by several documents presented the ICTY Case number 8 IT-04-74-T, the Prosecutor versus Prlić et al. (<https://www.icty.org/x/cases/prlic/trans/en/070306ED.htm>, accessed on September 15, 2020). However, the authority under which the battalion conducted its operation is a source of a dispute, with the Croatian authorities denying any direct involvement. “Annex B - Slobodan Praljak’s request for reconsideration or, in the alternative, for certification to appeal the non-admission of certain documentary evidence” refers to a report issued by Slavko Tomanjik to the embassy of the RBiH military economic representative office, stating the following: “[the report] describes how the battalion was established in May 1992 in Zagreb, and then was sent to the BiH as a part of the ABiH. Moreover, this battalion was active in the BiH army but asked the HV for assistance with logistics (page 9).” Source <http://icr.icty.org/LegalRef/CMSDocStore/Public/English/Request/NotIndexable/IT-04-74/MRA18973R0000291505.pdf>, accessed September 15, 2020.

- 44 When I attended the commemorations, in 2019, the number of attendees was around 200. The official ceremony is also preceded by a series of parallel initiatives aimed to involve the local population. One example is constituted by the football memorial tournament “Bokovi” that takes place the day before the official commemorations. See <https://gradiska.com/vijesti/gradiska/sport/udruzenje-gradana-hrast-pobjednik-turnira-bokovi-2019.html>, accessed on September 18, 2020.
- 45 In August 2019, the commemoration was attended by the president of Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović. Source: <http://gradiska.tv/obiljezana-27-godisnjica-odbrane-gradiske-na-bokovima/>.
- 46 *Glas Srpske*. August 9, 1992. P. 4.
- 47 *Glas Srpske*. August 10, 1992. P. 1, 5.
- 48 The article is titled “*Junaci nikad ne umiru*” (Heroes never die). *Glas Srpske*. August 12, 1992, p. 5.
- 49 Episodes of smuggling and arms trafficking across the Gradiška border are extensively reported in the months before the attack by local media and police reports. As of the time of writing, I could not find any substantial evidence to corroborate the story of the ‘arsenal’ and the ‘Berbir’ road sign.
- 50 Several cases are reported by ICTY investigators and witnesses in ICTY Case number IT-08-91-T. 7 - The Prosecutor versus Mico Stanisic and Stojan Zupljanin. See Official transcript p. 26,052. [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin\\_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm), accessed on October 12, 2020. And [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin\\_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/zupljanin_stanisicm/trans/en/111118ED.htm).
- 51 See Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Interior, Monthly Report (December 30, 1991 to January 30, 1992). Evidence number 03041374, ICTY case number, 10 IT-99-36-T, Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brdjanin.

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