Petra Hamer[1]

Between Camp and Cross: Ambiguity, Memory, and Commemoration in Trnopolje

ABSTRACT: This article examines how historical narratives, collective memory, and embodied personal experience shape postwar nation-making and border-making in Bosnia-Herzegovina, through an ethnographic analysis of commemorative landscapes in the north-western municipality of Prijedor. Based on personal narratives, everyday practices, and situated encounters with sites such as the former Trnopolje detention camp, the Trnopolje Cross, the Kozarac memorial, and the Prijedor Cross, the article explores how ethno-national modes of commemoration produce and sustain contested 'deathscapes'. It argues that, despite profound ethno-national and religious divisions between Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) living in Republika Srpska, the dead are publicly acknowledged and ritually commemorated in comparable ways, so long as remembrance remains anchored within nationalistic frameworks of 'us' versus 'them'. Drawing on anthropological theories of collective memory (Halbwachs 1980), nationalism and nation-making (Gellner 1987; Smith 1991), and the political lives of the dead (Verdery 1999), the article demonstrates how routine, everyday engagements with monuments and commemorative practices reproduce ethno-national belonging and sediment post-conflict divisions in Prijedor.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina; Trnopolje; Postwar Society; Collective Identity; Memorialisation; Monumentalisation; Remembrance

POVZETEK: Ta članek skozi etnografsko analizo spominskih pokrajin v severozahodni občini Prijedor preučuje, kako zgodovinski narativi, kolektivni spomin in osebne izkušnje posameznikov in posameznic oblikujejo povojne procese oblikovanja naroda in meja v Bosni in Hercegovini. Na podlagi osebnih pripovedi, vsakdanjih praks in umeščenih srečanj s kraji, kot so nekdanje taborišče Trnopolje, trnopoljski križ, spomenik v Kozarcu in prijedorski križ, članek raziskuje, kako etno-nacionalni načini komemoracije proizvajajo in ohranjajo sporne »pokrajine smrti«. Trdi, da so kljub globokim etno-nacionalnim in verskim razdelitvam med bosanskimi Srbi in bosanskimi muslimani (Bošnjaki), ki živijo v Republiki Srbski, mrtvi javno priznani in ritualno komemorirani na primerljive načine, dokler je spominjanje zasidrano znotraj nacionalističnih okvirov »mi« proti »njim«. Z opiranjem na antropološke teorije kolektivnega spomina (Halbwachs 1980), nacionalizma in oblikovanja narodov (Gellner 1987; Smith

1 Petra Hamer is a Postdoc Researcher at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Email: petra.hamer@ff.uni-lj.si

1991) ter političnega življenja mrtvih (Verdery 1999) članek pokaže, kako rutinska, vsakdanja soočanja s spomeniki in komemorativnimi praksami reproducirajo etno-nacionalno pripadnost in utrjujejo povojne delitve v Prijedorju.

Ključne besede: Bosna in Hercegovina, Trnopolje, povojna družba, kolektivna identiteta, memorijalizacija, monumentalizacija, kultura spominjanja

Introduction[2]

More than three decades after the formal end of the war, Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-H[3]) continues to be shaped by the material and symbolic legacies of violence. The war between 1992 and 1995 not only resulted in genocide, displacement and destruction, but also produced enduring spatial, social and mnemonic divisions that continue to structure everyday life. While armed conflict officially ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, the war's consequences remain deeply embedded in the postwar commemorative landscape, where memory, identity and political power intersect in highly contested ways. The Dayton peace agreement institutionalised these divisions also through the creation of two entities, the Serbian controlled *Republika Srpska* and the Bosniak and Croat dominated *Federacija*, alongside the jointly governed *Distrikt Brčko* (Jansen 2011). This territorial arrangement largely reflected the outcome of systematic campaigns of ethnic cleansing carried out by the leadership of *Republika Srpska* in cooperation with the Yugoslav National Army (JLA) and the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), aimed at producing an ethnically homogeneous Serbian territory. The conflict claimed approximately one hundred thousand lives and displaced about two million people, almost half of the pre-war population. Many who later returned to their homes encountered devastated landscapes, abandoned properties, and the absence of family members who had been killed or who remain missing. For many returnees, including several of my interlocutors, returning also meant becoming ethnic or religious minorities in places that had once been their own communities. Such demographic transformations have reinforced internal borders that separate not only territory but also identities, memories, and

2 This article is based on research funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 101095729, project DEAGENCY)

3 B-H refers to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I will use this abbreviation throughout the article.

everyday commemorative practices. These divisions are most pronounced in *Republika Srpska*, a Bosniak-minority entity where I conducted fieldwork for this article.

Within this broader context, commemorative landscapes have emerged as key sites through which postwar identities are negotiated and reproduced. Monuments, memorials, cemeteries, mass graves, and former detention camps are not neutral remnants of the past. Rather, they are active political and cultural instruments through which particular interpretations of history are legitimised, contested, or silenced. Scholars of memory have long emphasised that collective memory is socially framed and spatially anchored, produced through shared narratives, rituals, and material sites rather than stored as a fixed record of events (Halbwachs 1980; Nora 1989). In post-conflict societies, these processes are particularly fraught, as remembrance is closely tied to questions of responsibility, victimhood, and moral legitimacy.

This article focuses on the spatial constellation of the former Trnopolje detention camp and the Trnopolje Cross in northwestern B-H. Trnopolje[4] is not only a physical location, but also a symbolic node in wider struggles over memory, identity and political legitimacy. As Maddrell (2013) argues, contemporary *deathscapes* are characterised by the entanglement of grief, identity, and territorial belonging, revealing how spaces associated with death are deeply implicated in the politics of the living. The former camp, remembered internationally through iconic media image of Fikret Alić and legal testimony, functions as a site of Bosniak and Croat suffering under Bosnian Serb control. In contrast, the Trnopolje Cross, erected in 2000 in front of the former camp, materialises a rival narrative that centres Serbian sacrifice and foundational statehood. Additionally, the article gives a comparison between Kozarac[5] and Prijedor[6] monuments, providing an additional analytical lens through which to approach research questions by illustrating how selective commemoration operates differently across closely connected localities. By juxtaposing survivor-driven memoriali-

4 Latitude: 44.9800° N, Longitude: 16.7800° E.

5 Latitude: 44.97238° N, Longitude: 16.82864° E.

6 Latitude: 44.9808° N, Longitude: 16.7133° E.

sation grounded in lived experience with institutionally sanctioned, ethno-national commemorative dominance, the analysis demonstrates how everyday encounters with memorial landscapes actively shape ethno-national belonging and reinforce ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinctions in post-conflict B-H.

Read together, these sites form a composite and deeply contested deathscape, in which different collectives inscribe, defend, and negotiate their interpretations of the past. The juxtaposition of presence and absence, commemoration and erasure, produces a mnemonic palimpsest, where memory is neither stable nor consensual, but continuously reshaped through everyday encounters and practices. This dynamic is not unique to Trnopolje, but reflects broader patterns of memorialisation across B-H, including the selective recognition of some victims, the marginalisation of others, and the uneven visibility of monuments and memorial plaques.

The article adopts an ethnographically informed, bottom-up approach that foregrounds personal narratives and everyday interactions with commemorative landscapes. Rather than treating monuments as static symbols imposed from above, it examines how individuals engage with, contest, and reinterpret these sites in their daily lives. In doing so, it situates personal storytelling and embodied experience at the centre of postwar memory production, highlighting how private narratives intersect with and reproduce broader socio-political dynamics such as ethno-nationalism.

The analysis is guided by two research questions. First, how do personal narratives, experiences, and everyday interactions with commemorative landscapes shape and reproduce ethno-national identities in postwar divided societies? This question explores how collective memory is produced and maintained at the level of lived experience, and how my interlocutors actively make sense of entity borders through daily engagements with monuments, former camp sites and commemorations. Drawing on Halbwachs’ concept of collective memory (1980), it emphasises the role of social frameworks and embodied practices in shaping identity and belonging. Second, how do practices of memorialisation and the selective absence or presence of monuments contribute to the construction of ‘us versus them’ dichotomies in post-conflict societies and nation-building processes? This question directs attention to the

material culture of memory and to the politics of visibility and silence. Building on theory of imagined communities (Anderson 2007), it examines how monuments and their absence function as active instruments in the production of national narratives, disciplining memory in ways that reinforce binary oppositions such as 'ours' versus 'theirs'. I argue that in B-H, commemorative landscapes are central to the ongoing reproduction of ethno-national boundaries. Through the interplay of personal narratives, everyday practices and material sites of memory, the war continues to be lived and reinterpreted in the present. The case of Trnopolje demonstrates how deathscapes become arenas of mnemonic struggle, where the political lives of the dead shape identities, moral claims, and forms of belonging long after the violence has ended.

Methodology

Although the ethnographic research was conducted in three municipalities in northwestern B-H[7] in the time frame from February 2024 to June 2025, this article deliberately narrows its analytical focus to Prijedor in order to examine in greater depth the local dynamics of commemorative practice and ethno-national identity formation. Participants were recruited either at random or based on referral. I included all individuals who wished to participate regardless of nationality, religion, gender, education, or socio-demographic background. All interlocutors had personally experienced the war and/or had been in the country when it began. The final sample consisted of ninety interlocutors and nineteen public events, and all participants were over eighteen years old with diverse ethnic identifications including Bosniak, Muslim, Bosnian Herzegovinian, Serb, Croat, Slovene, and Yugoslav. Semi-structured interview questions, previously validated within my research team, allowed for both comparability and flexibility. Core questions were asked consistently across interviews, while additional questions were adapted to personal wartime experiences. Usually, interlocutors invited me into their homes where I observed that many rebuilt properties displayed a modern architectural style and contained

7 In municipalities Prijedor in *Republika Srpska* with predominantly Bosnian Serb population; Sanski Most, and Ključ in the *Federacija* with predominantly Bosniak population.

religious symbols, family portraits, and in some cases the only surviving possessions of relatives killed in the conflict. My opening question, what had happened to participants and their families during the war, frequently elicited sharply divergent narratives.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and supported by fieldwork notes, a fieldwork diary (for my private usage), photographs, videos, and audio recordings of public speeches. I excluded those interviews and materials that did not relate to the research questions of this article. To organise the material, I maintained a participant registry and catalogued all interviews, events, observational notes, and audio-visual materials with identifiers and metadata. Data analysis followed established qualitative procedures, including thematic coding, grounded theory techniques, narrative and discourse analysis, and ethnographic interpretation. Field notes and interviews were coded inductively and codes were developed into thematic categories through the identification of recurrent ideas, behavioural patterns, contradictions, and divergent accounts of similar events. Triangulation involved cross analysing interviews, observations, documentary material, and the varied perspectives of actors in different social positions.

I attended nineteen public events across the three field sites and conducted participant observation, collecting photographic material and audio recordings of speeches delivered by political, religious, and community figures. I observed each event from the moment participants began to gather, noting how spatial arrangements reflected underlying hierarchies, and how the dramaturgy and protocols structured interactions and flows of events. I documented who assumed particular roles, how rituals unfolded, and how audiences responded. For the purposes of this article I included only those elements that provide essential contextual understanding for the analysis that follows. All data collection and analysis procedures were designed to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and sensitivity to the emotional weight carried by participants.

Theoretical Framework

A foundational assumption of this article is that memory is socially produced, emerging from individual experiences that are shaped, organised,

and given meaning through both bottom-up practices and top-down institutional and political influences. Maurice Halbwachs (1980) conceptualises collective memory as a process through which social groups reconstruct the past according to present needs and shared frameworks of meaning. Collective memory differs from history, is rooted in lived social relations and sustained only as long as the particular group exist. It is embedded in institutions, rituals, and spatial settings that give memory durability and authority. Individuals often internalise these shared narratives, making collective memory central to the reproduction of national and ethno-religious identities. Halbwachs' emphasis on the present oriented nature of memory is complemented by Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Hobsbawm demonstrates how rituals, symbols, and narratives are deliberately created, often by political or religious elites, to appear ancient and natural even when they are of recent origin. While Halbwachs highlights the social shaping of memory through everyday interaction, Hobsbawm foregrounds intentional fabrication as a political strategy. Together, they show that remembrance is neither neutral nor spontaneous. What is remembered, forgotten, or ritualised is selected to legitimise authority and stabilise collective identities.

In post-conflict settings, memory is also structured by silence. Yael Danieli's (1998) concept of the conspiracy of silence captures how traumatic experiences may be publicly acknowledged while remaining privately suppressed, with emotional legacies circulating informally within families and communities. Silence functions as a social practice that manages pain and political risk, but it can also reinforce exclusion by allowing dominant narratives to prevail while marginalising others. In B-H, such silences often coexist with highly visible commemorative practices, producing a fragmented memory landscape in which official narratives and private recollections remain disconnected. This is especially visible in the Prijedor municipality, where one ethno-national narrative is visible in monuments, commemorations, including in the local museum, while the other is deprived, denied, and ignored. In this case, it produces symbolic boundaries that allow collective memory to become a site of political struggle, closely linked to questions of responsibility, victimhood, and moral legitimacy.

The dynamics of collective memory are inseparable from broader processes of nation-building and territorialisation. Memory does not circulate in abstraction, but is embedded in projects that seek to define who belongs to a nation, where a nation is located, and how its history should be publicly recognised. In this sense, commemorative practices are constitutive of national and ethno-religious identities. Classical theories conceptualised nations as relatively stable formations grounded in shared culture, history, and myth (Gellner 1987; Smith 1991), or as imagined political communities sustained through shared narratives and symbols (Anderson 2007). These approaches remain useful for understanding how national identities are institutionalised and rendered socially intelligible, particularly through education, ritual, and public commemoration. However, following Rogers Brubaker, this article treats nationhood as a dynamic and relational process rather than as a bounded group identity (Brubaker 2004). Brubaker's critique of groupism is especially relevant in postwar B-H, where political discourse often presents ethnic groups as homogeneous and internally coherent despite the fluid and situational nature of everyday identification. In Prijedor, commemorative practices repeatedly reinforce these essentialised representations by framing identity as natural, territorially anchored, and mutually exclusive.

Across all these perspectives, territory remains a central stake. The assumption that a nation requires its own territory to complete its nation-building project is deeply embedded in nationalist thought (Yiftachel 2001, cited in Özkırımlı 2002). In post-conflict B-H, commemorative landscapes play a crucial role in symbolically securing territory by embedding national narratives in specific places. The marking of some sites of violence and the neglect or erasure of others contributes to the naturalisation of ethnic ownership over space and to the consolidation of postwar borders in everyday life. These processes operate not only through official commemorations but also through actions of what Michael Billig (1995) described as banal nationalism. He argues that national identity is reproduced through everyday encounters with monuments, flags, plaques, and commemorative rituals. Such practices function as constant but often unnoticed reminders of national belonging, embedding ethno-national distinctions in ordinary spatial experience. Billig also highlights the asym-

metry between dominant memory practices framed as legitimate and defensive, while alternative narratives are portrayed as excessive or threatening. In Prijedor, this asymmetry is visible in the differential recognition of wartime suffering and in the framing of commemorative practices as either acceptable expressions of loyalty or challenges to social order.

To understand how memory is lived and encountered, this article draws on the concept of deathscapes (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010), which refers to both places associated with death, and to the meanings and emotions attached to them. These include cemeteries, memorials, mass graves, former detention camps, and domestic spaces of remembrance, all of which form dense mnemonic terrains through which identity is materially and emotionally inscribed. The concept has a wider genealogy in work on informal memorialisation and the emotional geographies of death (Hartig and Dunn 1998; Kong 1999), emphasising that deathscapes are not passive backdrops to mourning but active social spaces where memory, power, and belonging are negotiated. Many scholars have explored the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of deathscapes such as cemeteries and memorial landscapes across diverse contexts (Cameron 2009; Teather 2001; Yeoh 1999; Romanillos 2015; Maddrell and Sidaway 2010), but in the case of B-H, deathscapes are central to postwar life because the dead and the missing remain politically, symbolically, and emotionally present. The landscape is permeated with traces of violence and its aftermath, and everyday movement through space frequently involves encounters with contested sites of remembrance. As Maddrell observes, contemporary landscapes are overlaid with multiple '-scapes', including deathscapes and memorialscapes, which shape how people experience and interpret their surroundings (Maddrell 2013, 510). Deathscapes also foreground the politics of absence. Unmarked graves, missing memorial plaques or monuments, and the erasure of certain sites from official commemorative maps, are not neutral omissions. They are meaningful practices that structure whose losses are publicly recognised and whose remain invisible. Such absences can intensify vernacular remembrance while simultaneously reinforcing exclusion at the institutional level.

The final theoretical pillar of this article is Katherine Verdery's concept of the political lives of dead bodies. Verdery argues that the dead possess

political agency because their remains, graves, and symbolic representations can be mobilised to assert territorial claims, legitimise authority, and articulate collective identities (Verdery 1999). In post-conflict contexts, acts such as reburial, monument construction, and the marking or non-marking of mass grave sites are not only expressions of mourning but also interventions in political and moral order. In B-H, the dead continue to shape political discourse and community formation. Their presence or absence in commemorative landscapes generates narratives that legitimise certain identities while delegitimising others. The dead thus remain active participants in social life, shaping moral hierarchies, spatial claims, and collective memory long after violence has ended.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives conceptualise remembrance as layered, contested, and politically consequential. Collective memory is shaped through social frameworks, selective narration, invention, and silence (Halbwachs 1980; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Danieli 1998). Nationhood and territory are reproduced through everyday practices and commemorative landscapes that normalise ethno-national boundaries (Brubaker 2004; Billig 1995). Deathscapes provide the spatial and affective settings in which these processes are lived and negotiated (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010; Maddrell 2013), while the dead continue to exert political influence through their symbolic and territorial significance (Verdery 1999). Together, these approaches offer a robust framework for analysing how ethno-national identities are reproduced in post-conflict B-H and how commemorative practices sustain enduring 'us' versus 'them' divisions, particularly in contested localities such as Prijedor.

Short Historical Context

In the spring of 1992, the municipality of Prijedor in north-western B-H, in the *Krajina* region, now part of *Republika Srpska*, became one of the earliest and most systematic sites of ethnic cleansing. Following the seizure of power by Bosnian Serb authorities affiliated with the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the non-Serb populations were subjected to coordinated campaigns of intimidation, isolation, expulsion, and violence (Neuffer 2002; Vučkovac 2021). Approximately 30,000 Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats were detained in detention camps, most notably Omarska, Keraterm,

and Trnopolje, which rapidly became sites of severe abuse, torture, and killing (Vučkovac 2021, 234). From spring to autumn 1992, at least 3,176 Bosniaks were killed, alongside 186 Croat, and 78 Serb civilians (Medić 2019, 445). Their remains were later exhumed from more than two hundred mass graves in and around Prijedor (Izvor 2012; Tabeau and Bijak 2005). Children[8] and minors were also among the victims, underscoring the indiscriminate nature of the violence (Medić 2019). The consequences of these events continue to shape post-war Prijedor, influencing patterns of refugee return, local peacebuilding, and deeply contested practices of remembrance (Belloni 2005). Contemporary commemorative initiatives, such as White Armband Day (*Dan bjelih traka*), demonstrate how memories of Prijedor have moved beyond the local context to become transnational symbols of injustice and resistance against denial (Paul 2021) and silence (Danieli 1998).

Trnopolje is a small village in the municipality of Prijedor, where in the spring of 1992 (24th of May) Bosnian Serb authorities established a detention camp in a former school building, cinema, and cultural centre. The camp was primarily used to detain Bosniak and Croat civilians, particularly women, children and elderly, who were held under conditions of fear, deprivation, and violence (Mihajlović Trbovc 2014, 28; Jennings 2013, 80). Bosnian Serb authorities, alongside with my Bosnian Serb interlocutors describe Trnopolje as a transit centre: 'These were centres to which Muslim individuals from the surrounding areas, from the *Bosanska Krajina* region, were unquestionably brought, most often people who were of military age and who, in one way or another, were armed and had offered resistance to the authorities at the time' (PH_007)[9].

In contrast, survivor testimonies and journalistic accounts place Trnopolje alongside Omarska and Keraterm as part of a broader system of detention and persecution in the Prijedor region (Riding 2015, 379). In August 1992, the camp gained global visibility when British journalists Ed Vulliamy and Penny Marshall visited first the Omarska camp and then Tr-

---

8 Till today, a monument to commemorate the 102 killed children remains absent in the municipality of Prijedor because of continued ethnic divisions (Riding 2015, 391).

9 PH_007, male, 42 years, Bosnian Serb.

nopolje and photographed detainees behind barbed wire (PH_001)[10]. One image, showing the emaciated Bosniak detainee, Fikret Alić, appeared on the covers of international magazines Guardian, Time, and TN (Sadiković 2018), becoming one of the most recognisable visual symbols of the Bosnian war (Karčić 2022, 3; Paul 2021).

Today, the deathscape of Trnopolje does not have an official memorial dedicated to the civilian victims of the camp. During this year's commemoration that took place on 26th of May (2025), I entered the 'memorial room' situated within the former cultural centre; its complete emptiness starkly underscored the absence of institutional recognition for the camp's victims (PH_n_016)[11]. Instead, a monument honouring Serb soldiers who lost their lives for the creation of *Republika Srpska* was installed in 2000 in front of the former camp complex, at a site where no fighting took place, effectively overwriting the site's history (Paul 2021, 7). This commemorative inversion reflects a broader pattern in Prijedor, where monuments to Serb combatants are highly visible, while memorials to non-Serb civilian victims remain absent or are actively prevented (Riding 2015, 391–393). This dissonance is particularly stark given local memories of Trnopolje as a historically multi-ethnic village, where at least twelve national minorities lived before the war, including Ukrainians, who also had their own church. One interlocutor recalls how this plural social fabric was violently ruptured during the war, when his family was also forcibly separated (PH_011)[12].

Case Study of Trnopolje Camp and Trnopolje Cross

As a deathscape, the former camp is marked as much by absence as by presence. The camp operated between May and November 1992. Unlike

10 PH_001, male, 53 years, Bosniak.

11 PH_n_016 designates record from a commemoration at which I conducted participant observation. It was a 33rd anniversary of the establishment of the Trnopolje camp, held on 26 May 2025. The commemoration is organised by the Association of Camp Survivors of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Regional Association of Camp Survivors of the Banja Luka region, the Association of Camp Survivors 'Prijedor '92', and the Kozarac Association of Camp Survivors. The event included a commemorative programme in front of the former camp facilities, political speeches, a prayer and laying of flowers.

12 PH_011, male, 64 years, Bosniak.

some massacre sites, Trnopolje is not dominated by mass graves or extensive cemeteries. Instead, its deathscape character arises from the knowledge of what occurred there, from survivors' testimonies, and from the social and bodily memories that continue to inhabit the space. It is a landscape of terror and displacement, where absence is palpable in the form of those who have not returned. In Halbwachsian terms, the camp is inscribed into a global framework of memory that transcends local disputes. However, the local spatial ordering of memory tells a more complicated story. As my interlocutors indicated, the camp area is for them a place of daily encounter with the past: 'I live close by, and I get the chills every time I pass the cross.' (PH_043)[13]

Here, Trnopolje appears as a lived deathscape in Maddrell's sense, where everyday mobility is haunted by traumatic recall and where commemorative practice is experienced as a moral obligation to absent victims. The chills described by the interlocutor are not simply individual affects, but are socially produced responses generated by the collision of personal experience, collective narrative, and a spatial environment that refuses closure.

If the former camp anchors a narrative of atrocity, the monument erected in 2000 in front of it reconfigures the mnemonic field in a markedly different direction. It is dedicated to 'soldiers who gave their lives to build the foundations of *Republika Srpska*.' The monument is made in the shape of an eagle with outstretched wings, emblazoned with metal plaques explaining, the meaning of the monument (Riding 2015, 392–393).

Several implications follow from this juxtaposition. First, there is a striking dissonance between the historical function of the site and the dedication inscribed on the monument. The monument does not mention the detainees of the camp at all. Instead, it honours Serb fighters who are framed as foundational to *Republika Srpska*. The spatial and symbolic centrality of the monument in front of the former camp effectively privileges a Serb narrative of sacrifice and state-building over recognition of non-Serb suffering. In Foote's (2003) terms, the site is not simply neglect-

13 PH_043, female, 68 years, Bosniak.

ed or obliterated but actively re-marked in a manner that redirects moral attention. Second, the iconography of the monument combines national and religious symbolism. The eagle is a long-standing emblem in Serbian heraldry and orthodoxy, and the superimposed cross sacralises the soldiers' deaths as a Christian sacrifice. This configuration casts Serb fighters as martyrs who 'gave their lives' for the freedom and existence of *Republika Srpska*. The monument thus embodies what Verdery (1999) identifies as one of the core political uses of the dead, namely the capacity of corpses and symbolic representations of the dead to legitimise new forms of authority and territorial claims. By honouring the Serb dead at the very site associated internationally with Serb perpetration, the monument performs an inversion of the moral geography of the war. Third, the timing of the monument's erection in 2000 situates it firmly within the postwar period of entrenching ethno-national divisions in B-H. Rather than opening space for shared commemoration, it reasserts a unilateral narrative that aligns with nationalist rhetoric in both public and private spheres. It participates in what Kromják (2017) identifies as a memorial culture in which the existence and absence of monuments become key mechanisms for shaping collective consciousness. Additionally, my Muslim interlocutors from Trnopolje expressed criticism towards the existing monument, saying it is not right to honour the perpetrators in front of the former camp. For them, this deathscape is full of sad and bad memories, experiences, and traumas. It signals an awareness that the landscape itself has become an arena in which the meaning of death and suffering is negotiated, and in which mnemonic violence can be exercised by elevating some dead while silencing others.

Viewed together, the former camp and the Trnopolje Cross constitute an entangled deathscape shaped by competing mobilisation of the dead. On the one hand, the Bosniak and Croat dead associated with the camp are often physically absent from the site, whether because they were killed elsewhere, remain missing, or are buried in different locations. Their political presence is sustained through survivor testimony, commemorative gatherings and demands for justice. On the other hand, the Serb dead invoked by the monument are symbolically hyper present in the immediate landscape, despite the site not being primarily associated with Serb deaths during the war. Following Verdery (1999), we can understand the Bosniak

and Croat dead as having a political life that is fundamentally linked to claims for recognition of atrocity, accountability, and the moral delegitimisation of ethno-nationalist violence. They haunt Trnopolje through absence. Their absence from the monument, and indeed in official local memorial culture, becomes a powerful negative sign. It testifies to their exclusion from the dominant narrative and to an ongoing struggle over whose suffering counts.

Commemorations at Trnopolje Camp

My interlocutors attend two commemorations in Trnopolje every year. the first is in May, organised by Camp survivors organisations together with the Islamic community. The second is the event *Night in Trnopolje*, organised every august by the youth NGO *Kvart*.

The annual commemoration that I attended this year (2025) constitutes an act of counter-memory that attempts to reinscribe these dead into the moral landscape of the village. Interestingly, my Bosniak interlocutor, who attends all commemorations regarding the former camps, critically explained:

> Commemorations held at former camps have become monotonous and predictable, each year follows the same pattern: national anthem, political speeches, minute of silence, prayer *Al-Fatiha*[14], laying of flowers, allowing everyone to pay their respects in a personal way. But in general, those events are always the same. For a few hours, the site becomes a space of remembrance, after which it reverts once again to private ownership and everyday use. (PH_004)[15]

The continuity of the commemoration is not always seen as negative. Many interlocutors confirmed they see it as their moral obligation towards the victims, remembering them, speaking out their names means they did not die in vain. They do agree and are critical, towards those, who use commemorations for political agitation. It was interesting observing the

---

14 Al-Fātiha (Arabic: 'The Opening') is the first chapter of the Qur'an, recited by Muslims in daily prayers and often read at graves or memorials as a prayer for the deceased. In B-H, it is recited not only during daily prayers but also at funerals, memorial gatherings, and graveside visits, serving both as a prayer for the deceased and an expression of respect and remembrance. My interlocutors usually used the word *fatiha*.

15 PH_004, male, 53 years, Bosniak.

dynamics of the event, seeing the absurdity of the situation, when a long speech by one of the camp survivors representatives evoked negative comments from the crowd, saying it is too hot to listen to them (PH_n_016).

In order to deliberately avoid politics and nationalisation of the Trnopolje camp, the local NGO *Kvart* organises an alternative commemoration *Night in Trnopolje*. Through the criticism of nationalistic politics of Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs authorities, it is an alternative commemoration carried out in a way that is completely different from those held elsewhere.

> It takes place at night. By doing so, we wanted to convey something important: the camps existed at night as well, they were not only a daytime reality. Because the event is held outdoors, we chose 5 August, the date of the visit by British journalists, when the wider international public first became aware of what was happening. Only a small part of the programme is dedicated to speaking directly about Trnopolje itself. The rest consists of film screenings, exhibitions, book promotions. Everything is framed within a human-rights perspective. (PH_001)[16]

Bosniak victims hold annual commemorations at a site where Serb perpetrators have erected a monument honouring their soldiers. In one place two ethno-national and religious narratives coexist, mobilising the living and the dead. The Serb fighters honoured by the monument have a political life that revolves around asserting the legitimacy of *Republika Srpska* and recasting Serbs primarily as victims or heroic defenders. Their inscribed presence works to normalise a reading of the war in which Serb violence is either downplayed or framed as necessary defence. The monument thus mobilises the dead to contest the international portrayal of Trnopolje as a site of Serb perpetration. It does so not through explicit denial, but through strategic forgetting and re-emphasis, a process that Mijić (2018) identifies as central to the maintenance of contested narratives. The site becomes a layered space, where one group legitimises symbols of national endurance, while another group sees this a painful provocation that honours those perceived as perpetrators and contributes to a sense of ongoing injustice.

16 PH_001, male, 53 years, Bosniak.

The co-existence of the former camp and the Trnopolje Cross in a single locality can be read as an architectural diagram of Bosnia's broader memory politics. Together, these processes sustain ethnic separation by suppressing uncomfortable truths and perpetuating contested narratives (Mijić 2018, 138). Privileging the dead of one group and marginalizing the dead of others is not merely a matter of symbolic injustice. It also has practical implications for the possibilities of coexistence and reconciliation. These frameworks support different interpretations of the same space, resulting in what might be termed parallel memory regimes.

Comparative Case of Kozarac and Prijedor: Selective Commemoration, Lived Experience, and the Reproduction of Ethno-national Belonging

The Kozarac Memorial stands in the centre of the predominantly Muslim town of Kozarac and serves as a tribute to Bosniak victims of wartime atrocities. Unveiled on 31st of July 2010, the open-air memorial commemorates more than 1,200 victims. Its circular form invites movement and reflection, while its white marble structure is punctuated by iron rods of varying lengths symbolising the different ages of the victims. The walk-in interior bears the names of both civilians and soldiers, collapsing rigid distinctions between categories of wartime loss. Its central location means that residents and visitors cannot avoid passing by the memorial, embedding memories of violence into everyday routines. This spatial centrality makes Kozarac's memorial landscape inseparable from the lived experiences of its inhabitants. 'In Kozarac stands the only monument in Republika Srpska that commemorates Bosniak victims. The people of Kozarac erected it because they respect themselves and their dead.' (PH_048)[17]

For survivors the memorial does not simply represent the past but articulates a moral claim grounded in embodied suffering. Laying of flowers and praying *Al-Fatiha* at the monument is part of every commemoration, bringing people together, and many see this as their moral obligation towards the dead. This understanding of the memorial as a moral claim root-

17 PH_048, male, 80 years, Bosniak.

ed in lived suffering is further articulated through the voices of survivors themselves. For those who endured the camps, remembrance is not confined to a physical site or ritualised commemoration, but rather entails an ongoing obligation to speak, to demand recognition, and to resist erasure. As one survivor from Omarska explained, his engagement in memorial activism is inseparable from a sense of responsibility toward those who did not survive: 'My commitment has never been solely to remembering the dead, but to ensuring that the detention camps of 1992–1995 are formally recognised and commemorated. I believe that my work is driven above all by respect for those who did not survive. I have always felt, in a very real sense, that I am their voice… I live to tell.' (PH_040)[18]

Today, Kozarac has become a symbolic reference point in transnational discourses on ethnic cleansing, genocide, and human rights. According to Verdery, the dead continue to exercise political agency through memory, mobilised as testimony that demands recognition and accountability beyond the local context. At the same time, Kozarac's visibility is partial. While the memorial exists, there are no plaques marking the numerous mass graves scattered over Prijedor municipality[19]. This selective recognition signals that commemoration remains politically constrained. The absence of such markers reinforces feelings of marginalisation and strengthens in-group solidarity among Bosniaks, while deepening mistrust towards dominant political institutions. Personal trauma is thus translated into collective identity, with commemoration functioning as a site where memory, morality, and belonging converge. As Halbwachs suggests, collective memory is anchored in social frameworks, but these frameworks are sustained through lived experience. In Kozarac, memory is reproduced through survivor testimony, ritual repetition, and everyday engagement with a memorial that validates Bosniak victimhood within an otherwise hostile commemorative environment.

In Prijedor a seven-metre high Serbian Orthodox cross, erected in 2012, occupies a central urban location and commemorates the fallen and in-

18 PH_040, male, 52 years, Bosniak.

19 The exception is a tombstone in Stari Kevljani secondary mass grave where 456 bodies were exhumed in 2004.

jured fighters of the so-called Defensive Homeland War of 1990–1996. The inscription *Za krst časni* (For the Honourable Cross), drawn from the phrase *Za krst časni i slobodu zlatnu* (For the Honourable Cross and Golden Freedom), invokes deeply rooted Serbian religious and historical symbolism, expressing devotion to Orthodoxy and readiness to sacrifice for freedom. Its invocation situates the violence of the 1990s within a longer narrative of national struggle and moral righteousness. Nearby, in *Kozarski park*, stands the *Spomen kuća Kameni cvijet* (Stone Flower Memorial House), a small chapel-like structure listing the names of Serbian fighters. Visitors may enter, light candles, and pray, embedding remembrance into routine religious practice. The symbolic reference to the Stone Flower monument at Jasenovac concentration camp[20] reinforces parallels between the wars of the 1990s and the atrocities of the Second World War, anchoring contemporary Serbian victimhood in a longer historical continuum.

Both monuments are part of the annual commemorations, with the most significant taking place on the 30th of May, marking the anniversaries of liberation in the Second World War and the defence of the city during attacks by Muslim and Croatian paramilitary formations. On this occasion, a *parastos*[21] is held in the local Orthodox Church, followed by a ceremonial parade through the city of Prijedor. After wreaths are laid and prayers are offered at both monuments, the commemoration concludes at the main square dedicated to Major Zoran Karlica,[22] one of the 15 members of the Bosnian Serb army and police forces who died in 1992, while 27 others were wounded.

---

20 Jasenovac, a town in Croatia, was the site of one of Europe's largest concentration camps during the Second World War, run by the fascist *Ustaše* regime from 1941 to 1945. Part of the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the camp was known for its brutal treatment of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political dissidents. The number of victims remains disputed. For Bosnian Serbs, Jasenovac symbolises a genocide against their people that remains unrecognised by the international community (Kužnar, Odak and Lucić 2023). Among my Bosnian Serb interlocutors, majority is convinced that the Second World War atrocities committed in Jasenovac are still not properly researched and elaborated.

21 *Parastos* is a memorial service in the Serbian Orthodox Church. Alongside the liturgy, they consist of prayers performed by priests in remembrance of the dead, often held at gravesites or memorials, and dedicated to the repose of the souls of those who were killed (PH_007).

22 In *Republika Srpska* a single official Serbian state narrative prevails, contrasted with a Bosniak narrative in the Federation, or the absence of a Croatian narrative, and the erasure of supranational Yugoslav identity (see Džankić 2015; Lendák-Kabók 2024), exemplifying what Billig terms banal nationalism through everyday symbols such as street names and public commemorations.

Viewed comparatively, the memorial landscapes of Kozarac and Prijedor demonstrate how selective commemoration sustains rather than bridges ethno-national divisions. While Kozarac's survivor driven memorial makes Bosniak suffering locally visible, Prijedor's dominant commemorative regime foregrounds Serbian sacrifice and asserts symbolic control over public space and historical meaning. The resulting spatial separation of memory produces parallel mnemonic worlds within the same municipality, reinforcing the us and them distinctions and limiting moral engagement with crimes committed against non-Serb civilians. Rather than fostering reconciliation, these memorial practices entrench competing moral geographies, ensuring that remembrance continues to reproduce post-conflict division in B-H.

Conclusion

This article has examined how commemorative landscapes in post-conflict B-H operate as active sites of ethno-national identity formation rather than as neutral spaces of remembrance. Through a comparative analysis of Trnopolje camp, Trnopolje cross, and monuments in Kozarac and Prijedor, grounded in personal narratives and everyday encounters with memorial space, it has demonstrated that practices of commemoration are deeply implicated in how individuals interpret both the violent past and the contemporary political order. Far from fostering reconciliation or shared understanding, selective memorialisation often reinforces ethno-national belonging and entrenches divisions that remain central to post-war life.

The analysis has shown that personal experiences of detention, torture, forced displacement, and the loss of family members profoundly shape how people engage with commemorative landscapes. For survivors, memory is not an abstract historical concern but an embodied and ongoing reality that informs their moral and political judgements. The spatial constellation of the former Trnopolje camp and the Trnopolje cross constitutes a dense mnemonic landscape in which competing narratives of the Bosnian war are articulated, contested, and sedimented. As such, it exemplifies what Maddrell (2013) describes as the entanglement of grief, identity and territorial belonging in contemporary deathscapes, where spaces of the dead are deeply implicated in the politics of the living.

In Kozarac, survivor driven memorialisation translates lived trauma into a collective moral claim. The central visibility of the Kozarac Memorial affirms Bosniak suffering and asserts belonging within a political entity where such suffering is otherwise marginalised. Annual rituals, survivor activism, and everyday encounters with the memorial reproduce a shared framework of meaning through which Bosniak identity is sustained and transmitted across generations. In this sense, collective memory, as theorised by Halbwachs, is shown to be inseparable from lived experience and social practice.

In Prijedor, by contrast, commemorative practices are institutionally sanctioned, spatially dominant, and oriented towards Serbian national and religious narrative. The central placement of the Orthodox cross and related memorial structures embeds a particular interpretation of the war into everyday urban life, framing it as a defensive and morally justified struggle. Through religious symbolism, historical references, and ritual accessibility, these monuments normalise Serbian ethno-national identity as the default and legitimate mode of belonging. According to Billig, they function as banal nationalism, continuously flagging Serbian ownership of space, history, and moral authority.

All the examples discussed illustrate how opposing commemorative regimes can coexist spatially without convergence, stabilising parallel mnemonic worlds that reproduce 'us' versus 'them' dichotomies. Within the same municipality, post-conflict memory in B-H is not negotiated through shared narratives but through selective recognition and exclusion, with the dead continuing to exert political agency in Verdery's sense by shaping identity, belonging, and moral order long after the violence has ended. This study, which directly addresses the research questions, has demonstrated that personal narratives and everyday engagements with commemorative landscapes play a central role in reproducing ethno-national identities, as experiences of extreme violence remain embedded in how individuals interpret the present and position themselves within contested national frameworks. Practices of memorialisation that privilege a single ethno-national narrative do not merely reflect existing divisions but actively strengthen them by aligning memory with territory, morality, and legitimacy. From my experience in the field, this raises a critical question

about whether meaningful coexistence is possible as long as communities remain oriented primarily towards their own suffering, without fully acknowledging the pain and continued existence of others, both the dead and the living. As long as memorial landscapes remain selective, spatially segregated, and aligned with exclusive narratives, they are likely to function as sites of boundary making rather than spaces of shared reflection, constraining the possibilities for a more inclusive post-conflict future.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. 2007. *Zamišljene skupnosti: O izvoru in* širjenju *nacionalizma*. Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis.

Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism.* London: SAGE. Access: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221648 (1 October 2025).

Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University press.

Cameron, Sarah. 2009. Beyond deathscapes? Geographical engagements with death and its meanings. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(2): 236–253. Access: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508099796 (1 October 2025).

Danieli, Yael, ed. 1998. *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma.* New York: Plenum.

Džankić, Jelena. 2015. *Citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro: Effects of Statehood and identity Challanges.* London: Routledge.

Foote, Kenneth E. 2003. *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy revised and updated*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

Gellner, Ernest. 1987. *Nations and Nationalism.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1980. *The Collective Memory.* New York: Harper & Row. Access: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226774497.001.0001 (1 October 2025).

Hartig, Keith V., and Kate M. Dunn. 1998. Roadside memorials: Interpreting new deathscapes in Newcastle, New South Wales. *Australian Geographical Studies* 36(1): 5–20. Access: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8470.00036 (1 October 2025).

Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1992. *Nations and nationalism since 1780.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Izvor. 2012. *Knjiga nestalih opštine Prijedor: Ni krivi ni dužni*. Prijedor: Udruženje prijedorčanki Izvor.

Jansen, Stef. 2011. Troubled Locations. Return, the Life Course and Transformations of Home in Bosnia-Herzegovina, In *Struggles for home: Violence, Hope and the Movement of People* eds. Stef Jansen, and Staffan Löfving, 43–64. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. Access: https://doi.org/10.3167/9781845455231 (1 October 2025).

Kong, Lily. 1999. Cemeteries and Columbaria, Memorials and Mausoleums: Narrative and interpretation in the study of deathscapes in geography. *Australian Geographical Studies* 37(1): 1–10.

Kromják, Laura. 2017. *Witnesses to Balkan Killing Fields: Identity, Trauma, and Remembrance in Anglophone Testimonies of Bosnian Americans.* Graz: University of Graz.

Kužnar Benčić, Andriana, Stipe Odak, and Danijela Lucić. 2023. *Jasenovac Concentration Camp: An Unfinished Past.* London, New York: Routledge.

Lendák-Kabók, Karolina. 2024. Mixedness in conflict: The impact of Yugoslav wars on intermarriages in the Western Balkans. *Sociology Compass* 18(7): 1–11. Access: https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13156 (1 October 2025).

Maddrell, Avril. 2013. Living with the deceased: Absence, presence and absence-presence. *Cultural Geographies* 20(4): 501–522. Access: https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013482806 (1 October 2025).

Maddrell, Avril, and James D. Sidaway. 2010. *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*. Farnham: Routledge. Access: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315575988 (1 October 2025).

Mijić, Ana. 2018. Don't Talk About the Elephant: Silence and Ethnic Boundaries in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Human Studies* 41(1): 137–156. Access: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-017-9448-1 (1 October 2025).

Özkırımlı, Umut. 2002. *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A critical Engagement.* Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillian.

Riding, James. 2015. Landscape memory, and the shifting regional geographies of Northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Geo Humanities* 1(2): 378–397. Access: https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2015.1093917 (1 October 2025).

Romanillos, José Luis. 2011. Geography, Death, and Finitude. Geography, Death, and Finitude. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 43(11): 2533–2553. Access: https://doi.org/10.1068/a4474 (1 October 2025).

Sadiković, Mirza. 2018. 'Čovjek sa žice' – simbol najtužnijeg razdoblja historije BiH. Access: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2018/5/12/covjek-sa-zice-simbol-najtuznijeg-razdoblja-historije-bih (1 October 2025).

Smith D., Anthony. 1991. *National identity*. Reno, Las Vegas, London: University of Nevada Press.

Tabeau, Ewa, and Jakub Bijak. 2005. War-Related Deaths in the 1992-1995 Armed Conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Critique of Previous Estimates and Recent Results. *European Journal of Population* 21(2/3): 187–215. Access: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-005-6852-5 (1 October 2025).

Teather, Richard J. 2001. The case of the disorderly graves: Contemporary deathscapes in Guangzhou. *Social & Cultural Geography* 2(2): 185–202. Access: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360120047769 (1 October 2025).

Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change.* New York: Colombia University Press.

Vučkovac, Zoran. 2021. Against Institutionalised Forgetting: Memory Politics from Below in Postwar Prijedor. In *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans,* eds. Ana Milošević, and Tamara Trošt, 231–262. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Access: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54700-4_10 (1 October 2025).

Yeoh, Brenda S. A. 1999. Negotiating space for the dead: Cemeteries, columbaria and crematoria in colonial and contemporary Singapore. *Urban Studies* 36(1): 51–72. Access: https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098993760 (1 October 2025).