The Dead, the War, and Ethnic Identity: Ghost Narratives in Post-War Srebrenica

Mirjam Mencej

Abstract
Based on field research, this article studies the role of ghost narratives about the dead killed in the genocide of the Bosniak people in Srebrenica. It focuses on three clusters of belief narratives spread among the Bosniaks: narratives about ghosts of the unburied dead; narratives about the dead buried in the cemetery for the victims of the massacre; and narratives about a murdered imam appearing at the site of a demolished mosque, calling the faithful to prayer. The article argues that these stories are the effects of the persistent denial of the genocide by the Serbian population and of a strong sense among Bosniaks that justice has not yet been properly restored nor the perpetrators adequately punished. Ghost narratives play a significant role in the war discourse: through them, the Bosniak inhabitants of the Srebrenica region, lacking social and political power in the Serb-dominated territory, are able to articulate and maintain their memory of the massacre, reclaim the space, acquire some sense of control over the situation, and thus, ultimately, acquire some empowerment. Moreover, ghost legends occasionally prove vehicles for the transmission of ideological messages in the post-war identity processes of the Bosniak ethnic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Introduction
In the early 1990s, images of war in former Yugoslavia—shootings, dead bodies, columns of refugees, and bombings of historical monuments—flooded the media around the world. While the war that took place on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a republic of the former Yugoslavia, has been officially termed a ‘civil war’ between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) (occasionally also between Croats and Bosniaks), it began instead as a war for territory, serving Serbian but also Croatian expansionist appetites (Donia and Fine 2011, 17–18). Some 95,940 people were killed and more than two million became refugees or were displaced in the period from 1992 to 1995, when the war formally ended. The Dayton Agreement in 1995 divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, controlled by the Bosniaks and Croats; and Republika Srpska, administered by the Serbs. Of all three main ethic
groups—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, related to the cultures of Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Roman Catholic Christianity, respectively—Bosniaks suffered by far the heaviest losses. Over half of all displaced people and refugees were of Bosniak ethnic identity. Moreover, 62,013\(^1\) Bosniak people were killed in the course of the war, 31,107 of them civilians (Honig and Both 1997; Tokača 2012, 13–14).

Dead bodies of the victims of inter-ethnic violence, as an indisputable ‘material’ proof of the crimes committed, powerfully affect and shatter people’s lives, and evoke a variety of understandings, meanings, and emotions, as Katherine Verdery amply demonstrates in her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999). The rediscovery of the bodies of the victims of the ethnically motivated massacres during and immediately after World War II served to promote a new historical revisionism, in which nationalist histories emerged for the newly emerging states and helped ignite the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in 1991 (Hayden 1994, 172–78; Verdery 1999, 95–102). The materiality of the bodies allows them to be visibly displayable and engaged in various commemorative practices through which the death of the victims of violence enters the national memory; consequently, they can become powerful political symbols and sites of political profit (Verdery 1999, 27–33; Jonker and Till 2009). However, the effect that the victims of the massive killings evoke is not only a result of the practices related to their dead bodies. Their spiritual counterparts—the souls, or spirits, or spectres, or whatever one may call the immaterial essence that is believed to leave the body upon death—may lead an equally influential post-mortem life, becoming political symbols no less powerfully affecting the lives of the living. In fact, numerous studies have shown that spirits of people killed in wars and massacres have left traces in the local, regional, and/or national memory through narratives and ritual practices, reflecting tensions related to the violent events. Judith Richardson, for instance, demonstrates that stories about ghosts of those defeated in the Revolutionary War in the Hudson Valley in the USA express fears relating to unmarked graves and unidentified bodies, and express trauma, horror, and dismay over the violence and its consequences. They reflect uncertainty about the experience and the legacy of the war regarding questions of territory, possession, and legal and moral rights (Richardson 2003, 150–54).

Indeed, ghost narratives especially often seem to point out what had been hidden and neglected, unresolved, or repressed in a society in the past, with ghosts of the dead becoming the vehicles of the silenced social memory. Heonik Kwon demonstrates how after the Vietnam/American war (1960–76), the memory of the dead who were on the wrong (i.e. American) side was banned from the new political community of the nation and alienated from the moral community of family ancestral worship. Consequently, many who were killed in the war became politically engendered ghosts who, having died unmourned, haunted the living to force their way into the community’s consciousness and to be remembered. The memory of these dead, excluded from the post-war institutions of commemoration, has mainly been preserved through hospitality towards their ghosts within the domestic ritual space (Kwon 2018). Niels Bubandt notes that in the aftermath of the North Malukan conflict between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia from 1999 to 2001, which
resulted in more than two thousand deaths and led to a massive population
displacement, rumours spread about a revengeful ‘un-dead vampire’ whose image is
‘an apt metaphor for the unresolved status of many of the victims, whose bodies had
never been found or identified and whose fate remained unknown’ (Bubandt 2015,
217). Similarly, Seong-Nae Kim explores ways in which ghosts of the mostly innocent
civilians, killed in the so-called Cheju April Third Massacre (a six-year-long violent
period against communism, 1948–54), managed to tell their stories at a time when
anti-communist sentiment in South Korea had effectively silenced public memory of
the massacre. Kim demonstrates that until the democratization process in the 1990s
and the official commemoration of the massacre, shamanic rituals of spirit
possessions and family ancestral rites were the only culturally available means for
people to mediate traumatic memories, and constitute vernacular memories of the
massacre (Kim 2013). As long as restless ghosts produced by violence are not
acknowledged through mourning and memorialization, they cannot be settled, or at
least managed, Rubie S. Watson (1994) claims. Evidently, the ghosts of those who died
a violent death have social, historical, and political implications, and play an
important role in constructing, maintaining, and contesting national memory. To
truly understand social life, one must therefore confront ‘the ghostly aspects of it’,
notes Gordon (2008, 7).

In this article, I will discuss belief narratives about the untimely dead killed in the
massacre of the Bosniak (Muslim) population in Srebrenica that took place in July
1995, later proclaimed a genocide by the International Court of Justice. As it turned
out, the ghosts2 of those killed in the massacre feature extensively in the narratives
that circulate among people of Bosniak ethnic affiliation. I shall draw upon the
narratives that I was told during my field research in various parts of Bosnia and
Herzegovina during 2016–19, and particularly in the Srebrenica region, nowadays a
part of Republika Srpska, where I conducted fieldwork in June 2018. I will also
occasionally make use of the interviews I conducted with the Serbian population in
the Srebrenica area in the same time period. The transmission of stories about the
ghosts of the dead killed in the massacre, however, turned out to be strictly limited
to one particular segment of population: exclusively those of Bosniak ethnic
affiliation. The memory of the massacre, and its victims, which the post-war ghost
stories discussed in the following carry with them, is thus solely the memory of the
Bosniak population.4

**Srebrenica: Historical Background**

Let me first introduce the historical context that triggered the spread of ghost
narratives. The municipality of Srebrenica lies in the Drina River basin (Podrinje) in
eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, along the border with Serbia. According to the last
Yugoslavian census before the war, 75.2% of its inhabitants were Bosniaks, while only
22.7% were of Serbian ethnic affiliation. Podrinje, however, was of important
strategic value for post-1991 Serbia’s expansionist policies. Their goal was a corridor
towards a region in north-eastern Bosnia inhabited by a large Serbian population.
In this way, they also hoped to extend Serbian territory to Croatia, and integrate the Serbs living there into the Serb-dominated territory (Donia and Fine 2011, 203).

Soon after the war broke out in 1992, armed forces and other armed volunteer factions occupied a large part of the Podrinje region. In the course of the occupation, the Bosniak, but also the Croat, population living in the area was being systematically killed, tortured, and robbed; many women were raped, and many people imprisoned in refugee camps, where they were forced to live and work under life-threatening conditions. As a consequence, many Bosniak people from the wider Podrinje region moved to Srebrenica and a few other areas that were still under Bosniak control. By the spring of 1993, all of the main roads leading to the town and the rural parts of the municipality were already under the control of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS). The mortality rate in the town was increasing rapidly due to starvation, infectious diseases, and cold. In April 1993, the UN Security Council declared the besieged enclave of the town of Srebrenica a ‘safe area’ under UN protection. Nevertheless, the VRS did not cease its efforts to occupy the town. On 11 July 1995, the Bosniak defence of Srebrenica was finally overcome. On that day, Ratko Mladić, commander of the VRS, declared that he was giving the town to the Serbian nation ‘as a present’, adding that the time had finally come to take revenge against the ‘Turks’ — ominous words that presaged the horrible events that were to follow shortly.

Following Mladić’s announcement, thousands of people of Bosniak ethnic affiliation started to gather at UNPROFOR’s Dutch troop base in Srebrenica. After the Serbs bombed the base, about twenty to twenty-five thousand Bosniaks, mostly women and children, together with the Dutch troops, headed towards the nearby village of Potocari, to reach the main Dutch battalion’s compound. This development suited the Bosnian Serbs well: the Bosniak population was now restricted to a single place, which made control over them that much easier. In the next couple of days, while imprisoned in the compound, many people were brutally killed, and many women raped. Men and boys were systematically separated from women, children, and older people. The latter were to be deported to Kladanj, a Bosniak-held town, while the men and boys were to be sent to various locations in nearby Bratunac, a town under Serbian control—officially in order to search for war criminals, whereas in fact they were liquidated. The violence meted out to the Bosniaks, who in the minds of the perpetrators were equated with the ‘Turks, oppressors of Serbs for centuries’, was seen in their eyes as a ‘justifiable and just act’ (Dizdarević 2016, 182).

At the same time, about ten to fifteen thousand Bosniak men (some with their family members) and older boys decided to try to escape from Srebrenica over the hills. During the night of 11–12 July 1995, they started heading through the woods towards Bosniak-held territory. Not many of them survived the march—the Serbs knew about their movement and many were ambushed and killed soon after they had begun their journey to freedom. Most, however, were either captured or killed in the fields and forests by the roads they attempted to cross; some also drowned, killed themselves, or surrendered. The captured Bosniaks were driven to various locations, where over the next few days they were systematically tortured and killed. The aftermath of this
‘ethnic cleansing’ was 8,372 killed, and twenty-five to thirty thousand expelled (see Honig and Both 1997; Begić 2016, 169; Dizdarević 2016, 184–85).

The memory of the genocide, recognized as the worst tragedy Europe has faced since World War II, has been kept alive through various official, public, organized commemorative services; memorials; documentaries; exhibitions; scholarly publications; and so forth. However, the dead killed in the Srebrenica massacre are not only remembered through public recognition. Out of sight of the public eye, people also memorialize their dead through shared private experiences articulated in memorates, through rumours and fabulates. I will discuss three clusters of belief narratives that I learned about during my fieldwork, in which the victims of the Srebrenica massacre are remembered: narratives about ghosts of the unburied dead; narratives about the dead buried in the Potočari cemetery; and narratives about a murdered imam, calling people to prayer at the site of a demolished mosque. Helping them to accommodate the massacre and the anxieties related to its aftermath, the narration of ghost stories may have a therapeutic role for both the bereaved individuals and the local community as a whole. However, I will argue that the narratives about ghosts of the victims of the massacre also play a more significant role: they participate in the war discourse and in the preservation of the Bosniak memory of the massacre. Moreover, I will demonstrate that ghost narratives also prove useful tools in the post-war identity processes of the Bosniak ethnic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*Ghosts of the Unburied Dead*

The ghosts of the dead who were killed in the Srebrenica massacre that I discuss here are a product of the interplay between the historical reality of the genocide—many victims have never been found and properly buried—and traditional concepts about death. According to these, any violent and untimely death is considered a ‘bad’ death and those who die such a death are believed to remain stuck between the worlds, as ghostly ‘apparitions’ tormenting the living and haunting the places where their blood was spilled (Schneeweis 2005; Vinogradova 1999; Cowdell 2011, 59–62; Ellis 2003, 186; Davies 2007, 5; Softić 2016, 266–67). Likewise, the souls of the dead not given a proper burial are believed to remain in the liminal stage, haunting the living and thus reminding them of their obligation to bury them correctly (see Thompson 1989, motif E235.2 ‘Ghost returns to demand proper burial’; Vinogradova 1999, 48–49; Petrovic-Steger 2006, 49; Davies 2007, 4; Cowdell 2011, 51–60; Softić 2016, 267).

Nusret, a fifty-nine-year-old refugee from Srebrenica (interlocutor 11), one of the ‘lucky ones’ who ‘made it through the woods’, claimed that many Bosniak people who repatriated to the Srebrenica region after the war have experienced encounters with ghosts of the victims. Yet memorates about the ghosts of people who were killed in the massacre are not only narrated by natives of the Srebrenica region, among whom hardly anyone did not experience a loss in the course of the July 1995 events. I was also told such narratives by Bosniak interlocutors from central Bosnia, not only by those who settled there after escaping or being expelled from the
Srebrenica region during the war. This should not strike us as surprising: the Srebrenica massacre has become a ‘generic symbol of Muslim victimhood, of a genocide carried out by the Serbs against the Muslims of Bosnia as a whole’ (Duijzings 2016, 164). Through various organized commemorations of the massacre, the ‘outsiders’ who participate in these events are additionally able to connect with the area’s violent history. Annual commemorations, memorializing the massacre that followed the Bosnian Serbs’ occupation of Srebrenica, have been held at the Memorial Centre and Cemetery in Potocari on 11 July every year since 2003. ‘To remember through movement’ is the aim of the 110-kilometre ‘Peace March’ in which participants have, since 2005, followed the movement of the columns of men and boys who attempted to escape from the Srebrenica enclave through the woods. Visits to the sites of violence where Bosniak men were imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the Serbs have been held on 13 July every year since 2008 (Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 48–71). When I was sitting one morning with Fatima and Naila at the front doorstep of the latter’s tiny house in a village in central Bosnia, they told me about their friend’s experience with ghosts during her participation in the commemoration in Potocari:

I2: See, it’s like those who go there to Srebrenica, for instance. They go and they spend a night there. They say that the forest where people went, you can’t imagine all sorts of voices that one hears! It’s creepy to stay there overnight, they say, God protect us! And she said that when they went there the first year, she couldn’t fall asleep for the whole night. From that forest, you can’t imagine what voices come from it! There are ghosts coming from this forest.

F: You mean the forest where they were …?

I2: Where people went and were then captured.

I1: Where they ran [to escape].

I2: Where they were killed. Because they were killed when they were fine and healthy. How many children [were killed]! […]

F: And what do people say, what exactly do they hear?

I2: One hears various sounds. Mostly crying, they say.

F: Crying?

I2: Crying. Yes, crying. The crying of children, crying, that woman says that it is crying that one hears. There is no power that could make you fall asleep, she says. (No. 20; I1: female, Bosniak, b.1955; I2: female, Bosniak, b.1953)

It is interesting to note that while the victims of the mass killings in the forests were mostly men, my interlocutors, narrating the experience of their friend, talked about the children crying. The children’s crying seems to be an experience that both women, having children themselves, could emotionally connect to particularly strongly. Since men are not supposed to cry, at least not in public, the replacement of an inconceivable act (men crying) with a conceivable one (children crying) can also be understood as a narrative strategy that allowed my interlocutors, or the original narrator, to address the post-mortem apparitions of the crying murdered men. Moreover, the replacement of men by children in the narrative has a powerful symbolic effect: it endows the victims who fell under Serbian hands with an aura of innocence, as typically pertaining to children.

While the forests where men were killed in their attempt to escape to freedom feature in these narratives as a generic, unspecified space, filled with ghosts of
unburied victims of the massacre, narratives about the apparitions of restless souls are also sometimes attached to specific places where mass killings took place or where mass graves were later discovered. Kravica, one of the most ardent Serbian nationalist communities in the area (see Duijzings 2016, 149 and 163; Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 66), about twenty kilometres from Srebrenica, was one of the places where mass executions of the captured Bosniak men and boys took place. On 13 July 1995, about one thousand to fifteen hundred men were liquidated in Kravica’s agricultural warehouse (Begić 2016, 169–70). Since then, some narrators claimed, screams and crying have been heard at the site where the killings took place:

I1: They were saying down there, that by Kravica, you know where there was that massacre … They say there were screams and crying [heard there] and that … Was it the people who passed by in that period [that heard them] and that [the sounds] stayed, I can’t [tell], I can’t, it was not me [who heard them]. I can’t tell what I do not know.
F: So, who did you hear that from?
I1: Well, I heard that from our people [Bosniaks] who passed by. In Kravica, the massacre was the worst. When they drove them out of the forests … You’ll see when you go there, there’s a building, a big one, overgrown. They [Serbs] didn’t even allow us to put flowers there. One year ago, perhaps, three or four women were there, and the police chased them away. The worst massacre took place there, on that day, you see. When they chased those who went through the woods, they drove them down there. And now, what happened to the others … only God knows.
(No. 230; female, Bosniak, b.1954)

The site of the Dutchbat compound in Potočari, where people gathered after the Serb occupation of the town of Srebrenica, and where many of them were tortured, raped, and killed, or were seen for the last time, is yet another site of violence whose memory is preserved by ghost stories:

I1: Well, in the halls in Potočari they were selecting people, slaughtering, raping, this is known … There they took a baby out of a woman’s belly and slaughtered it. It was, it was … A woman hanged herself there. I mean, there are living witnesses who … The human mind cannot, it cannot imagine this. I mean, they can tell you, they can tell me, but I cannot comprehend it. I was not there. You understand? … And after that, it was being heard. I mean, people talked, I can’t say anything.
F: Can you tell me what people said?
I1: Well, that they hear screams. But what can you do when you see a child of fifteen years being taken away from you and slaughtered?
F: Did they hear screams when this was already over?
I2: Yes, yes, when this was over, when there was nothing any more going on, a year or two later.
I1: Horrible. It was horrible. [… That was] after 1995, after they had been expelled.
I2: After Srebrenica’s fall these sorts of stories began, something …
I1: It’s no ’sorts of’! These are all true stories!
I2: Indeed.
I1: For sure it is being heard, it ought to be heard! Blood lies there, for God’s sake! Don’t be childish! There must be some kind of law! There’s a law about what you cannot do! It absolutely was being heard; how could it not have been?! It was horrible. If you didn’t see it and weren’t [there] …
I2: It was they [Serbs] who allegedly said that they heard voices and that something was like appearing to them.
I1: It was not us! (No. 230; Bosniak couple, I1: wife, b.1954; I2: husband, b.1948)
Like the sites of violent deaths, the sites of mass graves are also remembered through ghost stories. After the mass executions of the captured Bosniak men were completed, the Serbian army was eager to hide their crimes. Dead bodies were thrown into caverns or shallow caves dug out for this purpose, sometimes only to be exhumed again and thrown into secondary graves, for the corpses to be dispersed and the crimes covered up. As of 2010, more than eighty mass graves had been uncovered and the corpses exhumed. In Budak (Dugo Polje), a village close to Potočari, a mass grave with 176 bodies was discovered in July 2005 (Čekić, Arnaut-Haseljić, and Macić 2010, 485–88). Until their bodies were dug out and properly buried, the dead were heard moaning and crying at night, as my interlocutor, living nearby, tells me:

I1: When the mass grave was there [pointing] and those sounds … They were heard when they opened the grave, here, right here where there’s a church now. Various sounds were heard. You know [addressing her husband], when Mother would go outside in the evening, before dusk. It was horrible, like crying, moaning. Like some kind of dreke.14 Until they moved those corpses and that, you could hear voices, I mean that crying and moaning. In the time of akšam.15 This was heard, in the time of akšam, it was always heard like moaning. Like crying, like dreke, you know. Mother told me that, but she didn’t want to tell us then, you know, before they moved them [the bodies] away, so that we wouldn’t get frightened …
F: And after the bodies were exhumed?
I1: Then it stopped, it was not heard anymore. When [the mass grave] was opened, it was heard even louder. But since they took the bodies away, since they moved them, nothing has been heard anymore. She didn’t hear anything anymore. (No. 223; female, Bosniak, b.1980)

This narrative points to the moral obligation of the living to provide the deceased with a proper funeral, which the victims from the mass grave were deprived of. As many of my interlocutors argued, the soul cannot proceed to the other realm without a properly conducted funeral:16

I1: But let me tell you, it must appear [in Srebrenica]! Not every body was found and given a dženaza17 and buried. They were thrown somewhere, maybe into a river or a forest, or some grass or somewhere like that. When someone passes by, it surely appears. Because blood was spilled there. Blood was spilled. (No. 19; female, Bosniak, b.1945)
I1: As much as I could hear … They find their peace when they are buried. But until they are buried, their soul roams around … Like their soul cannot find peace until they are buried. (No. 221; female, Bosniak, b.1964)

While the ghostly crying in Budak allegedly ceased after the bodies had been finally found, exhumed, and properly buried, the horror by which the place has been scarred continues to linger on in the memory of the local population, albeit not necessarily always within a ‘ghostly framework’. While I was drinking coffee with Emina (no. 222; Bosniak, b.1993) one early afternoon, she suddenly admitted that she was afraid of passing by the place, especially after dusk, when according to Islamic beliefs the dangerous time begins. She feared she could naograjisat, she explained. The term usually refers to one’s unknowingly trampling on džins,18 malevolent spirits believed to be especially attracted to ‘unclean’ places, for instance those marked by death—the consequence of which is usually physical or mental illness (Bringa 1995, 178–79). The dead thus continue to label the place in the people’s memory as unclean
and dangerous, even long after the corpses were removed. As my interlocutor pointedly explained: ‘People were killed there!’

Unlike the dead from the mass grave in Budak, for whom the day finally arrived when they were properly buried and their souls thus able to proceed to the other world, more than a thousand victims of the Srebrenica massacre still wait to be found and given a proper funeral. Grief, evoked by the violent events of July 1995, and anxiety over the large number of unfound bodies of the victims who have not yet been properly buried and their souls consequently not granted access to the other world, might explain the psychological roots of the hauntings (see Richardson 2003, 153). These stories, however, address yet another anxiety that the Bosniak population in the area have had to cope with since their repatriation after the war: of facing, once again, the attempts to expel them from the space they had inhabited, if not physically, at least symbolically. Since Srebrenica was apportioned to the Republika Srpska after the war, its officials have put a great deal of effort into inscribing the new political order onto the landscape. Crosses have been erected, Orthodox churches built, mosques demolished, and streets, schools, and villages renamed. Through these acts, Ger Duijzings writes, ‘Serbs sent a clear message that there was no place for Muslims in the RS [Republika Srpska]’ (Duijzings 2016, 153; Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 70). Indeed, in 2011, a new Orthodox church was built just a few metres away from the uncovered location of the mass grave in Budak, in the immediate vicinity of the Potočari Memorial Centre and Cemetery, in spite of the protests of civil initiatives, the Bosniak local community, and representatives of the international community.19 As Bosniaks have no political power to resist the Serbian appropriation of space, ghost narratives may thus also be understood as one of the few cultural means available to the members of their community living in the Srebrenica region to reclaim their space. As places are essentially constructed from the stories that people tell, stories about the murdered dead haunting the landscape—being of Bosniak ethnic affiliation—ultimately mark the space with a Bosniak presence. Through ghost narratives, the presence of the Bosniak ethnic community is thus inscribed onto the landscape, contesting the continuous and persistent Serbian hegemonization of the public space.

The Dead Buried in the Potočari Cemetery

Contrary to the ghosts of the first group of narratives—who, moaning and crying, are at best able to testify to their tragic death and request a proper burial—the dead of the second group of narratives, buried in the Potočari cemetery, are powerful agents of revenge. Compared to them, the ghosts of the first group are clearly exposed as marginal to the kinship system as well as politically marginal (see Weller 1985). Unlike their kin buried in the Potočari cemetery, the unburied dead are, on the one hand, deprived of family visits and commemorations. On the other hand, they are also eliminated from the main public commemorative ritual, significant to the formation of collective political identity (see Rubin 2020, 366), which takes place at the Memorial Centre and Cemetery in Potočari.20 The supremacy of the dead
featuring in the second group of narratives as compared to the first, grounded in the traditional moral boundary between ghosts (unclean dead) and ancestors (venerable dead), is thus conditioned by their inclusion in the Potočari cemetery and consequently among their ethnic kin.

The location of the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide, as its formal title goes, in Potočari, a village halfway between Srebrenica and Bratunac, was chosen by the survivors for two reasons: on the one hand, it is tied to the site of the initial trauma; on the other, it is located close to their homes (Pollack 2003a, 795–99; 2003c, 193–94). From 2003 to 2020, altogether 6,619 victims of the Srebrenica massacre found their final resting place in the cemetery. As encounters with the ghosts of the dead near the cemeteries belong to ‘grammatic’ experiences in European traditional culture (Ellis 2003, 187; Goldstein, Grider and Thomas 2007, 11, 48, 89, 189–191, 208; Cowdell 2011, 53–54), and are not unusual in Bosnian folklore either (Softić 2016, 271–72 and 279), we should not be surprised by recent narratives about the section of the road that leads past the cemetery becoming a site of uncanny events. According to the rumours, the dead buried in the cemetery are causing passing Serbian drivers to have traffic accidents. Contrary to the memorates discussed previously, based on the (reports of) alleged personal experiences of uncanny phenomena, in these narratives the uncanniness is a matter of interpretation of the events (traffic accidents), rather than a matter of experience as such.

I1: A lot of traffic accidents happen here [Potočari]. I think that two Serbian boys were killed there. They happen, they happen. There [pointing to the road]! But now, whether they happen because of what they say or not, I cannot …
F: And what do they say?
I1: Well, they say: Let it happen to you as you did to me! Like this. You know what human consciousness is. When something hurts you and you cannot get over it … So, you see, accidents happen because it had here happened to me and not to you, and now it’s time that you too see how it is when it happens to you. You see? I don’t wish this on anyone, God forbid, I don’t want it to destroy anyone.
F: Do they say that something appears?
I1: Plenty will appear to them! To those who did this. Let them suffer! It’s sad that the children who are not guilty suffer, no matter whose they are. But for God’s sake …! (No. 230; female, Bosniak, b.1954)

This narrator may have still been hesitant to state directly who actually causes the accidents, although she made it clear that the accidents by the cemetery happen to the Serbs as a punishment for crimes committed in the war. The next narrator, on the other hand, was explicit in declaring who the punishment comes from. It is the dead buried in the Potočari cemetery (and God through them) that take revenge on the Serbs via the accidents, she asserted bluntly:

I1: In Potočari … perhaps in 2002, 2003, the traffic accidents started to occur, like … it is our [Bosniak] people who … You know, they are saying that they are occurring because of our [people] down there [pointing to the cemetery in Potočari] …
F: You mean the dead?
I1: The dead! Like they are [doing this].
F: But how, I mean, how could the dead cause these accidents?
I1: Well, I don’t know, here, I’m telling you … This is what people say … How can I say—they [the dead] appear. [Smiles] They [drivers] may see something and then they lose control over the wheel … Well, I say, I don’t believe much. I don’t believe much as this never happened to me. [Smiles]
F: And who told you that the accidents are occurring here?
I1: I heard it from our people. There were accidents … I know that there were accidents here, and they always said: [This is how] God takes revenge on them [Serbs] for what they did! Like our sehids protect us.21 (No. 221; female, Bosniak, b.1964)

The motif of the dead taking revenge on the living by causing misfortunes, emphasized in both narratives, is not rare in traditional folklore. When the dead are not satisfied with the living, they may in this or another way take revenge on the living for violation of social norms of behaviour (Thompson 1989, motif E235 ‘Return from dead to punish indignities to corpse, or ghost’; Ellis 2003, 187; Davies 2007, 50; Cowdell 2011, 55). Bosnian and Herzegovinian folklore is full of stories about the dead causing misfortunes to the living when they neglect their wishes or behave disrespectfully towards them (see Filipović 1949, 209; Softić 2016, 272–80). Moreover, at certain spots in central Bosnia, legends are spread about the dead taking revenge on the living due to the highway that was built over their graves, precisely by causing traffic accidents. Nevertheless, none of these reasons plays any role in these narratives. Instead, the reason for the Potočari cemetery dead’s revenge is grounded solely and exclusively in the crimes the Serbs committed during the war.

While the motif of the dead haunting and taking revenge on their murderers also belongs to international folklore (Thompson 1989, motif E234.3 ‘Return from dead to avenge death (murder)’; Davies 2007, 53; Cowdell 2011, 57), the victims of the traffic accidents caused by the vengeful dead buried in the Potočari cemetery can hardly be identified as those responsible for their death. They, according to the narrators, were young boys, thus born after the war. While killing their children may be a way to take revenge on the parents for their crimes, these were never said to be children of the perpetrators; instead, they stand for all Serbs. The guilt that the dead boys carry is collective and applies equally to the past, present, and future members of the Serbian ethnic community. The implicit logic in the act of the dead taking revenge on Serbian boys for war crimes is that their ethnic affiliation essentially makes them responsible for the crimes committed by their ‘fathers’. The sons, together with their fathers and forefathers, are thus ‘imagined’ as belonging to the common body of their ethnic community, extending beyond any living generation, uniting the past, present, and future into one whole (see Anderson 1992, 9–10; Hayden 1994, 167; Verdery 1999, 41 and 104–106; Čolović 2015, 108–109). ‘Our people’, ‘Ours’ (Naši), that is, members of the Bosniak ethnic community, on the other hand, encompass the living as well as the dead buried in the Potočari cemetery, and contrast with ‘Them’ (‘They’, Oni), the Serbs. The fundamental division, as revealed in the stories about the agency of the vengeful Bosniak dead from the Potočari cemetery, does therefore not lead along the line of ‘the living versus the dead’ (or ‘the supernatural’ in general), as is typical in traditional legends (see Lindahl 1986). Instead, it is drawn along the ethnic parameters.
Narratives that point to the tensions between the two ethnic groups sharing the same territory reveal the vulnerability and powerlessness of the Bosniak community living in Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. They show that—lacking political, social, and legal power—their only option is to rely on the power of their dead, an invisible army, protecting them from the Serbian ‘enemies’ and taking revenge on their behalf. They mediate a strong sense felt by the Bosniak community that justice has not yet been properly done nor has their profound need for the war crimes to be adequately avenged and perpetrators punished been satisfied. When they cannot count on the law to restore justice, and thus ensure an equilibrium that might enable them to come to some sort of closure, all that remains is relying on the dead to take justice into their hands. While the Potočari Memorial Centre and Cemetery may therefore fulfil various functions for various agents, it has, through the agency of its dead, also become a means of empowerment of the local Bosniak population. The ghosts of the dead buried in Potočari, these narratives reveal, thus ultimately help transform the sense of powerlessness of the local Bosniak community living under Serbian political dominance into a sense of power and help them achieve at least symbolic control over the situation.

**A Murdered Imam Calling to Prayer in a Demolished Mosque**

While inter-ethnic antagonisms may fundamentally underlie these narratives, they never mediate explicit nationalist messages. The narratives I am going to discuss in the following, on the other hand, do occasionally turn into vehicles of nationalist agendas. A legend that I often heard in the Srebrenica region, as well as outside it, narrated as a report of a truthful event, tells of a hodža (Bosnian for imam) killed by the Serbian army who after his death continued to call Muslim believers to prayer from the demolished munara (minaret) of Srebrenica’s main mosque. This was mined by the Serbs in 1995, and later rebuilt and reopened for service in 2011. While some narrators talked about an ‘external’ uncanny phenomenon, others framed the discussion within a psychological discourse, and explained it as an internal experience, a consequence of the tormented psyche of the Serbs who committed the crimes.

11: There was, they said, in Srebrenica, something that appeared. The Serbs demolished the mosque ... They demolished it to the foundations. But every night one can [hear] an ezan in this mosque. He shows himself.
12: [That is] the hodža that prays.
11: The hodža shows up at the place where the mosque was demolished. He shows up and prays. And that happened in the Republika Srpska! It was the Serbs who claimed this! It was not us, none of ours [Bosniaks] heard him!
12: The Serbs were afraid. This comes [appears] to them.
11: They said so. That every evening this hodža prays and that this prayer, this ezan [can be heard] from the mosque’s tower. (No. 13; Bosniak couple, 11: husband, b.1949; 12: wife, b.1951)

11: This was being talked about, that they heard an ezan. This comes from fear, those who had committed that, it came to their mind. I can’t understand ... You see? I heard that too.
F: What exactly have you heard?
11: Well, that he, for instance, at a certain time for prayers—sabah, akşam, ikindija, jacija in the evening—that at these times one could allegedly always hear an ezan. There.
F: And who said that?
I1: Well, people who were here talked about it. There were also Serbs. There's one Serb who even nowadays goes around Srebrenica and says: I told them not to demolish the mosque, people would return. He is still alive, he walks around. But whether he ...
F: This is a Muslim or a Serb?
I2: A Serb, a Serb! There were only Serbs then, there were no Muslims.
I1: At that time, there were no Muslims in Srebrenica. (No. 230; Bosniak couple, I1: wife, b.1954; I2: husband, b.1948)

In fact, the Srebrenica mosque is not the only one in Bosnia and Herzegovina to which the legend about the murdered imam calling the faithful to prayer is attached. In addition to that of Srebrenica, the legend is also told in reference to the famous sixteenth-century Ottoman Aladža mosque in Foča and the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka, as well as some other less significant mosques. Bosnian folklorist Aiša Softić (2002, 212–14) writes that the legend was known already during World War II, and that it merely resurfaced after the war in the 1990s. This demonstrates that the story travels freely and can become attached to any mosque that was demolished during the war.25 Indeed, when Fatima (no. 20; Bosniak, b.1953) suddenly got confused about whether the story she was telling me really referred to Srebrenica, or perhaps happened somewhere else, she was not bothered much: ‘You know, there are so many villages! It doesn’t necessarily need to be Srebrenica, it could have happened anywhere, wherever there were these religious buildings!’

Not only the mosque, but also the witness of the imam’s apparitions in the legends remains uncertain. The person who experienced the uncanny events that the legend describes is usually one who the narrators do not know personally. Moreover, this is someone who does not belong to their ethnic community: as a rule, he is of Serbian ethnic affiliation. Discussing the killings in Potocari, the earlier narrator (no. 230) attributed the hearing of the victims’ screams to Serbs. Likewise, the narrator of the legend about the imam emphasized that ‘[i]t was the Serbs who claimed this. It was not us, none of ours heard him!’ (no. 13). Narrators’ claims that the Muslim people had not yet even returned to Srebrenica when the calling to prayer was heard (no. 230) likewise imply that the Serbs were the sole possible witnesses of the apparitions. One comes across similar claims about the Serbs hearing an ezan in the story related to the Aladža mosque, published on the Internet,26 as well as in a legend related to the ruined mosques in Bosanski Petrovac in Softić’s collection of Bosniak folk legends (Softić 2002, 213–14). The repeated claims about the Serbs being the witnesses of the imam’s chanting in various variants of this legend are certainly no coincidence. The legend about apparitions above the demolished mosque, directly pointing a finger at the guilt that the Serbs bear for killing the imam and demolishing the sacred building, has a moral point. It discloses their crime not only as one against the imam, or, more generally, against the Bosniak community as a whole, but as a crime against higher ethics, having cosmic rather than (only) earthly dimensions. The veracity of the uncanny events, and consequently the gravity of the Serbs’ guilt, could therefore be unequivocally confirmed only when those who had witnessed the uncanny events were not the accusers, but the guilty parties themselves—that is, the Serbs. The apparition of the dead Bosniak imam thus, on the one hand, serves as evidence of the
crimes that the Serbs committed, and on the other features as a higher moral imperative, compelling the Serbs to take accountability for the crimes they committed. Like the previous cluster of narratives, these legends too reveal the profound need of the Bosniak community for the Serbs to acknowledge the crimes and to be held accountable for them.

One should not, however, overlook the fact that the members of the conduit of these stories are always exclusively of Bosniak ethnic affiliation. Not one of my Serbian interlocutors has ever confirmed having experienced the apparition of a Bosniak killed in the war. Likewise, they have never admitted having heard any of other ghost stories spread among the Bosniaks in the area. Indeed, some even angrily rejected their ‘lies’ and understood these stories as a means for Bosniaks to emphasize their victimhood. One would assume, though, that the Serbian inhabitants of the Srebrenica region would have heard at least some of the ghost stories narrated by the Bosniaks (even if they denied their veracity) and some details in the interviews might indicate that they were aware of them. However, by admitting this, they would indirectly admit to having committed the crimes the stories are about—and this they never wanted to do. While to prove the veracity of the apparitions of the dead required that the Bosniak narrators put Serbs in the role of witnesses, to disclaim their veracity required that the Serbs not only deny the events described in them, but any knowledge of the stories altogether.

While the core message of the legend about the imam’s apparition as told by the Bosniak narrators living in Srebrenica and directly affected by his death and the demolition of their mosque was to point to the Serbs’ guilt, when it is narrated by people living outside the directly affected community, this message fades into the background. Instead, in some versions it is a religious and ethnic (nationalist) agenda that comes to the foreground. Indeed, the close intertwinement of the two is typical of the Balkans, where religion has always been the key marker of ethnic identity, and ethnic identification has always fundamentally relied on religious affiliation.27 While religion was downplayed in the period of Yugoslavia (1945–91), the political processes that were occurring on its territory at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s offered an opportunity for the re-Christianization and re-Islamization of their ethnic communities. Religious elements thus became a significant part of the process of the ‘ethnification of politics and politicisation of the ethnic’ (Velikonja 2002, 195–97; Bougarel 2002, 2016). In this respect, it seems understandable that the legend in which the main roles are played by an imam and a mosque easily lends itself to further nationalist interpretations in which they stand for Bosniak (Muslim) ethnic and religious identity. This message is clear in the following discussion of the legend, related to the Aladža mosque, by my interlocutor Mehmet, a Muslim believer and religiously educated government employee from Sarajevo:

No one can turn off Allah’s light, God’s light! Even when they [Serbs] destroy something that they thought they had destroyed, they haven’t. This is a mission impossible. This is impossible. This means that you oppose with your oppression, killing, with something, you do something awful, bad, weird, and you think that the Master [Allah] didn’t see you, and that he didn’t register. That ezan is only a manifestation of Allah’s power and indicates that he registered what they have done and that they will be held accountable for this. Because with that ezan it is confirmed that
they did not destroy what they thought they had. It shows them, the criminals: You did this, but you will be punished for it! (No. 242; male, Bosniak, b.1962)

The nationalist agenda is perhaps even more explicit in the legend documented by Softić in 1997. The witnesses of the events here too are Serbs. Moreover, the Serb who communicates the message of the uncanny events is not just any Serb but a pop, an Orthodox priest—the representative of the Serbian community. His profession, proving him an expert in deciphering the symbolic meanings of divine messages, unequivocally confirms the accuracy of his interpretation of the uncanny events as the message of the perseverance of Islam, and Muslims, on Bosnian soil:

I heard from people that the chetniks ran away. At first, they thought that someone is cheating them. Then they thought that some hodža stayed there, and they searched for him, and suddenly [they heard] an ezan. And then they searched around the Serbs’ houses. They say, every day, in the early morning, one hears an ezan. Sometimes also at midnight. There is a church there. They went to consult the pop. Then one chetnik told him, he said, every morning we hear some voice, as if someone was ’singing’, but we don’t understand. Then the pop asked: ‘When do you hear it?’ He says: ‘Sometimes in the morning, sometimes at midnight’. He says: ‘Well, this is an ezan. This is a sign that Islam will remain in Bosnia. And where did the munara fall when you demolished the mosque?’—’How could I know?’—’You know, you know!’ Then he came back. He says: ‘The top of the munara fell towards the East—’This is the sign that Islam will remain in Bosnia!’ They hanged the pop. (Softić 2002, 213; translation mine)

Conclusion

The narratives discussed in this article—memorates about apparitions of the dead who had not yet been found and given a proper funeral, rumours about the dead buried in the Potočari cemetery taking revenge against the Serbs, and legends about an imam who continued to call to prayer after his death, all testifying to the post-mortem agency of the Srebrenica genocide’s victims—to some extent certainly help bereaved individuals to express (unresolved) grief and cope with the loss (Carsten 2007, 10–11) and trauma, thus ultimately helping them progress towards ‘working it through’ (see LaCapra 2014). However, rather than providing a means for individuals to release personal pain, these stories seem to serve as a means of expression for the local Bosniak community as a whole. While the social memory of the genocide against the Bosniak population living in the Srebrenica region has not been officially repressed as such—on the contrary, it has been internationally acknowledged and memorialized in various commemorations, rituals, marches, museums, and narratives—its denial (Duijzings 2016, 160–61; Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 49) and, indeed, glorification and celebration, or, as Halilović calls it, a culture of ‘genocide triumphalism’, has been part of the official narrative in Republika Srpska. In fact, it has been fuelling the actions of the local Serbian population in their continuous efforts to deny the reality and suppress the memory of the genocide. My Serbian interlocutors in the area, as well as in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost without exception disavowed the gravity of the massacre and questioned the official number of victims. They claimed that they knew Bosniak people who are alive but whose names were engraved on a tombstone in the Potočari
cemetery, or that some reburied their long-dead ancestors in the Potočari cemetery, all in order to make the number of their victims appear higher. I was even told that the Serbian community in the Srebrenica area have recently formed a committee whose task is to gather evidence proving that the number of Bosniak dead in the massacre has been artificially inflated.

Since the ‘lessons’ of the collective trauma, objectified in monuments, museums, memorials, rituals, and so on (see Alexander 2012, 27), have therefore not been able to bring the Serbian community to acknowledge the genocide and take accountability for the crimes, ghost stories seem to serve as a means for the Bosniak inhabitants of the Srebrenica region to remind them of the reality of the massacre, and their role in it. They have become a vehicle for the maintenance of their collective memory of the past violence and for contesting the Serbs’ attempts at its suppression. Inscribed in the landscape, the ghosts transfigure the familiar places into a map of past violent acts, and testify to the unresolved past that continues to affect the present (see Jonker and Till 2009, 316; Schindel and Colombo 2014, 8). Moreover, ghosts, acting as they do in the traditional repertoire in which the living are morally accountable to the dead, such as appearing when social norms are being violated and punishing the transgressors, at the same time become the ultimate carriers of spiritual revenge to the perpetrators for the crimes committed (see Bubandt 2015, 220–21). Symbolically, at least, they thereby help deliver justice for the mass murders committed by the Serbs that the Bosniak population believe has not been properly provided by the legal institutions.

Even mass murders, however, are not inherently traumatic, as Jeffrey C. Alexander points out, and do not necessarily create collective trauma. A traumatic status is attributed to an event only if the stability of the collective identity is believed to have been abruptly and harmfully affected and it is always socially constructed through imaginative processes of representation (Alexander 2012, 2–4 and 10–16). Such a blow to the basic tissues of social life usually damages the bonds between people and impairs the prevailing sense of communality (Erikson 1995, 185–87). When the texture of the collectivity is damaged, its identity shifts, and reconstruction is needed (Alexander 2012, 26–27; Smelser 2004, 43–44). Since identity is a product of relationships between groups, in post-traumatic communities, it is this relationship that seems to fall apart. Ghost stories pointing towards the perpetrators’ and their communities’ acceptance of the background universal values and attitudes, so that the identity of the victims’ community can be re-established, may therefore also be a means for the identity of the affected community to be re-established. 30

Once these stories move outside the confines of the local community, however, they may be used as an element in the ‘symbolic repertoire’ available to the dominant ethnic and religious structures in their efforts to bind their members into a collective identity (see Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000, 7). Which of their roles will come to the foreground will depend on the narrator’s position, and their goal. One should not forget, furthermore, that in this process, it is the ethnic affiliation of the ghosts that proves crucial and instrumental, and that in this complex entanglement between personal, local, and ethnic, the narratives are always selective: they forward the
memory, the perspective, and the agenda of the narrators’ own ethnic and religious community while at the same time concealing and suppressing the memory, the perspective, and the agenda of the antagonistic party.

**Acknowledgements**

This research received financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (programme no. P6-0187), European Research Council (ERC project no. 324214), and Alexander-von-Humboldt Stiftung. I would like to thank Éva Pócs, ERC’s leader, and Ulf Brunnbauer, Director of Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. Thank you, Ágnes Hesz and Rajko Muršič for kindly commenting on the earlier draft of the article.

**Notes**

1 The numbers of war victims differ somewhat in various publications. Here, I follow the data on the victims in the most thoroughly documented publication (Tokača 2012).

2 I use the term ‘ghost’ as a broad etic term, encompassing all sorts of phenomena experienced as the manifestation of the (agency of the) dead, not only as a visible but also as an auditory sensation. In fact, the dead as a rule do not appear visually in the ghost stories in Srebrenica. In addition, I use the word as an umbrella term for phenomena that are not only seen, heard, felt, or sensed, but also only ascribed to the agency of the dead. My use is thus closest to Paul Cowdell’s definition of a ghost ‘covering all post-mortem contact with the living’, referring to the incident, rather than the entity (Cowdell 2011, 6). Referring to incidents, I also occasionally use ‘uncanny’ or ‘supernatural’ for events, experiences, or phenomena. Unless specified, I do not make a distinction between ‘ancestors’ and ‘ghosts’, although the encounter with the latter is usually unwished for and experienced as frightening.

3 From February 2016 to July 2019, I conducted a total of 247 interviews with members of Bosniak, Croat, and Serb ethnic communities, as well as with some Roma, often with multiple interlocutors involved. Most of my fieldwork was conducted in rural central, eastern, and north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina.

4 This is not related to their religion: like Orthodox Christianity, Islam officially does not envision souls of the deceased ‘returning’ after death (Smith and Haddad 2002, 50). Vernacular religious beliefs of Muslims and of Orthodox Serbs, on the other hand, do imply the notion of ghosts, albeit not necessarily under this term.

5 Nowadays a derogatory term for Bosniaks.

6 Linda Dégh argued that no criteria for a separate categorization of memorates, rumours, and fabulates withstands scientific inquiry and proposed an overarching term ‘legend’ for all of them (Dégh 2001, 23–97). When discussing the narratives in general, with no specific (sub)genre determination, I will thus either use ‘legend’ or unspecific ‘(belief) narrative’ or ‘story’.

7 Bosniak inhabitants of the Srebrenica region usually brought the stories up by themselves; if they did not, I inquired about ghost narratives that I had encountered before. I came across the narratives of the second cluster discussed here exclusively in the Srebrenica region. As for my Serbian interlocutors, it was always me who brought the question up.

8 In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ‘apparition’ (pri(j)e)kaza, privid, utvara), expressed also in the phrase ‘it appears/appeared’ (prikazuje se, priviđa se, ukaziva se, priliči se), is the most usual emic term, referring not only to a visual manifestation of the dead—as the term might suggest (see Davies 2007, 2)—but encompassing various sorts of experiences of encounters with the dead (visual, auditory, or tactile,
dreams of the dead included), and ‘supernatural’ agency in general. I refrain from discussing the apparitions of the dead in dreams, as these—based on my fieldwork experiences—were always private experiences. Here, I discuss stories that referred to the dead who people did not necessarily know personally, and were in wider circulation, not restricted to private, but shared as common experiences.

In order to protect the identities of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms or otherwise anonymized them.

Bosniaks started to re-settle in Srebrenica only after 2000.

‘I’ in the interviews indicates an interlocutor, ‘F’ a folklorist (i.e. me). The number in parentheses refers to the number of the interview in the archive; all recordings and transcriptions are stored at the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Science.

Contrary to men and older boys, women were, for instance, not supposed to visit graveyards and participate in funeral rituals, ‘because they cry a lot’ (which could upset the souls of the dead) (see Bringa 1995, 186; see also Sofić 2016, 232–33).

As my Bosniak interlocutor claimed, any act of commemoration of the victims in Serbian Kravica has been strictly forbidden. Annual visits to the site have only become possible through international intervention and sponsorship (Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 61–67).

Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian: drek(a/avac), a restless soul, usually appearing in an animal body, recognized by its terrifying screams (Schneeweis 2005, 42–43).

The period of sunset, the time of the fourth daily prayer for Muslims, when people are believed to be most vulnerable to the attacks of malevolent spirits.

Although in Islam a funeral is also possible ‘in absence’ (u otsunosti), people usually believe that the body, even a small part of it, has to be buried for the soul to be able to proceed to the other world and find peace.

A Muslim burial ceremony.

That is, djinns, according to Islam, the invisible spiritual beings who can be good or bad (Sofić 2002, 67–68); in folk beliefs, they are usually considered malevolent.

See: www.dw.com/hr/crkva-razdora-nad-poto%C4%8Darima/a-16759439

The unfound and unburied dead who were killed during their attempt to escape to the free zone through the woods are commemorated with the ‘Peace March’, yet the marginality of the event, in comparison to the main commemorative ceremony for those buried in the Potočari cemetery, can be recognized not only in its being a later addition to the main commemoration, but also in its subordination to it. The participants in the Peace March start walking in the village of Nezuk around 8 July in order to arrive in Potočari in time to participate in the main commemorative service on 11 July, the anniversary of the enclave’s fall and the violence that ensued. In addition, in contrast to the highest level of international and national religious and political leaders who have participated in the latter, the participants in the former are predominantly Bosniaks (see Nettelfield and Wagner 2014, 54–55).

The term šehid (Arabic shahid), a martyr fallen while fighting on ‘Allah’s path’, that is, sacrificing his life for Islam, is believed to be immediately granted direct access to dženet, Paradise (Brown 2004, 432; Bougarel 2016, 168). Since April 1992, the Islamic community has been identifying the Bosnian Muslims who were killed fighting the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serb paramilitaries as šehids. Moreover, during the war, the leaders of the leading Muslim-oriented party Stranka za demokratsku akciju (SDA) endeavoured to apply the term šehid to all Muslim war victims. Bougarel (2002, 2016) has outlined the role that the concept of šehid played in the nation-building and re-Islamization processes initiated since 1990. While according to my interviews the Bosniaks who live in the area learned to use the term šehid for their dead relatives buried in the Potočari cemetery, Duijzings writes that the SDA politicians are reluctant to use the term when referring to the victims in Srebrenica, partly as international officials are not very keen to use the Islamic term for the victims as ‘martyrs of the faith’ (Duijzings 2016, 164).
The Memorial Centre and Cemetery in Potočari has, as Pollack and Duijzings demonstrate, become a physical embodiment of the struggle for political control and power. Both Muslim and Serbian leaders use it as an arena for ethnic and nationalist politics and a platform for political struggles. For the survivors from advocacy and political groups, it has also become a means to reclaim the land as it ‘brings back the bodies that were meant to be removed and re-establishes a Muslim presence on land that is now occupied by the Serbs’; to demand compensation and call for the prosecution of the international actors they hold accountable for the massacre; to force local Serbs to acknowledge the massacre, which could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the Republika Srpska and Serb control over the region; and to maintain control over constituencies for both sides (Pollack 2003a, 797–800; 2003b, 132–41; 2003c, 189–90; Duijzings 2016, 163–64).

From Turkish ezan (Arabic adhan), the Islamic call to prayer, recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day.

The names of four (out of the five) daily prayers conducted by practising Muslims at particular times of the day and night.

A total of 614 mosques were demolished in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995:
http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/podsjecanje-na-614-dzamija-porusenih-u-bih

In the first three censuses after World War II, the people now called Bosniaks (Bošnjaci) were treated as a religious group (and counted in national terms as Serbs, Croats, Yugoslavs, or Undeclared), which rendered them politically invisible. In 1968 they gained the status of a nationality, ‘Muslims’, rather than a religious group. The ambiguity of the term ‘Muslim’ referring to a national identity was avoided by writing it with an initial capital (Muslimani), while members of the religious community were in lower case (muslimani). In this way, the socialist Yugoslav policy implicitly denied the dependency of the national category on religious identity (Banac 1994, 144–46; Bringa 1995, 9–10; Velikonja 1998, 267–72; Markowitz 2010, 53).

Here, the name used for Serbian perpetrators in general.

LaCapra distinguishes between ‘acting out’ the trauma, involving a compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma, and ‘working through’ it, an ‘articulatory practice’ that involves self-examination, struggle, and critical engagement, and gradually enables one to make distinctions between past, present, and future (LaCapra 2014; see Schick 2011).

Anonymous reviewer’s interpretation.

References Cited

Alexander, Jeffrey C. Trauma. A Social Theory. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London and New York: Verso, 1992. First published 1983.

Ashplant, T. G., G. Dawson, and M. Roper. ‘The Politics of War Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics’. In The Politics of War, Memory and Commemoration, edited by Timothy G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, 3–85. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Banac, Ivo. ‘Bosnian Muslims: From Religious Community to Socialist Nationhood and Postcommunist Statehood, 1918–1992’. In The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their Historic Development from the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia, edited by Mark Pinson, 129–53. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Begić, Mujo. ‘Genocid u Prijedoru i Srebrenici—komparativni pristup’ [Genocide in Prijedor and Srebrenica—a comparative approach]. In Srebrenica 1995–2015: Evaluacija nasljeda i dugoročnih posljedica...
Bougare, Xavier. ‘Avtoritarna reislamizacija in nove sestavine v bosanskem islamu’ [Authoritative re-Islamization and new elements in Bosnian Islam]. Časopis za kritiko znanosti 30, nos 209/210 (2002): 207–15.

———. ‘Death and the Nationalist: Martyrdom, War Memory and Veteran Identity among Bosnian Muslims’. In The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society, edited by Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms, and Ger Duijzings, 167–92. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016. First published 2007.

Brinca, Tone. Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Brown, Daniel W. ‘Martyrdom’. In Encyclopedia of Islam and The Muslim World, edited by Richard C. Martin, 431–34. New York: Macmillan, 2004.

Bubandt, Nils. 'Psychologising the Afterlife: Ghosts and Regimes of the Self in Indonesia and in Global Media'. In Between Magic and Rationality: On the Limits of Reason in the Modern World, edited by Vibeke Steffen, Steffen Jöhncke, and Kirsten Marie Raahauge, 199–234. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, University of Copenhagen, 2015.

Carsten, Janet. ‘Introduction: Ghosts of Memory’. In Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness, edited by Janet Carsten, 1–35. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Cowdell, Paul. ‘Belief in Ghosts in Post-War England’. PhD thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2011.

Čekić, S., M. Arnaut-Haseljčić, and B. Macić. Masovne grobnice u Bosni i Hercegovini—Sigurna zona ujedinjenih nacija Srebrenica [Mass-graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina—Safe Zone of the UN Srebrenica]. Sarajevo: Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv covječnosti i međunarodnog prava, 2010.

Čolović, Ivan. Balkan—teror kulture. Razprave o politični antropologiji 2 [The Balkans—terror of culture. Essays on political anthropology 2]. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 2015.

Davies, Owen. The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Dégh, Linda. Legend and Belief. Dialectics of a Folklore Genre. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Dizdarević, Išmet. ‘Posttraumatski stresni poremećaj žrtava srebreničkog genocida’ [Post-traumatic stress disorder of the Srebrenica genocide victims]. In Srebrenica 1995–2015: Evaluacija naslijeđa i dugoročnih posljedica genocida. Zbornik radova sa Međunarodne naučne konferencije održane 9–11. jula 2015. Godine [Srebrenica 1995–2015: evaluation of the heritage and long-term consequences of the genocide. A collection of papers from the international scientific conference that took place from 9 to 11 July 2015], edited by Fikret Bečirović and Muamer Džananović, 180–208. Sarajevo: Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv covječnosti i međunarodnog prava, 2016.

Donia, R. J., and V. A. J. Fine, Jr. Bosna i Hercegovina: Iznevjerena tradicija [Bosnia and Herzegovina: a tradition betrayed]. Translated by Daniela Valenta. Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu, 2011. First published 1994.

Duijzings, Ger. ‘Commemorating Srebrenica: Histories of Violence and the Politics of Memory in Eastern Bosnia’. In The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society, edited by Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms, and Ger Duijzings, 141–66. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016. First published 2007.

Ellis, Bill. Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults. Legends We Live. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003.
Erikson, Kai. 'Notes on Trauma and Community'. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 183–99. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Filipović, Milenko S. ‘Zivot i obićaji narodni u Visočkoj nahiji’ [Folk life and customs in Visočka Nahija]. *Special Issue, Srpski etnografski zbornik* 61 (1949).

Goldstein, Diane E., Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas, eds. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. First published 1997.

Halilović, Hariz 2020. ‘Srebrenica Genocide Has Changed Me and My Generation’ (posted 22 July 2020). Pešćanik.net: http://www.pescanik.net/srebrenica-genocide-has-changed-me-and-my-generation

Hayden, Robert M. ‘Recounting the Dead. The Rediscovery and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia’. In *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, edited by Rubie S. Watson, 167–84. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1994.

———. ‘Muslims as “Others” in Serbian and Croatian Politics’. In *Neighbors at War: Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture, and History*, edited by Joel M. Halpern and David A. Kideckel, 116–24. University Park: Pennslyvania State University, 2000.

Honig, W. J., and N. Both. *Srebrenica, Hronika ratnog zločina* [Srebrenica: record of a war crime]. Translated by Haris Mešinović. Sarajevo: Ljiljan, 1997.

Jonker, J., and K. Till. ‘Mapping and Excavating Spectral Traces in Post-Apartheid Cape Town’. *Memory Studies* 2, no. 3 (2009): 303–35.

Kim, Seong-Nae. ‘The Work of Memory: Ritual Laments of the Dead and Korea’s Cheju Massacre’. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek, 223–38. New York: Wiley, 2013.

Kwon, Heonik. ‘The Ghosts of War and the Spirit of Cosmopolitanism’. In *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 293–305. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018. First published 2004.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Lindahl, Carl. ‘Psychic Ambiguity at the Legend Core’. *Journal of Folklore Research* 23, no. 1 (1986): 1–21.

Markowitz, Fran. *Sarajevo: A Bosnian Kaleidoscope*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Nettelfield, L. J., and S. E. Wagner. *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Petrovic-Steger, Maja. ‘Anatomizing Conflict—Accommodating Human Remains’. In *Social Bodies*, edited by Helen Lambert and Maryon McDonald, 47–76. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2006.

Pollack, Craig Evan. ‘Burial at Srebrenica: Linking Place and Trauma’. *Social Science & Medicine* 56 (2003a): 793–801.

———. ‘Intentions of Burial: Mourning, Politics, and Memorials, Following the Massacre at Srebrenica’. *Death Studies* 27 (2003b): 125–42.

———. ‘Returning to a Safe Area—The Importance of Burial for Return to Srebrenica’. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16, no. 2 (2003c): 186–201.

Richardson, Judith. *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Rubin, Jonah S. ‘Exhuming Dead Persons: Forensic Science and the Making of Post-Fascist Publics in Spain’. *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2020): 345–73.
Schick, Kate. 'Acting out and Working Through: Trauma and (In)Security'. *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (October 2011): 1837–55.

Schindel, Estela, and Pamela Colombo. 'Introduction: The Multi-Layered Memories of Space'. In *Space and The Memories of Violence: Landscapes of Erasure, Disappearance and Exception*, edited by Estela Schindel and Pamela Colombo, 1–17. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Schneeweis, Edmund. *Vjerovanja i običaji Srba i Hrvata* [Beliefs and customs of Serbs and Croats]. Zagreb: Golden Marketing- Tehnicka knjiga, 2005. First published 1961.

Smelser, Neil J. 'Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma'. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Roy Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, 31–59. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

Smith, J. I., and Y. Y. Haddad. *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. First published 1981.

Softić, Aša. *Usmene predaje Bošnjaka* [Oral legends of Bosniaks]. Sarajevo: BKZ 'Preporod', Institut za bošnačke studije, 2002.

———. *Običaji bosanskohercegovačkih muslimana vezani na smrt* [Promised time. Death-related customs of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims]. Sarajevo: Zemaljski muzej Bosne i Hercegovine, 2016.

Thompson, Stith. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Reprint ed. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Tokača, Mirsad. *The Bosnian Book of the Dead: Human Losses in Bosnia And Herzegovina 1991–1995*. Sarajevo: Istraživačko Dokumentacijski centar, 2012.

Velikonja, Mitja. *Bosanski religijski mozaiki. Religije in nacionalne mitologije v zgodovini Bosne in Hercegovine*. [Bosnian religious mosaics. Religions and national mythologies in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.] Ljubljana: Znanstveno in publicistično središče, 1998.

Velikonja, Mitja. 'In hoc signo vinces: verski simbolizem v vojnah na Balkanu 1991–1995' [In this sign shalt thou conquer: religious symbolism in the wars in the Balkans, 1991–1995]. *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 30, nos 209/210 (2002): 193–206.

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

Vinogradova, Lyudmila. ‘Notions of “Good” and “Bad” Death in the System of Slavic Beliefs’. *Etnolog* 9, no. 1 (1999): 45–50.

Watson, Rubie S. 'Making Secret Histories. Memories and Mourning in Post-Mao China'. In *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, edited by Rubie S. Watson, 65–85. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1994.

Weller, Robert P. 'Bandits, Beggars, and Ghosts: The Failure of State Control over Religious Interpretation in Taiwan'. *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 1 (February 1985): 46–61.

**Biographical Note**

Mirjam Mencej is Professor of Folkloristics at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has published numerous papers and monographs on belief narratives, witchcraft, and vernacular religion.