”No Room for Denial”? Historical Memory and the 1995 Genocide at Srebrenica

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“No Room for Denial”?:

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by

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1. Introduction

Whenever they [the Bosnian Serb soldier] spot a male person… they would take him away and the person would not be seen after that… Every time they came to take a man away, afterwards you would hear screams of the family, of the wife, daughters, and from the direction of the houses where the men were being taken to, I couldn't tell you exactly, of course, what was happening there, but from that direction we could hear screams which looked like something from a horror movie.

So they [the Bosniak men] were taken towards the buses one by one… this was one of the saddest moments that I ever had in that area, in that you could see men, real men, crying, asking us, "You, UNPROFOR, why are you letting these people take us? Why are you letting them go with us? Why do you want us to be killed by these people?" And we could ask them, you know, "What do you think they're going to do to you," and they say, "Really, these people are going to kill us."

And of course, everywhere in the world, when Srebrenica is discussed, it’s seen as genocide…The reconciliation process cannot truly start without [the perpetrators] admitting it.

Acknowledging the truth about Srebrenica is a must and indispensable to all sides. Part of that truth is that despite the pain, despite the suffering… those acts were not done with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Bosnian Muslims as a group. The truth is that General Radislav Krstić is not guilty of genocide or complicity in genocide.¹

These quotes come from the documentary from which this project draws its name:

“Srebrenica Genocide: No Room for Denial,” produced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The ICTY was founded by the United Nations in 1993, after the UN’s Commission of Experts found evidence that forces involved in the Croatian and Bosnian Wars had breached international humanitarian laws.² The first two quotes come from witnesses before the courts – a Bosniak woman and an UNPROFOR soldier; the third, from a survivor of the genocide; and the last, from the defense in the trial of Radislav Krstić. Although the documentary title itself states that the facts established by the Tribunal regarding Srebrenica

cannot be disputed, the reality of the situation is that narratives of denial are pervasive in Bosnia, including in the ICTY’s courtroom. But why is that, and how do unofficial narratives interact with the ICTY’s official narrative?

After Josef Tito died, the collapse of communism and an uptick in nationalism created the perfect storm for Yugoslavia. The period of relative peace gave way to political and economic crisis that culminated in Slovenia and Croatia declaring independence on the same day in 1991. On March 3, 1992, Bosnia declared its own independence following a referendum boycotted by Bosnian Serbs, and about a month later, it was recognized as a sovereign nation internationally.3 Around the same time, Bosnian Serbs declared independence from Bosnia, and in alignment with an agreement made in 1991 between the presidents of Serbia and Croatia, Bosnian Serbs with support from Serbia and Bosnian Croats with support from Croatia began seizing territory for their respective ethnic homelands.4 The fighting reached eastern Bosnia, where Srebrenica is located, by June 1992, causing tens of thousands of Bosniaks to shelter in the town of Srebrenica, which was subsequently declared a safe zone by the UN, who sent troops to protect it.5

Life in Srebrenica was bleak, and made bleaker by Directive 7, issued in early 1995 by the president of the Bosnian Serb administration and the general of the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS), which set the goal of making life in the enclave “unbearable”. On July 6, 1995, the VRS took the town of Srebrenica, at which point the refugees fled to the UN base at Potočari, which was overrun only a few days later, on July 11. That night, a group of Bosniak men tried to escape

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by marching to Bosniak-held territory further west. The VRS began to separate women and children from men; the men were taken to detention sites and the women and children were forcibly removed by busses to Bosniak territory. On July 13, the VRS embarked on mass killings of the Bosniak men who stayed behind, all the while shelling the column and taking prisoners, who were then also executed.\textsuperscript{6} Over the course of the war, all three ethnic groups became both victims and perpetrators of war crimes.\textsuperscript{7} The war ended with a ceasefire followed by the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords until intense international pressure from the US and NATO.\textsuperscript{8} It is important to note that the war did not end because of a military victory, so while ending the fighting probably saved many lives, it did complicate reconciliation, because there was no true victor.

In this paper, I use narratives of affirmation and denial surrounding the genocide at Srebrenica to argue that historical memory is being used as a tool to promote ethnonationalism in Bosnia. This ethnonationalism is not without consequence, as it promotes a narrow, uncomplicated view of history, and one that perpetuates existing tensions. I will begin by discussing the historical context as it relates to the rise of ethnonationalism and establishing the official narrative as set forth by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. I will then analyze how the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center, created by the Bosniaks, confirms and engages with the ICTY’s narrative, before exploring some of the ways in which Bosnian Serbs participate in perpetuating narratives that deny the genocide. According to Sanja Kutnjak Ivković and John Hagan, the brand of ethnonationalism present in the former Yugoslavia today relies on positioning one’s own ethnic group as a victim rather than a

\textsuperscript{6} “Srebrenica Genocide: No Room for Denial.”
\textsuperscript{7} “The Conflicts.”
\textsuperscript{8} Friedman, 57-58.
perpetrator. In the case of Srebrenica, for Bosnian Serbs, accepting the ICTY’s findings – that the Bosnian Serb Army was guilty of committing genocide – would directly contradict that narrative, and thus the major narratives of denial of Srebrenica come from ethnic Serbs. For Bosniaks, however, engaging in narratives of commemoration or affirmation of the ICTY’s findings at Srebrenica serves as a way of justifying their ethnonationalism.

In her book *Memorial Mania*, Erika Doss characterizes the frenzy to erect monuments in the United States following World War II as “an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts.” She identifies five primary emotions that relate to the “affective conditions” of today’s America as is manifested in this memorial mania: grief, gratitude, fear, shame, and anger. While Doss was referring specifically to the United States, her writings are relevant when applied to the situation in Bosnia today. In Bosnia, there is a void where a common historical narrative should be. Because the Dayton Accords ended the war with essentially a draw, there is a sense of a lack of resolution regarding the war and the ethnonationalist tensions that sparked it. These tensions have been allowed to fester, with one of the results being competing historical narratives regarding the war. Because of this, conflicting historical narratives have arisen, and memorialization of the same event can take on multiple of the emotions that Doss discusses, depending on who is doing the memorializing. The narratives of affirmation tend to fit in with memorials related to fear, while the narratives of denial tend to fit in with memorialization of anger. Although the types of affect present in these narratives overlaps with those that Doss discusses, this analysis is not restricted to physical memorials in the way that Doss’s is; rather, it

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explores how the different narratives manifest themselves in many aspects of life in Bosnia, from graffiti to political speeches.

2. Historical Background

Despite today’s ethnonationalist tensions, the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats (the three major ethnic groups in Bosnia) share common origins. All three groups are descended from the same group of Slavs, who migrated to the Balkan Peninsula before the 7th century. Ottoman colonization in 1463 introduced Islam to a largely Christian society (Catholic and Orthodox), and although there were tensions between groups, these tensions were largely religious rather than ethnic. Although many converted to Islam, Christians enjoyed some self-governance under Ottoman rule, which allowed the religious communities to coalesce politically, marking the beginning of the transition from strictly religious groups to more complicated national groups. Today, these religious differences have evolved to help delineate ethnic groups: Bosniaks tend to be Muslim, Serbs tend to be Orthodox, and Croats tend to be Catholic. After the Austro-Hungarian takeover in 1878, local bureaucrats deliberately exacerbated tensions between the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in attempts to gain power, while the Hapsburg sought to create a Bosnian identity based on geography rather than ethnicity. The Hapsburg policies were not popular, and resulted in a growth rather than decline in ethnonationalism. It is important to note that the Muslims were still considered “anational” at this point, but they had enjoyed religious privilege during Ottoman times, and began “coalescing communally” in an effort to protect that. Nationalism among Bosnian Serbs, who wished to be made a part of independent Serbia,

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11 Friedman, 6, 8.
12 Friedman, 8.
catalyzed the First World War when a Bosnian Serb nationalist, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. Croats (who fought with the Austrians in WWI) and Bosnian Muslims began violent protests against the Serbs.¹⁴ Post-WWI, the multinational predecessor to Yugoslavia, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, came into existence.¹⁵ During this period, Serbs dominated the centralized government, while Croats and Slovenes sought to decentralize the government, and Muslims actively pursued the maintenance of political autonomy. This conflict led to a ban on nationalist parties. The Kingdom was then renamed Yugoslavia and divided into nine districts. Four of those districts split up what had historically been Bosnia-Herzegovina, nullifying Muslim efforts to maintain autonomy and leaving them minorities in all four districts, three of which had a Serb majority and one of which had a Croat majority.¹⁶

After invasion and division by the Axis powers in 1941, the fascist Independent State of Croatia began the deportation and extermination of Jews and Roma. The Serbs and Bosnian Muslims fared better: a third of Serbs converted (voluntarily or forcibly) to Catholicism and survived, while Bosnian Muslims were identified as “not ethnically unique” from Croats, and Islam was made a state religion along with Catholicism. Multiethnic Partisan forces led by Josip Tito liberated Yugoslavia from fascism and ended the inter-ethnic civil war, which mainly pitted Serbs against fascist-supporting Muslims and Croats. Tito unified Yugoslavia through Marxism, but despite the ethnic warfare that had shaped World War II in the Balkans, there was no truth and reconciliation process in an effort to “negate the previous separate histories… to bind the South Slavs together.”¹⁷ Five republics divided along historic ethnic borders were created, along

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¹⁴ Friedman, 11-13.
¹⁵ Friedman, 13.
¹⁶ Friedman, 15-16.
¹⁷ Friedman, 19-22.
with a sixth – Bosnia and Herzegovina – that was multiethnic, containing large numbers of Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbs and Croats fought each other for control, making the Muslims, who were still not considered a separate ethnic group, a desirable ally in coalition-building. Tito worked to create a country focused on domestic consensus, but the division into largely ethnically-based republics made his job harder. Despite large ethnic minorities in almost all of the republics, the republics pursued issues “through the filter of national self-interest, which inevitably fragmented Yugoslav society along national lines… [and] undercut the basis for civil society.” This led to the wars for independence, including the Bosnian War, following his death.

3. The ICTY

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia only deals with individual perpetrators, as organizations and administrations are out of its jurisdiction, and four types of crimes: “grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva conventions, violations of the laws or customs of war, genocide and crimes against humanity.” It was intended to hold people accountable for war crimes, not to improve relationships between former combatants, and considers itself to “[have] contributed to an indisputable historical record.” (emphasis added). As the most ethnically diverse of the former Yugoslav republics (43% Bosniaks, 33% Bosnian Serbs, and

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18 Friedman, 22-24.
19 Friedman, 26-27.
17% Bosnian Croats), there is considerable internal division along ethnonationalist lines regarding the ICTY’s narratives. This is amplified by the fact that some of the most devastating breaches of humanitarian law, including the genocide at Srebrenica, happened during the Bosnian War, which means that the ICTY’s cases dealing with Bosnia included some of its most controversial cases.

3A. The ICTY’s Official Narrative

The ICTY’s investigation of crimes committed in Srebrenica in 1995 led to the indictment of twenty individuals, with more than 1,000 witness testimonies. As of June 2015, fourteen of those individuals had been convicted, one individual was acquitted, and one case was terminated (as the accused died before a judgment was passed). In addition to witness testimonies that included both victims and perpetrators, the ICTY also used mass grave exhumations, testimony from demographic experts, and intercepted military communications. The trials led to a few key findings: that Bosnian Serb forces (along with others) killed between 7,000 and 8,000 Bosniaks over the span of about one week, that these killings were mass executions rather than battle casualties, that the executions were planned ahead of time, and that the executions qualify as genocide.

The ICTY’s rhetoric surrounding Srebrenica is particularly strong. In their publication entitled “Facts About Srebrenica”, the ICTY states that “[the] massacre… was the single worst atrocity committed in the former Yugoslavia during the wars of the 1990s and the worst

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23 “The Conflicts.”
24 “ICTY Remembers: The Srebrenica Genocide, 1995-2015.” As of 2015, last four trials were still ongoing. During the appeals process, Momčilo Perišić, the only acquittal, was acquitted of his crimes at Srebrenica, but was still found for other war crimes.
massacre that occurred in Europe since the months after World War II.” (emphasis added). The ICTY also uses the phrase “beyond a reasonable doubt” ten times in the eight-page document. However, in a 2012 survey conducted in the Republika Srpska (RS, the Bosnian entity dominated by Bosnian Serbs), where the majority of the population are ethnic Serbs, only 20.1% of respondents had heard of the massacres at Srebrenica, believe that it happened, and believe it to be a crime. In the “Facts About Srebrenica” document, the ICTY acknowledges some of the major narratives of denial: that the number of people killed was exaggerated, that most of the dead were combatants rather than civilians, that the attacks were spontaneous and came about as revenge for attacks on ethnic Serbs living near Srebrenica, and that it simply was not genocide.

The fact that the ICTY feels the need to address these narratives of denial, despite claiming that their historical narrative is indisputable and that this case has been proven “beyond a reasonable doubt”, indicates that these narratives of denial are widespread enough and have gained enough traction that the ICTY’s ethos has been called into question. People seem to be making room for denial in the ICTY’s findings, whether the ICTY believes that room is there or not. The question now is why, and how?

3B. Attitudes towards the ICTY in Bosnia

Members of every ethnic group committed and suffered “horrendous crimes”, including systematic rape, civilian detention centers, and genocide. Within Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, Bosniaks and Croats tend to say that their respective ethnic groups were the greatest

27 “Facts About Srebrenica,” 1, 2, 6, 7, 8.
30 “The Conflicts.”
victims, and both agree that the Serbs were the greatest perpetrators. In contrast, Bosnian Serbs tend to say that everyone suffered equally and everyone bears equal responsibility as perpetrators.\(^{31}\) In a survey from 2012, respondents from the RS had largely negative views of the ICTY in general, with 84% of the RS respondents reporting a mainly negative or extremely negative perception of the ICTY. In contrast, 59% of residents of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the population is mainly Bosniak and Croat, report a mainly positive or extremely positive view of the ICTY. However, in the Herzegovina region within the Federation, which has the largest concentration of ethnic Croats in Bosnia, 85% of the population has a mainly negative or extremely negative perception of the ICTY. This indicates that Bosniaks are the only ethnic group with a generally positive perception of the ICTY.\(^{32}\) Among Serbs in the RS and Croats in Croatia,\(^{33}\) the most prevalent rationale for not trusting the ICTY was that it is perceived as biased against members of the ethnic group of the respondent.\(^{34}\) In contrast, Bosniaks felt that the ICTY was unbiased and treated the three ethnic groups equally.\(^{35}\) Of the ICTY cases completed by 2005, two-thirds of the defendants were Serbs, a quarter were Croats, and less than a tenth were Bosniaks.\(^{36}\)

It is estimated that 3.1% of the Bosniak population in Bosnia-Herzegovina was killed or disappeared during the war, in contrast with 1.4% of the Bosnian Serb population and 1.0% of the Bosnian Croat population. In terms of absolute numbers, 57,992 Bosniaks, 19,398 Bosnian Serbs, and 7,543 Bosnian Croats were killed or disappeared. Bosniaks also made up over 60% of

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\(^{31}\) Milanović, 244.

\(^{32}\) Milanović, 240.

\(^{33}\) Because there are no separate results for Croats and Bosniaks in the Federation, I chose to use the results from Croats in Croatia to substitute for Bosnian Croats based on the fact that the feelings of the majority ethnic group (in this case, Croats in Croatia) towards the ICTY tend to carry over to locations where that ethnic group is in the minority (i.e. Croats in Bosnia). See Kutnjak Ivković and Hagan, 204.

\(^{34}\) Milanović, 242.

\(^{35}\) Kutnjak Ivković and Hagan, 205.

\(^{36}\) Kutnjak Ivković and Hagan, 205.
deaths among civilian men and women, and military men and women, and accounted for 65.0% of total deaths, while Bosnian Serbs accounted for 21.7% of total deaths and Bosnian Croats accounted for 8.5% of total deaths.\textsuperscript{37} Based on these numbers, Bosniaks clearly suffered the most losses, both in terms of percentage of the population killed or missing and in terms of percentage of war deaths, indicating that Bosniaks’ perception of themselves as the greatest victims is in fact correct, despite Croats’ and Serbs’ disagreement. This is not to say that Bosniaks did not also commit brutal war crimes, because they did, but it is logical that the ICTY has indicted the least Bosniaks out of the three ethnic groups.

From these statistics, we begin to understand why the ICTY’s narrative of Srebrenica has been simultaneously rejected and accepted by different groups. Bosniaks felt that they were the greatest victims of the war and that the Serbs were the greatest perpetrators. Their worldview appears to align with the ICTY’s findings, as most of the indictees have been Serbs, with very few Bosniaks. Because their worldview is generally in consonance with the ICTY, they tend to have a more positive opinion of the ICTY, and are therefore more likely to accept its version of what happened during the Bosnian War. However, it is important to note even though the ICTY generally aligns with Bosniak worldviews, Bosniaks still force cases that do not align with that worldview out of the common narrative. For example, when one Bosniak general who had been convicted of responsibility for war crimes died, he was still granted “state funeral… with full military honors.”\textsuperscript{38} Bosnian Serbs felt that everyone was equally responsible and suffered


equally, which contradicts the ICTY, who has indicted the most Serbs out of any ethnic group, causing them to feel persecuted by the ICTY and to not accept its narrative. Clearly, despite the fact that the ICTY is intended to judge individuals, members of the ethnic groups who made up a vast majority of the indictments feel as though their ethnic group as a whole is on trial, and if one feels that members of one’s own in-group are being judged unfairly based on the aspect of their identity that ties that person to the rest of the group, that person is unlikely to accept the narrative created by those trials. These worldviews come into play in shaping the Bosniak and Bosnian Serb narratives of Srebrenica.

3. Narratives of Affirmation

One of the most prominent ways that the ICTY’s official narrative is publicly affirmed is through the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center. The Center consists of a cemetery with a *musala* for prayer, a museum, and a memorial room. The Memorial Center is located in Srebrenica (within the Republika Srpska); the battery factory that was transformed into the memorial room was one of the sites where the VRS initially separated Bosniak men from women and children.\(^{39}\) The Memorial Center was officially opened on September 20, 2003, with the burial of almost 1,000 victims of the genocide. The idea was brought forth by Paddy Ashdown, then serving as the High Representative in Bosnia, after his visit to the Holocaust Exhibition at

London’s Imperial War Museum.\(^{40}\) It is managed and owned by the Foundation of Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery, which is based in Sarajevo.\(^{41}\)

The entrance to the cemetery takes you to a curved path that runs in between the memorial wall and the *musala*, an structure with open walls that provides a place for prayer for visiting Muslims. The floor is engraved with prayer spaces, and spare prayer mats sit to the side.\(^{42}\) The cemetery, located on a slight hill, consists of rows and rows of 6,000 identical gravestones, white pillars a few feet tall, inscribed with the interred’s name, birthday, hometown, and a quote from the Koran: “And call not those who are slain in the way of Allah ‘dead.’ Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not.”\(^{43}\) Most graves hold only portions of remains, rather than entire bodies; the VRS used heavy machinery to dig up the mass graves at the execution sites and redistribute the corpses among secondary mass graves, “[resulting] in the violent disarticulation of human skeletal remains… an individual victim’s lower half might be found in one mass grave and the upper half in [another]… site”, making it difficult to find entire bodies.\(^{44}\) The graves are arranged in family plots, with gaps waiting to be filled by the remains of still unidentified bodies.\(^{45}\) In front of the graves, at the bottom of the hill, sits the memorial wall, a semicircular wall engraved with the names of the victims of the genocide, low enough that you can see the


\(^{43}\) Wagner, 73.

\(^{44}\) Wagner, 64.

\(^{45}\) Wagner, 68.
graves, but angled in a way that you can read every name.\textsuperscript{46} At one end of the wall sits a three-sided obelisk with the same prayer written in Arabic, Bosnian, and English.\textsuperscript{47}

One of the ways in which the cemetery affirms the ICTY’s narrative is in its demonstration of the scale of the atrocities, a part of the narrative that is often brought under contention. Although there is space for the burial places to extend behind the main area where \textit{musala} and memorial wall are located, all of the graves are located in front of the middle of the \textit{musala}. This means that when you enter the cemetery, there are no graves behind you, blocked from view. Instead, they extend back and to the sides, although there are significantly more on the right of the entrance than on the left. This, along with the uniformity of the graves, emphasizes not only the sheer number of people killed, but also creates a sense of solidarity, linking the victims after death. The memorial wall that surrounds the area where you enter also underlines the magnitude of the tragedy with the number of names displayed. As you walk the path along the memorial wall, the graves are always in the background, a constant reminder that these are the names of the dead. The prayer inscribed on the obelisk, the Koran verses on the graves, and the \textit{musala} all mark Islam as central to this place. Religion is one of the faultlines along which the different ethnic groups in the Balkans divide themselves, and the act of defining this as a Muslim place specifically further emphasizes the separation between the groups, drawing a hard line between the victims and the perpetrators.

The cemetery builds off the minimalist style that rose to popularity in memorialization following World War II, which Doss discusses in reference to memorials of fear. Memorials like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the Oklahoma City National Memorial in Oklahoma City, and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin mark a “rejection of

\textsuperscript{46} See Appendix 1.
\textsuperscript{47} See Appendix 1.
representational styles” in the face of many large-scale tragedies, as a result of the perceived “inadequacy of traditional forms of representational art.” Doss believes that “when public feelings matter, and public is deemed especially successful when it generates strong feelings of social relevance and public ‘ownership,’ minimalist art is considered the ‘best’ aesthetic because of its participatory and experiential dimensions.” The musala invites visitors to participate in and experience memorialization by praying in the memory of the victims, and its simple design, with open walls and a plain roof, echo minimalist design principles. The experiential aspect is also present in the cemetery at Srebrenica in the Memorial Wall, which mimics memorials like the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial by listing the names of the dead. This is participatory because it invites the visitor to read the names and engage with the memory of the dead in that way. When I visited the memorial, the wall was perhaps one of the most moving parts, because reading the names felt like a form of recognizing the humanity of each victim. Because the names are sorted by family, it drives home the fact that some families were essentially decimated by genocide. For example, the Salihović family name takes up almost four whole columns on the wall, more than 200 names. The gravestones themselves are also minimalist in their style and in their uniformity: rows and rows of simple white obelisks, all exactly the same except for the names. The combination of the wall and the gravestones emphasize the massive loss of population, and along with the prayer inscribed on the column next to the wall, make the social relevance abundantly clear: the genocide must be remembered in order to prevent such a massive loss of life from happening again, and that there is a fear that denial and apathy could lead to another such event.

48 Doss, 123.
49 Doss, 127.
50 See Appendix 1.
The abandoned battery factory, the site where so many Bosniaks saw their family members for the last time, is appropriately somber. Referred to as the *Spomen soba*, the Memorial Room, it was the main instructional space for the memorial beginning in 2003 until about two years ago, when the new museum space opened. The old factory is in a state of semi-decay, and marked by its industrial past, with rust stains spotting the walls and floor, exposed metal beams criss-crossing the ceiling, cracked paint, and some factory equipment still standing in a corner. The Foundation have done little to change the layout of the space, with the exception constructing two black structures that stand in the middle of the factory floor. One holds a series of twenty narrow displays with the stories of twenty victims and their lives before the genocide, containing the belongings that were found with them in the mass graves. The other provides a viewing space for audio and video clips of the genocide. Informational displays line the perimeter of the room, flat against the wall.⁵¹ Again, we see the minimalism that Doss discusses in her section on memorials to fear. The black cubes themselves are extremely minimalist and feature no ornamentation, and the industrial materials used in the construction of the factory, its original purpose, align well with aspects of minimalist design, as bronze, marble, and other traditional materials are not typically used in minimalism. Instead, minimalist sculptors tend to gravitate more towards materials like concrete and metal,⁵² both conveniently already present in the factory.

Here, the Memorial Center explicitly engages in conversation with the ICTY’s official narrative. One of the displays, approximately three feet tall, pictured in Appendix 2, features quotes from witness testimonies and from the ICTY’s description of the events, along with a quote from the trial of Radislav Krstić in large print at the top: “Those who devise and

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⁵¹ See Appendix 2.
⁵² Doss, 125.
implement genocide seek to deprive humanity of the manifold richness its nationalities, races, ethnicities, and religions provide. This is a crime against all humankind, its harm being felt not only by the group targeted for destruction, but by all of humanity.” It also contains a brief synopsis of the ICTY’s founding and context for Srebrenica. This is a clear moment of affirmation of the ICTY’s narrative of Srebrenica. By referencing the court cases and the witness testimonies, the Memorial Rooms borrows some of the ICTY’s ethos as an international court of justice to give its own narrative authority on the subject.

While the cemetery communicates the scale of the massacre, the Memorial Room seeks to personalize it, to make visitors come face to face with the reality of the deep losses suffered by the Bosniak community. In Martha Minow’s work on genocide and transitional justice, she argues that genocide is not just about obliterating a group, but also obliterating the stories of individuals within that group. The Memorial Room literally and figuratively sheds light on the stories of victims, as the displays located inside the black structures are the only artificially-illuminated portion within the black structure. On the walls of the factory, some of the displays also include photographs of personal items used to identify victims. These displays, both the signs and the alcoves spotlighting twenty of the victims, are similar to other memorials to the dead, particularly in memorials to Holocaust victims at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Jewish Museum Vilnius. These types of displays tend to prioritize emotional connection between the audience and the displays. The audience sees themselves in the everyday objects of the dead – the key rings, the glasses, etc. – and empathizes with the victims.

As previously mentioned, ethnonationalism in Bosnia today is centered around victimhood. The Memorial Center clearly positions the Bosniaks as victims, and rightfully so.
The cemetery emphasizes the religious identity of the victims as a way of supporting the ICTY’s narrative that this was a genocide, because religion serves as one of the differentiators between ethnic groups in the Balkans. The uniformity of the thousands upon thousands of graves works in conjunction with the Memorial Wall to emphasize the scale of the tragedy, and to pre-emptively fight narratives of denial regarding the number of victims (which will be discussed in the next section). In contrast, the Memorial Room seeks to personalize the tragedy to the audience, and uses video and audio footage, as well as material from the ICTY itself, to build its authority, and to convince visitors of the truthfulness of this narrative of genocide and persecution at the hands of the Bosnian Serbs.

4. Narratives of Denial

These narratives of affirmation, however, are constantly battling narratives of denial, particularly coming from Serbs in Bosnia and beyond. These narratives seek to repudiate or challenge the official narrative of Srebrenica and the narratives of affirmation espoused primarily by Bosniaks and by the international community. Israel Charny, a noted scholar of genocide, identifies multiple forms of genocide denial: reframing it as a different crime, constructing the perpetrator as the victim, placing it in the distant past, claiming that research as incomplete, framing statistics as inaccurate, and claiming that victims were actually treated well.55 Four of these six forms – reframing it as another crime, constructing the perpetrator as the victim, claiming that research is incomplete, and framing the statistics as inaccurate – are present in the narratives of denial that I will analyze. As previously mentioned, Bosnian Serbs tend to believe that all three ethnic groups suffered equally during the Bosnian War, and that everyone bears

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equal responsibility as perpetrators. Thus, denial seems to center around minimizing the crimes against Bosniaks and maximizing the crimes against Serbs, using the techniques that Charny identifies.

One example of a public display of this narrative is the Memorial to Serb Civilians, located at Kravica, approximately ten miles away from the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center. The Memorial to Serb Citizens is a concrete cross stands over 20 feet tall, and was erected in 2005, ten years after the genocide at Srebrenica. Part of the inscription on the cross reads:

The monument marks
the combatants killed and civilian victims
who died defending their homeland
and the Serb victims of the Second World War
of the Birač and central Podrinje region
Republika Srpska
From 1992 to 1995
3,267 Serb victims
From 1941 to 1945
6,469 Serb victims

While this memorial does not explicitly address the genocide at Srebrenica, there are ways in which the memorial seeks to position Serbs as the real victims in the region, thereby shifting victimhood to the perpetrator. The opening of memorial was planned for July 12, the day after the annual Day of Remembrance for the victims of the genocide at Srebrenica, and the day on which, ten years earlier, General Ratko Mladić declared Srebrenica liberated for the Serb people. Not only does this memorial link the Bosnian Army and the Nazis together as outside

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56 Milanović, 244.
57 See Appendix 3.
59 Nettelfield and Wagner, 271.
60 Jelacic.
threats to the Serb “homeland”, it also contains an outright lie in terms of the number of victims it claims to support the narrative that the Serbs were the greatest victims. According to the Research and Documentation Center, an NGO based in Sarajevo, only 849 Serb civilians died in the Podrinje region during the war,\(^6\) about 10-12% of the estimated number of Bosniaks killed in the genocide.

Denial has also run rampant among Bosnian Serb politicians at multiple levels of government, as well as among everyday citizens. Mladen Gruičić, the first Serb mayor of Srebrenica, elected in October 2016, declared that he “can’t agree with the qualification of the crime [as genocide],” claiming that the number of victims is exaggerated. While he has not taken anything out of the town’s budget for the annual Day of Remembrance, he has increased the section in the budget for commemorating Serb victims of the war.\(^6\) This not only reframes the genocide as another crime, but also calls the statistics into questions and implicitly reframes the perpetrators as victims, therefore engaging in three of Charny’s forms of genocide denial.

Milorad Dodik led the charge in 2018 to annul a report produced by the RS that acknowledged the scale of the crimes at Srebrenica in July of 1995 and that those crimes were a serious violation of international humanitarian law. Dodik, at the time the president of the RS, now the Serb member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, claims that the report propagated “false data… with the intention of satanising Serbs.” Neither Bosniak nor Croat members of the RS’s legislature supported the decision to reject the old report and sponsor a new report on war crimes committed at Srebrenica between 1992 and 1995 that would “illuminate all the uncertainties from the first report, but also include in the report the suffering

\(^6\) Nettelfield and Wagner, 271-272.
of Serbs in and around Srebrenica,” in the words of the Assembly.63 The most salient of Charny’s forms of genocide denial in this action is attacking the research as incomplete, as it specifically calls the legitimacy of the first report into question. Dodik specifically refers to “false data”, most likely implying that the number of deaths was exaggerated, another form of genocide denial. He also seeks to reframe the victim as perpetrator, both in terms of the violence and crimes that occurred at the time, and in terms of the way the issue has been treated since 1995. Dodik also supported a 2017 ban on textbooks from the Federation that include sections about the siege of Sarajevo or the massacre at Srebrenica, saying “it is impossible to use schoolbooks … in which it is written that the Serbs committed genocide and held Sarajevo under siege. It’s not true and it will not be studied [in the RS],”64 not quite reframing the genocide as a different crime, but denying that it was a genocide.

Milos Milovanović heads the Kravica war veterans’ association and is a prominent local member of the Serbian Democratic Party, the party to which Radovan Karadžić (president of the RS during the Bosnian War and convicted war criminal for his involvement in Srebrenica, among other crimes) belongs. In 2005, he told reporters that "The massacre is a lie," and that "It is propaganda, created to portray the Serbian people in a bad light. The Muslims are lying and are manipulating the numbers and exaggerating what happened."65 This fiery rhetoric takes reframing the genocide as another crime to the extreme, as it even contests the event’s status as a

64 Danijel Kovacevic, “Bosnian Serbs to Ban Lessons on Srebrenica Genocide,” Balkan Insight, June 6, 2017, accessed April 15, 2019. https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/06/bosnian-serbs-to-ban-lectures-on-srebrenica-sarajevo-siege-06-06-2017/. It is important to note that the ministries of education in Bosnia signed an agreement in 2002 that prohibited war topics in schoolbooks, meaning that the Federation did technically violate this agreement by using these textbooks. However, Dodik’s reasoning for supporting the ban fits in to the narratives of denial, and calls into question whether the ban was actually enacted to comply with the agreement or whether the agreement was a convenient justification for rejecting the narratives of affirmation in the textbook.
65 Jelacic.
massacre, which is less serious than a genocide. It also constructs the perpetrators as victims, not of the violence itself, but of the narrative surrounding the violence, and contests the current research by claiming that the statistics have been falsified.

Similar narratives of denial are present among everyday citizens as well. According to one Bosnian Serb citizen in Bibici, a village near Srebrenica, "[The Bosniaks] got what they asked for in 1995… Ninety-nine per cent of the Serbs will tell you the same."66 This sentiment is echoed by graffiti that Lara Nettelfield and Sarah Wagner encountered in Milići, a small town near Srebrenica, while researching their book, Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide, which reads “For Kravica, you got Srebrenica. We played by your rules.”67 While these are two isolated examples, they demonstrate that these narratives of denial are a larger trend because they associate these narratives with a larger community. The first does this by claiming that 99% of Serbs would agree with this statement which, although most likely an exaggeration, indicates that this narrative is widespread throughout the Bosnian Serb community. The second does so by referring presumably to the Serbs as “we” and to the Bosniaks as “you”, drawing a line between the two groups and constructing the violence on either side as collective. This reframes the genocide as a different crime – an act of justified revenge.

While the design of the Memorial to Serb Citizens has aspects that link it to memorials designed to conjure fear – a simple design made from concrete, an industrial material, and places to lay flowers, which makes it participatory – the majority of the overall memorialization on the Bosnian Serb side centers around anger: anger that at perceived persecution by the ICTY, anger

66 Jelacic.
67 Nettelfield and Wagner, 269-270. This graffiti is probably referring to the raids on the town of Kravica on Orthodox Christmas, 1993, by Bosniaks led by Naser Orić. During these raids, 78 Serb civilians were killed. Orić was indicted by the ICTY on counts of violations of customs of war - wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, not justified by military necessity, and murder or cruel treatment - but was acquitted on most counts and only imprisoned for two year on the basis of the defense of necessity, as “the Trial Chamber considered the extraordinary humanitarian circumstances in Srebrenica at the time.” (See http://www.icty.org/x/cases/oric/cis/en/cis_oric_en.pdf)
that the Bosniaks are seen as the victims and they as the perpetrators. Doss describes memorials designed to promote anger as a combination of, among other things, “fear, … lack of trust, … and a sense of slight.”68 As previously discussed, Bosnian Serbs do not tend to have faith in the ICTY as they tend to feel that Serbs are unfairly blamed for crimes committed during the war, which brings in aspects of fear of persecution by the ICTY and a lack of trust in the official narrative because it was set forth by the ICTY. Milovanović mentions “[wanting] to have a place where we can pray for the souls of our victims… like the memorial in Potočari,” as one of the motivations behind the Memorial to Serb Citizens,69 which indicates a sense that Serb victims are being slighted and ignored in the region in favor of the Bosniak victims.

These narratives of denial serve an ethnonationalist agenda by decentering Bosnian Serbs as perpetrators and Bosniaks as victims. By calling the research and statistics into question, and reframing the genocide as a different crime, these narratives of denial seek to cast doubt on the Bosniaks’ victimhood, and characterize them as liars. In doing so, the Bosnian Serbs also cast themselves as the innocent victims of the violence itself and of history, wrongfully accused of war crimes that they did not commit, with the loss of life in their community ignored. In this version of history, the Bosnian Serbs are the persecuted, not persecutors, and the Bosniaks are the villains. Dodik’s success as a politician – rising from Prime Minister of the entity of the RS to president of the same entity to president of the country – serves as a prime example that these ethnonationalist narratives centered around claiming victimhood and denying perpetrator status pay off on a larger scale. The fact that these narratives are echoed by lower-level politicians and everyday citizens highlight the pervasiveness of these narratives that work in a mutually-reinforcing cycle: politicians like Dodik get elected at least partially based on their rhetoric, their

68 Doss, 325.
69 Jelacic.
election increases their platform and credibility, they aggressively deny the official narrative, thereby reinforcing their constituents’ views, and the constituents continue to vote for politicians expressing the same rhetoric.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ICTY’s official narrative of what happened at Srebrenica is simultaneously challenged and affirmed in Bosnia. Bosniaks, the victims of the genocide, tend to believe that they suffered the most during the Bosnian War, and that Serbs were the greatest perpetrators of violence. Because this typically matches with ICTY narratives, Bosniaks have a generally positive view of the ICTY (although they are not immune from the trend of denying ICTY findings that contradict their worldview). In contrast, Serbs tend to believe that each ethnic group was equally a victim and a perpetrator, which does not usually align with the ICTY’s narrative. The ICTY found that that Bosnian Serb forces (along with others) killed between 7,000 and 8,000 Bosniaks over the span of about one week, that these killings were mass executions rather than battle casualties, that the executions were planned ahead of time, and that the executions qualify as genocide. In response, Bosniaks have engaged in historical memory practices that affirm the ICTY’s narrative, as exemplified by the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center. This memorialization centers around fear of the genocide being forgotten and potentially repeated. In contrast, Bosnian Serbs have embarked on their own mission to repudiate this narrative by erecting their own memorials to Serb victims, publicly denying the ICTY’s findings, and funding alternative narratives. While fear plays a role in memorialization and underscores some of the feelings of anger present, anger is the main driving force in the Bosnian Serb memorialization of Srebrenica.
This is significant because it is genocide denial in the name of ethnonationalism, falsifying and manipulating historical narratives to support a narrow, uncritical view of history. It is important to recognize that both the narratives of affirmation and narratives of denial are used as tools to further political goals, and to think critically about how either narrative fits into an agenda. However, as historians, we must not confuse neutrality for objectivity. Not taking a side is entirely different than taking an informed position based on a fair evaluation of facts. We can recognize that many Serbs were killed in Srebrenica and that Bosniaks also committed war crimes elsewhere without trying to equate these crimes. These deaths and crimes were tragic, yes, but cannot compare to the scale and tragedy of a genocide, the worst massacre in Europe since the Holocaust. This evaluation is not intended to cast one group as the victims and the other as the perpetrators. A similar paper about denialism and conflicting narratives could probably be written about any of the ICTY’s rulings, and each one would paint a different picture of the degree to which each ethnic group was victim or perpetrator. It is important to recognize that the same group can be both in different contexts, and being able to think critically about the history of one’s own group is a valuable skill in a context in which it appears that many still think about that history in terms of black and white.

Even in the face of such competing narratives, there is still hope for reconciliation. In June 2005, during Slobodan Milošević’s (the president of Serbia during the war) trial, a video of a Serbian paramilitary unit was introduced into evidence:

The video starts with a Serbian Orthodox priest blessing the unit members before they go off on their mission. Then, young [Bosniak] men, probably in their teens, showing evidence of severe beatings, are unloaded from a truck and made to lie on the ground, their hands tided [sic] behind their back. After a while, the men are made to walk up a hill, where they are shot in the back, point blank, from automatic weapons. The last two are made to carry the others to a pit, before being executed themselves. All of this is
happening to a background of banter and insults while the cameraman complains about the battery being almost empty, but urges his colleagues to ‘continue working’. The same day that the video was entered into evidence, excerpts of the footage ranging from eight minutes to 20 seconds aired on a number of television channels in Serbia, including the public broadcaster. While the video was originally intended to prove that Serbia actively participated in the Bosnian War, it had an added impact of “destroying, in the eyes of many, the myths of the heroic Serbian warriors fighting with honor in Bosnia,” and sparking a wave of affirmation of the ICTY’s narrative. The President and Prime Minister of Serbia both publicly condemned the crimes at Srebrenica, as did every active Serbian political party and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The President also announced his intention to honor the victims on the tenth anniversary of the massacre, and Parliament introduced a resolution to condemn the crimes at Srebrenica. The version of the resolution that passed, however, condemned all crimes committed during the Bosnian War (so that those committed against Serbs were included). While this still did not totally affirm the ICTY’s narrative (the word “genocide” was still not used) and this happened in Serbia, not Bosnia, it still represents the hope of finding some common ground and coming to terms with the past through education.

71 Zveržanovski, 424-425.
72 Zveržanovski, 426-427.
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Appendix 1: The Cemetery.

Personal image, July 14, 2017.

Personal image, July 14, 2017.
Personal image, July 14, 2017. The *musala* is visible in the background.

Image courtesy of Nicholas Kulawiak, July 2016. The memorial wall and central area are visible, as are the gaps in the grid of gravestones.
Image courtesy of Nicholas Kulawiak, July 2016.
Appendix 2: The Memorial Room

The interior of the Memorial Room, personal image, July 14, 2017.
Images of personal items that were used to help identify bodies of the victims, personal image, July 14, 2017.
Appendix 3: Memorial to Serb Citizens