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Landscape, Memory, and the Shifting Regional Geographies of Northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract

Writing and arguing with older discourses that have informed the subdiscipline of regional geography and setting them against new ways of conceiving of the region, this article considers the northwest of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a site that calls for a newly animated form of regional study. Of particular concern here is the role that memory and commemorative practices play in such a spatial schema. The monumental landscapes of the Tito regime and its collective commemoration of World War II sit alongside and are troubled by the more recent traumas and spaces of unmarked death associated with the ethnic war in Bosnia during the early 1990s. Read together, northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina functions as a vivid exemplar for understanding traumatic historical mourning as a phenomenological process that is inseparable from the wider geopolitical landscape.

Keywords

Bosnia-Herzegovina, landscape, memory, phenomenology, regional geography

We did not just think that what was going on was a tragedy—all wars are tragic—but that the values that Bosnia-Herzegovina exemplified were worth preserving ... a society committed to multiculturalism ... an understanding of national identity as deriving from shared citizenship rather than ethnic identity ... What remains is the obligation to bear witness, the obligation to the dead as well as the living.

—Rieff (1995, 10)

Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure.

—Young (1993, 2)

For centuries people have travelled and written of their excursions south from Zagreb, crossing the River Sava and entering the Balkans. These journeys were in the main driven by an interest in the region as somehow different from Europe: as exotic, out of the way, and on the edge of civilization. In 1875, the twenty-four-year-old English archaeologist, Arthur J.

Evans—later to become significant in the formation of Yugoslavia—journeyed through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on foot with his brother in tow, noting in the opening few pages of his travelogue that what he was witnessing might have never been described, or even visited, by a European before (Evans 1876, vi). On crossing the River Sava, he felt as if he was entering a different continent, first traveling south through Bosnia before reaching the Herzegovina in the south, and eventually Ragusa, now Dubrovnik, in southern Croatia, or Dalmatia. *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on Foot* narrates what Evans took to be a shared cultural identity, found in artefacts and practices. The journey the young archaeologist took was also to become a political intervention, undertaken while an insurrection against the ruling Ottomans was underway. In its emphasis on the material manifestation of a Bosnia-Herzegovina, the account Evans produced bears many of the hallmarks of an older regional geography. Yet, his excursion is not a tired mode of geographic inquiry to be dismissed as old fashioned. *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on Foot* speaks to contemporary accounts of region both methodologically and conceptually. In the spirit of Evans's descriptive regional study, I follow his footprints, creating a contemporary phenomenological reimagining of his template.

Evans had never been to Bosnia-Herzegovina before resolving to undertake his initial adventure through the country with his brother Lewis. It was early 2014 before I finally reached the border of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, it seemed to hold some sort of connection to my own past, having growing up with the country on television over two decades prior to this crossing. Images of emaciated inmates on the nightly news reached a northern industrial town in England where, as a seven-year-old boy, I sat cross-legged in front of a little screen, watching what British journalists had revealed to the world. The memory from childhood contained moving images of what I later found out to be detention camps: Trnopolje, Omarska, and Keraterm. First unveiled in August 1992, they soon lit up televisions thousands of miles away, in all corners of the globe. Images of concentration camps again in the rural hinterlands of Europe shocked viewers and shook their conscience. Being so young, I understood little of why people were behind barbed wire, why they were starving, or who these people were. I recently rediscovered these films, and I remembered the moment of my first seeing these in the front room of my old house. While preparing for my own journey through northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina, I was constantly asked: Why does it concern you? You are not from there. We have, perhaps, become so desensitized to images of suffering and trauma in distant regions on rolling news that it seems strange to say: As a child I was affected by what I witnessed on television in 1992 (see Sontag 2003; Butler 2010).

Taking my childhood memories of a war-torn country as a starting point, I followed Evans across the border into Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tracing the line that now divides the country roughly in half, here I consider two extremely violent periods in the history of this place. Passing by monumental memorials built to collectively mourn World War II, I eventually reach and remember the mostly unmarked sites of detention camps in use during the war in Bosnia, seen on television as a child years earlier. These camps—Omarska, Trnopolje, and Keraterm—have since been cleared away and evidence of war crimes covered up; a simultaneous politics of denial and a cultivated remembering has taken place in this

regionally altered land. Commemorative practices, of course, often reflect and consolidate the interests of power, in so far as the past becomes leashed to the services of new state and nation building (see Hung 1991; Young 1993; Esbenschade 1995). Such power is revealed in this part of Bosnia-Herzegovina through the absence of monuments; what is absented from sight here reveals an official narrative, reflecting the interests of those in power.

Yet, these sites of nonremembrance, lacking any official state monument, have become sites of intervention where memory is a means to promote change and challenge the current political system. This dissident form of remembering has been explored elsewhere by Jenny Edkins (2003). In an attempt to escape the context in which they occur—a country that has been separated along ethnic lines since the series of secessionist wars that occurred in the final decade of the previous century—these acts of remembering are freed from their collective and nationbuilding capacities and are instead reclaimed by the more discrete, idiosyncratic valences of the individual voice. In the process, the body—dehumanized by the traumatic event—has been recuperated by individuals who see it as necessary to the work of mourning (see Butler 2010). A vulnerability and susceptibility to violence and abuse is precisely why using the body to commemorate is a vital and powerful counternarrative to the material representations reinforcing nationhood. Specifically, the bodily act of commemoration becomes a counterpoint to the tendency in postconflict regions to constantly collectivize the individual voice, a voice that was perceived as animal howl for those that reside in the mass grave (see Arsenijević 2011).

Traveling between sites of commemoration as a travel writer might, my research drifts somewhat against previous ethnographic and geopolitical research conducted in BosniaHerzegovina since the collapse of Yugoslavia (see, e.g., Jeffrey 2006). A substantive engagement is made instead with the landscape of this region, and—through a close historical reading and a tracing of past journeys through the Balkans—with a well-established literature on Balkanism; that is, the representation of the Balkans as a backward, deviant, liminal region both within and beyond Europe. In what follows I first outline the issue of commemorating trauma in the former Yugoslavia after World War II, before examining the role of Balkanist literature in shaping Bosnian identity, which creates narratives that construct and reaffirm the cleaving apart of Europe—effecting what is deemed necessary to commemorate and remember as part of the European story. I then articulate a new regional geography in the Balkans, describing through the lens of monument building the creation and destruction of Yugoslavia, reaching, at the end of my journey, sites where the state has suppressed commemorative practices in the years after the collapse of Yugoslavia. This section offers an alternative to official new nationalist projects in the Balkans.

The narrative I produce is attuned to the travel writing examined at the opening of this article, describing the Balkans. There is a reason for this. Travel writing transports the reader to a different place and a different time through the art of a plain but vivid description of the specifics of time and place. It is this descriptive affect that I would like to harness, using it to displace and disrupt the Balkanist literature of the past and the nationalist revisionism of the present. Part memoir, part meditation on the relationship between landscape and memory, the

human and natural worlds, my purpose here is to resurrect and refigure the classic regional study offered from those, such as Evans, speaking grandly of traveling into the Balkans, narrating the story of its nation making.

Commemorating Trauma in the Former Yugoslavia

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, a story of a six-week ethnographic trip taken by the British travel writer Rebecca West (1941), the past is shown side by side with the present it created. The publication of the book coincided with the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia. The epigraph reads “To my friends in Yugoslavia, who are now all dead or enslaved.” Spomenici—the plural form of the word spomenik, meaning monument in this part of the world—emerged after the conflict, built to memorialize the dead to whom West referred. Unlike many of the monuments built after World War II across Europe, they could not remember a triumph. After the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded by the Axis powers in 1941, internal fighting began between the Partisans—Europe’s most effective anti-Nazi communist resistance movement, led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito—the Ustaše—Croatia’s fiercely Catholic, fascist, ultranationalist, terrorist organization, murdering Serbs, Jews, and Roma while ruling part of Axis-occupied Yugoslavia—and the Chetniks—Serbia’s anti-Axis movement, seeking to retain the monarchy and striving for an ethnically homogenous Greater Serbian state. World War II in Yugoslavia was not simply a war of liberation against an encroaching occupier, Nazi Germany; it was instead a multilayered and divisive conflict in Yugoslavia, which could still be felt long into the twentieth century.

The giant monuments built to commemorate World War II, on sites where battles were fought and concentration camps existed, are not statues of human warriors. Spomenici instead resemble abstract organic sculptures, emerging from the Earth, as if there was a silent acceptance that to use the body—the site of trauma, violence, degradation, and extermination—was both ethically and aesthetically impossible. Nature, apparently, is less problematic. Indeed, what type of human form might be possible here after a divisive and multilayered conflict that dehumanized so many? Nonfigurative concrete spomenici stand as an alternative to statues of human figures, alone in dense forests, teetering on the top of mountain peaks, or clinging to cliffs. Solidly anchored to the land beneath, abstract swirls of material large enough to top the trees round about them, socialist-era spomenici take on the organic form as if grown straight out of the soil. These giant swirling concrete shapes, dotted across the landscape, each gesturing toward the organic, provided a shared monumental history and identity for socialist Yugoslavia. They commemorate those who died as a result of nationalist ideology, remember the antifascist struggle begun in the region during World War II, and celebrate the socialist revolution achieved in its aftermath. Despite their massive, somewhat ambiguous, organic material presence—a warning from history of the evils of Nazism and fascism—nationalism returned to the region before the end of the twentieth century.

After the fall of communism and the death of Partisan guerrilla leader and unifying symbol

Josip Broz Tito in the same decade, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia seemed increasingly doomed. Remembered affectionately by many, the benevolent dictator, “father Tito,” eventually became president for life, serving concurrently in various other roles until his death in 1980 at the age of eighty-seven. Many citizens of Yugoslavia who lived through the Tito regime actively removed themselves from nationalist and identitarian debates, which were geared toward the ending of socialism and Yugoslavia (see Alcalay 2004, ix). Ammiel Alcalay (2004, ix) wrote of an “intellectual surrender” fed by the heroic imagery of Partisans, and the promise of stability that socialism and father Tito provided. Without Tito, Yugoslavia soon ceased to be.

Following the Slovenian and Croatian secessions from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, the multiethnic Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was inhabited by mainly Muslim Bosniaks, mainly Orthodox Serbs, and mainly Catholic Croats, passed a referendum for independence in February 1992. This was rejected by Bosnian Serbs, who boycotted the referendum. Supported by the Serbian government—with a newly emergent Chetnik character—Bosnian Serbs mobilized their forces inside the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to secure Serbian territory. Calls for a Bosnian Serb entity to be created within Bosnia-Herzegovina grew alongside efforts to construct a Bosnian Croat entity. Controlled from and supplied by Croatia—evoking the efforts of the Ustaše—war soon spread across the country as Bosniaks fought back, supported in turn by the Mujahedeen, stationed in Travnik, who saw the war as religious as well as ethnic. In an absurd situation, each town and village began to fight amongst themselves, as warmongers attempted to define individual besieged citizens as Bosniak, Bosnian Croat, or Bosnian Serb, where a matter of months earlier they were all Yugoslav. Europe dithered in providing assistance, and ethnic cleansing left up to 100,000 soldiers and civilians dead as the war in Bosnia raged for more than three years (see Glenny 1992; Thompson 1992; Little and Silber 1996; Campbell 1998).

The war in Bosnia was brought to an end in December 1995, when the Dayton Agreement was signed in Paris. Preceded by an agreement between Bosniaks and Croats signed in Washington in 1994, the country was separated into two political entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, sometimes informally referred to as the BosniakCroat Federation. In this fractured geopolitical landscape, attempts to historicize the war in Bosnia—to firmly locate it in the past—have been unattainable. Remnants of the past remain embedded in, buried beneath, strewn among, enfolded within, and always dimly recognizable in the present. Wartime—a time of continuing unease (Baille 2013)—persists in the cartographic idiosyncrasy of the Dayton Agreement, imposed on the citizens of a small nation in Europe, dragged into a conflict not of their making two decades ago.

As the twentieth anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica passes, sites of mass murder remain unmarked to this day. Those sites of commemoration that are present often remember a single ethnic group, thus reinforcing the geopolitical categories the murderers imposed on their victims. People are remembered as Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, or Bosniak; as Orthodox, Catholic, or Muslim; not as fathers, mothers, daughters, or sons. There are few

common sites of commemoration, or collective spaces to remember civilian victims. What is more, remembering has become a political statement, as those mourning are categorized and enfolded within a persistent ethnic and identitarian narrative. My task, when journeying through northwest BosniaHerzegovina, traveling in the footprints of Evans, was to travel and write outside of and beyond these ever present geopolitical discourses—discourses through which the representation, conduct, and resolution of the war were sought (Campbell 1998, 15).

Writing the Balkans

It is possible, according to Robert Munro (1895) in his *Rambles and Studies in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia*, that from the earliest times the Balkan Peninsula was inhabited by a mixed population, open to fluctuating civilizations from the shores of the Mediterranean to the nomadic hordes from Asia and northeastern regions of Europe (Munro 1895, 4). Little is known of this period, when the western half of the Balkan Peninsula was called Illyria. Northern wanderers—Avars, Serbs, Slavs, and Croats—found a footing in mountainous Bosnia and the Romans were driven to the Adriatic coast (Munro 1895, 4). Without ever being in a commanding position, the Ottomans took control in this liminal land of Orthodox and Latin Christendom, with, in the twelfth century, its own mystic creed of Christianity, Bogomilism. The Church condemned Bogomilism and persecuted the people of these lands. After the Ottoman conquest, many Bogomils became Muslims.

By the mid-fifteenth century the Ottoman Empire stretched across much of the former Yugoslavia, linking Europe and the Middle East. A rival of Orthodox Russia and Western Europe, it lasted for more than four centuries. In 1875, when Evans was writing, an insurrection was underway against four centuries of Ottoman domination, with Bosnian peasants demanding a redistribution of land and fair taxes (see Evans 1876). Only when Serbs, Croats, and Montenegrins joined the insurgency did it become a national war of liberation of the south Slavs—the Yugoslavs. The revolt lasted three years and was brought to an end only through the diplomacy of the Great Powers, culminating in the 1878 Congress of Berlin. It was decided that Bosnia and Herzegovina would be occupied by Austria-Hungary. Several decades later, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was shot in Sarajevo in 1914 by a revolutionary, Gavrilo Princip, precipitating a declaration of war against Serbia, and World War I. After the mass conflict, in December 1918, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes emerged. The revolutionary movement, though, was hampered by lingering religious differences—Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Islam—coupled with a renewed sense of nationalism across Europe postempire.

As is revealed in these shifting regional geographies, Bosnia-Herzegovina has been a meeting point of cultures for centuries. The culture of Bosnia-Herzegovina was formed through this interaction, undermining a sense of a nationalist political identity in the form of a homogenous nation-state. Nonetheless, as Evans traveled through the region he noted the Islamic nature of the country as its most distinguishable trait (see Evans 1876). This was a

standard response in the travel writing of the era, evident also in the *Rambles and Studies in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia* undertaken by Munro (1895). In 1851, Edmund Spencer wrote, “Scarcely a ray of Western thought had penetrated during the four centuries that had passed away since the Crescent replaced the Cross on the dome of Saint Sophia, and the empire of Constantine crumbled before the might of the Othman; centuries of ever increasing intellect, civilisation and prosperity” (Spencer 1851, 1). For Spencer, the dawn of a brighter day had arisen on the night of Turkish misrule, rekindling the hearts of a neglected and uncared-for Christian people:

Awakened from a trance, to a consciousness of their own power, to an appreciation of that lofty destiny, from which for centuries they have been excluded ... Unheeded and uncared for, by those nations of Europe claiming the swarthy son of distant India and Africa, while a portion of her very self remained torpid and corpse-like. (2)

In *To the Land of the Eagle*, Paul Edmonds (1927) extolled the hospitality of these exoticized and primitive locations, where an Englishman could travel without fear of being shot.

The places through which Evans, Munro, Spencer, and Edmonds traveled, walked, and rambled were for centuries known by the Ottomans as Rumeli. Only relatively recently did the name Rumeli fall out of use, the region becoming instead European Turkey, or Turkey in Europe, and, eventually, around the time Evans and Munro had completed their travels, the Balkans. The name the Balkans refers to the mountains near the center of the peninsula, across which travel writers would journey to Istanbul. Echoing the well-established literature on representations of the Balkans in literary studies and geography—such as *Inventing Ruritania* (Goldsworthy 1998) and *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997)—Mark Mazower (2002, 4), in his comprehensive study of the Balkans, wrote of how the Balkans became loaded with negative connotations as Europe’s “other” that was yet not quite separate from Europe. The term Balkan, drew scathing remarks and definitions; inharmonious conditions, small antagonistic states, hostile nationalities, all of which conspired to form the intractable Balkan or Eastern “question” (Carter 1977, xi).

Despite it being a relatively recent term, the idea of a separate, distinctly Balkan region is a powerful blanket. It enabled the rest of Europe—countries both in the East and West—to keep the war that brought an end to Yugoslavia at a distance. Slavoj Žižek (2000, 1–2) wrote of the Balkans as Europe’s ghost, down there, always somewhere a little further to the southeast, a photographic negative of tolerant, multicultural, postpolitical, postideological Europe. A “postmodern racism” exists, he argued, where the Balkans is seen as the intolerant other, while the rest of Europe has supposedly come to terms with otherness in its much vaunted—indeed marketed—language of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (see Žižek 2000, 1–2). Echoing this argument, Misha Glenny (1999, xxi) introduced his magnum opus, *The Balkans, 1804–1999*, with reference to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, in which the Balkans occupied the center of some sort of imaginative whirlpool, where every known superstition in the world was gathered.

In his memoir *Postcards from the Grave*, Srebrenica survivor Emir Suljagić (2005) argued for the existence of a new Europe, a new European imaginary, where Auschwitz and Srebrenica are a part of the same human—or inhuman—story. As Guido Snel (2014) observed in his examination of spatial metaphor and the persistence of imaginary European geographies post-1989, Suljagić was at pains to associate his experience in Srebrenica with the events that took place in the Third Reich’s extermination camps. The Holocaust—a moral touchstone for inhumanity and banal evil—influenced the way Suljagić interpreted ethnic persecution, and the failure of the European world to identify with his personal position revealed to him the persistence of a Balkan regional imaginary. For Susan Sontag (2003, 101), to set the sufferings of the people of Bosnia alongside the sufferings of others is to “compare” them, denigrating human life; this might well lead to a kind of competition between mere comparables. Yet, I would argue, Suljagić’s was a targeted questioning of “what is deemed necessary” to commemorate as part of the European story. For the cosmopolitan Europeans, Bosnia was not their tragedy (see Nancy 2000). Emir Suljagić was evacuated from Srebrenica in 1995, before the spa town was overrun. Almost every man he had ever known subsequently lost their lives in the genocidal massacre.

A New Regional Geography in the Balkans

One of the central impulses of regional literature is to evoke a sense of the place in which it is set. Deep, thick, or dense descriptions of landscape can be seen in the spiritual regionalism of Henry David Thoreau (1854) dwelling in Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts; the comments of Richard Jefferies (1880) walking around the great estates of Wiltshire; and the observations of Edward Thomas (1909), looping the gently rolling hills of the South Downs. In recent years, this old form of regional writing has been dimly present in the books of Tim Robinson (1985) exploring the coast of Ireland, Robert Macfarlane (2007) seeking out the wild places of Britain, and Kathleen Jamie (2012) tracing sightlines in the northern fringes of Scotland.

What is more, cultural geography has been witness to the reemergence of regional writing, documenting the rhythms of the subject in landscape as one lingers, waits, detours, and ruminates. Such work stresses direct bodily contact with and experience of landscape, attending to the phenomenological emergence of space (see Wylie 2002, 2005; Lorimer 2003, 2006; Pearson 2006; Wylie and Lorimer 2010; Dubow 2011; M. Rose 2012; Riding 2015). Researching the “regionness” of Bosnia-Herzegovina, my research is attuned to this phenomenological turn. I suggest one can both retain the impulse of phenomenological investigation, narrating self and landscape, while also addressing—as the traumatized landscapes of BosniaHerzegovina demand—more obviously political (and geopolitical) aspects that, some critics caution, can be glossed (Castree and Macmillan 2004; Van Dyke 2013).

Going back to regional geography can also be a way of moving forward (see Thrift 1994, 200). Described simply, regional geography is the study of world regions, paying attention to

the unique characteristics of people and place. Preeminent during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, regional geography was confronted by the scientism of the quantitative revolution in the 1950s. The works of Carl Sauer (1925) and Paul Vidal de la Blache (1926), for example, were to be critiqued for their singular modes of description. Since the 1980s, there have been attempts to reintroduce a new form of regionalism. Here, working across different scales and between regions—as undertaken by Anssi Paasi (1991, 1999, 2002, 2003), Martin Jones and Gordon MacLeod (2004; see also MacLeod and Jones 2001, 2007), and John Agnew (2013)—exposes the ambiguities, blurrings, borrowings, dabblings, and cleansings, in the name of space and identity that a divisive nationalist politics assumes to be cartographically fixed. For my part, and building on the work of David Matless (2014), I would add that ideas of the region might effectively be enhanced by reasserting the role of phenomenological experience.

The critical turn in human geography has brought a healthy, if unresolved, concern about doing ethnographic research to describe a particular region. Broadly these concerns are attentive to a discipline littered with the skeletons of murderous neglects and encounter (J. Robinson 2003, 277). The skeletons of the past bear consideration for any new regional geography to exist. Both postcolonial and feminist perspectives on the situatedness of knowledge and the concomitant relational nature of researcher positionality have done much to avoid replicating colonial era power relations (England 1994; G. Rose 1997). In what follows, I hope that such an unreflective, distanced, and voyeuristic account of the Balkans—accounts that have for decades worked to create a European “other”—is undercut by the incorporation of my own situated voice, and an acknowledgement of the historically intersubjective nature of the practices that I witness.

Crossing the Sava

After borrowing a rickety old Fiat Panda from a friend of a friend in Zagreb, I began my journey south in late May 2014. The car spluttered into motion only after I squeezed the clutch far into the floor. Turning the tin can through the busy streets of Croatia’s capital proved difficult while trying to read a map. A well-thumbed copy of the book Arthur J. Evans wrote in this region slid about on the passenger seat. Keep going, I told myself, as I revved around in circles. On the open road the car was equally unsure, rattling along the motorway. Heading for a commemoration day in the town of Prijedor, I turned the car right, off the A3 and toward the River Sava. On the southern edge of the Pannonian Plain and the northern edge of the Balkan Peninsula, just a few kilometers from the border between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, I met Evans and the Sava. At Sisak we followed the river together, traveling beside it to Jasenovac. Evans continued on to Slavonski Brod where he crossed the river; this is still the most common way of entering Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Balkans, from the North (Evans 1876, 42–85).

Evans wrote little of Sisak and Jasenovac, both now a part of the same tragic past. Sisak was the first place where an armed antifascist resistance unit was formed in occupied Yugoslavia

during World War II. It was established on June 22, 1941—the day Germany invaded the Soviet Union—and marked the start of the antifascist Partisan resistance in occupied Yugoslavia. Sisak was also the site of the Sisak Children’s Concentration Camp, set up by the Croatian pro-Nazi Ustaše government for Serbian, Jewish, and Romani children, part of the Jasenovac cluster of concentration and death camps and the wider Nazi genocidal effort.



Figure 1. Sisak Antifascist Spomenik in the forest of Brezovica
Source: Author

Parking the little Panda at the end of a gravel track, I sought out a relic of the former Yugoslavia, a spomenik built to commemorate the beginning of the antifascist resistance. I had seen images of spomenici before, but I was still surprised by what I could see ahead. Many had been destroyed, left to the elements, ignored, damaged, and graffitied. This one, resembling a concrete tree (Figure 1), appeared intact and maintained. I walked down a tree-flanked alleyway for a mile or so, with the concrete monument always just about visible in the distance. I could not take my eyes off it, so alien to the rest of the landscape did it appear. At the end of the straight path, the spomenik reached up out of the trees in a clearing. Mosquitoes were buzzing about in the damp warmth. Evidence of a bonfire, and burnt red, white, and blue plastic, sat in front of the monument. Nobody else was around.

I circled the concrete spomenik a few times, stepping over branches in long grass. Then I

decided to stand inside it for a while, stamping my foot to create an echo, breaking the immense silence. I soon turned back down the green lane toward the car, feeling a little odd in this place all on my own. Before I left, I gazed at an embossed star placed next to the number 1941 engraved in concrete. The gravity of what the monument symbolized became apparent in that moment. Strange in appearance, dedicated to the 1st Sisak Partisan Detachment, founded in 1941, the spomenik was designed by Želimir Janež. Sited in the middle of nowhere, in the forest of Brezovica, it was built in 1981 on the exact site where the Partisan detachment was established. I climbed back inside the car after a walk back through the avenue of trees. The spomenik was still visible, just about, in the rear view mirror.



Figure 2. Jasenovac Concrete Flower on the site of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp
Source: Author

Continuing downstream for an hour or so, I traced the footsteps of Evans along the Sava until it met the River Una, on the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. A spomenik built on the site of the former concentration camp Jasenovac stuck out of the flat landscape to my left, as the road twisted out of a copse, beside a gray block of a school where children played football on a tarmac yard. Shaped like a flower (Figure 2), this spomenik grew out of the marshland like a rebirth in concrete for the dead. Nature reclaimed what surrounded the monument sordidly and delicately, as the calcium carbonate of bones, buried in the earth,

tinted the grass greener. Parking up next to the school, I wandered around the site, fending off mosquitoes. Death mounds, once piles of bodies, were neatly covered by the emerald grass, surrounding an almost pretty lake emanating from the base of the concrete flower. Two coaches full of what sounded like German tourists were clicking with their cameras. Beside the water, tracks led to a train that could be from a railway museum. But here the locomotive was sinister, having delivered people to their death. This flat, swampy expanse was the last view for many, their final image. The site was serene, calm, after the coach had pulled away, taking the tourists to their next site. The silence belied the torture, the unheard of horror, and death buried within, in the soil. Directly beneath the monument a moment of sustained mourning, of reflection, was enabled, in the company of a cat. Inside the crypt of the concrete flower, paved with railway sleepers, a poem was engraved on a bronze plaque, written by Ivan Goran Kovačić, killed near Foča, southeast Bosnia-Herzegovina by Chetnik troops in 1943. The poem, chosen to memorialize the horror of Jasenovac, was called Jama—the pit—and starkly condemns fascist atrocities committed by the Ustaše, as blood replaces both light and darkness while the victim's eyes are plucked out with a knife:

Blood is my daylight and darkness too.
Blessing of night has been gouged from my cheeks
Bearing with it my more lucky sight.
Within those holes, for tears, fierce fire inflamed
The bleeding socket as if for brain a balm—
While my bright eyes died on my own palm.

On the memorial site, beside the concrete flower, a plaque mapped the mounds of dead and quotes a figure of up to 100,000 victims. The majority were Serbs who the Ustaše wanted to remove from the Independent State of Croatia, created after the Kingdom of Yugoslavia fell to the Nazis. Dedicated to the extermination camp victims, the stone flower designed by Bogdan Bogdanović was built in 1966. Like all other spomenici built to commemorate the dead of World War II, it has a certain aesthetic. The scale and strength of the object is clear, and the architecture mimics natural shapes, rather than representing the human form, leading some to argue that these have become sites of forgetting, not remembering.

Leaving Jasenovac behind, I got back inside the old banger and drove a short distance to the River Sava, the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Visible just beyond the checkpoint was a sign with WELCOME TO REPUBLIKA SRPSKA written on it, and a fluttering Serbian flag. Exiting Croatia and the European Union, in the footsteps of Evans, I glanced at his travelogue on the seat beside me. The nature of this border and the freight of its world historical importance struck Evans (1876, 76), who reached the historic military frontier while an insurrection against the ruling Ottomans was underway and these lands would soon become Austro-Hungarian: “We are now on the watery boundary-line between Christendom and Islam, and the contrast of the two shores is one of the most striking that can be imagined.”

Climbing Kozara

The Bosnian Frontier, Bosanska Krajina—the historic name for the northwest of Bosnia-Herzegovina—was known for its strong resistance during World War II, incorporating all citizens. It was the most ethnically diverse of the antifascist Partisan brigades, liberating an area of Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia, known as the Republic of Bihać, in 1941. To the east, in what is now Republika Srpska, the Rivers Sana and Gomjenica descend the Kozara Mountain into the Prijedor Valley. This picturesque landscape was proclaimed a protected National Forest in 1967. Up on the mountain, among the trees, the Kozara Offensive was fought in 1942. The battle was pivotal to the success of the Partisan movement, when outnumbered and outgunned Partisans and civilians fought off the invading Nazis, Ustaše, and Axis forces. Protecting the iron mine at nearby Banja Luka, the Nazis attempted to destroy the movement on the mountain of Kozara, sending many Serbian civilians to Jasenovac as they tightened their grip on the region. The Partisan soldiers who survived the onslaught founded the Fifth Krajina Brigade, and met with the main Partisan group, and Tito, moving east, eventually regaining parts of the lost area. According to a tourist map—which I picked up in the foyer of Hotel Prijedor—the spomenik built to commemorate the battle in what is now the Kozara National Park is flanked by a bronze memorial wall with the names of 9,921 Yugoslav Partisans who gave their lives for the freedom of this region during World War II. It went on to say that at thirty-three meters tall, the cylindrical spomenik, “symbolically presents the value of freedom for the population of Kozara and their traditional freedom-loving spirit.”

The next morning, with the tourist map to hand, jagged mountains broke the horizon for the first time in the journey as the mini motor wheezed its way out of Prijedor. I was joined for this leg of the journey by an artist from Prijedor called Nemanja, and we could see through the car windows the peaks of the Kozara Mountain. Up there stands the Monument to the Revolution, remembering those killed during the Kozara Offensive. Turning left, away from Trnopolje and Omarska, we began to weave our way upward, passing through the tiny Bosniak village of Kozarac, covered in Bosnian flags. As the car growled uphill in first gear, tires screeching, the road became increasingly difficult to continue along. Miles up into the forest we eventually stopped by a concrete staircase ascending one of the highest peaks, Mrakovica. At the beginning of the ascent we could see the top of the monument in the distance (Figure 3). With each step up a little more of the spomenik appeared, drawing the eye forward and away from the rest of the landscape. Mimicking a gravestone, it seemed to gather in the landscape around it. The ghosts of those unfortunate enough to have fought their way up and down the vertiginous escarpment came to mind as we climbed higher and higher. Another installment appeared with each step we took, intertwining ourselves, the monument, and the landscape.

When we landed at the top of the concrete steps, Nemanja sat in the middle of the clearing, while I eagerly looped the spomenik to see it from all angles. At once it appeared as both sculpture and architecture. I squeezed through a tight gap, into the core of the spomenik, and looked upward at the sunlight, as if in the dense forest, or the trunk of a tree. Firmly grounded, it stabbed into the mountain surface like a flag, shattering it, claiming the

Krajina for the antifascist movement. From above, the spomenik appeared as a sundial, or clock, as concrete tentacles explode out from the center. Nemanja told me that it was designed by Dušan Džamonja and completed in 1972. It teeters on the top of the peak, and uses dark and light to symbolize life and death. The bulges sticking out of the cylindrical spomenik represent life, the recesses death. Enemy forces are represented by darkness, unable to win through and destroy light, life. After I returned to Nemanja, we sat for a while talking about the spomenik beside us. He said, “The Monument to the Revolution is now a monument to exactly that.”



Figure 3. The Monument to the Revolution, Mrakovica Peak, Kozara National Park
Source: Author

No official monuments on the hillside refer to the war in Bosnia, from 1992 to 1995. Nemanja walked me to a crumbling Tito-built concrete bunker, which he recently graffitied with the words, SHELTER FOR THE NEXT GENERATION. An arrow, painted into the forest floor, beckons you in. Beside the bunker, two sound waves sculpted by another local artist, from the sticks of the forest, are stuck into the ground like a picket fence. Each sound wave represents a speech, one by Radovan Karadžić—former Bosnian-Serb politician and president of Republika Srpska—and the other a speech by Slavoj Žižek—Slovenian Marxist philosopher and cultural critic.

According to Nemanja, the pieces in the forest, overshadowed by the Monument to the Revolution, aim to escape any ethnic flattening of the individual by producing art that does not command you to remember in an instrumentalized way. They instead draw you into the complicated history of the region. This type of antipolitical art—antipolitical in the sense that the artists do not want to be drawn into the usual nationalist political debates—intends for a remembering to occur in this landscape that incorporates all citizens. The shelter and wave are surrounded by other pieces aimed at further critiquing the geopolitical landscape in which they are produced. Unlike the vast, solid spomenici, anchored to the rock, the art collective give over the finishing of their artwork to nature, as they decay over time, like bodies in the ground.

Walking through Prijedor

The war in Bosnia dramatically changed the composition of the population of Bosanska Krajina. Expulsion, forced relocation, emigration, and killings meant that the various parts of the frontier became less ethnically diverse, leaving homogenous enclaves in place. This has meant that confronting the violent past—as Tito’s spomenici did—in the places where torture and murder occurred has proven difficult. After Srebrenica, the Prijedor Massacre represents the largest episode of mass extermination during the war in Bosnia. Unlike Srebrenica, however, the Prijedor Massacre is largely forgotten by the wider world, while the main perpetrators, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, continue to deny the extent of the systematic ethnic cleansing that occurred. Survivors were forced into exile, leaving with the baggage of their wartime traumas and prewar memories, as their houses were targeted and destroyed. Some of those convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia—set up in 1992, a couple of months after the discovery of detention camps in Bosanska Krajina—are now free, as their victims are still being exhumed from mass graves in the Prijedor area. Other perpetrators still await trial, or their cases are ongoing. Detainees at the nearby detention camps—Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolje—who lived in an atmosphere of constant fear and terror, have had their efforts to place a monument at execution sites continually rebuffed by the local Bosnian Serb authorities.

Nevertheless, a memorial walk has taken place for the past few years. Citizens who wish to mourn the atrocities that occurred in this region during the war in Bosnia mark May 31 each

year by wearing a white armband and walking together through the center of Prijedor. For the past two years, on the last day of May, Ahmed and Belma—friends I met along the way—have arrived in Prijedor early in the morning, on a bus from Zenica. As we mingled at the end of the main shopping street in Prijedor, with a few hundred others, Ahmed tied a white ribbon around my upper arm. This ritual symbolically refers to a decree issued on May 31, 1992, via local radio, for all non-Serbs to mark their houses with white flags or sheets and to wear a white ribbon when leaving home. Not since the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, when Polish Jews were made to wear the Star of David, had an ethnic or religious group been marked in this way. Slowly, the crowd began to move down the street in silence carrying banners marked with *jer me se tice*—“because it concerns me”—and holding up roses labeled with the names of children killed nearby. Despite threats from their neighbors and family, some locals joined the group, now stretching back the length of the street. Other residents watched on from shops lining the pedestrian street, as the traumatized passed by, some visibly distraught at the experience of returning to the place.



Figure 4. Laying 102 roses in Prijedor, as part of the White Armband Day memorial
Source: Author

At the square in the center of Prijedor, underneath a dominating concrete building, we stopped to place the roses carried by mourners in a circle. I stood beside Nemanja and his

artist friends, here to speak to the crowd. They vented their disgust and sorrow over loudspeakers. In Prijedor, their hometown, a monument to commemorate dead children remains absent because of continued ethnic division. Two speakers loudly boomed out the names of the 102 children killed, followed by their ages when they died. Eight-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, fifteen-year-olds, caught up in a war twenty years ago, here. On the opposite side of the square I could see Emir—an activist and traveling acquaintance—busily checking that everyone was ready to place their roses in the center of the main square. A few years earlier Emir had stood on this square with a small group of mourners, wearing white ribbons around their arms. The commemoration has grown through the insistence of victims that their trauma should be remembered. “I was that age during the war,” I heard from many. “It could have been me,” they went on to say. As the roses were laid down, I was drawn forward. Someone hugged me and dragged me closer. In turn, people came forth from the crowd to place a rose on to the ground. In the background the names and ages of the children still echoed around the square. Each rose had a white label wrapped round the thorny stalk, with a name and an age. Once all had given their roses to the square, a circle had been left. “We have to leave now,” I then heard from many. Soon the square was deserted, only the rose circle remaining (Figure 4).

Exiting the Krajina

On August 6, 1992, British journalists from Independent Television News (ITN) and The Guardian unveiled to the world the existence of camps for non-Serb civilians near Prijedor. Shocking images of emaciated inmates encircled the globe, shaking the conscience of humanity. Before driving south to Sarajevo, I attempted to find the former detention camps.

The closest camp to the town, Keraterm, was a ceramics factory. I had an idea of where it was after asking people the day before, at the white ribbon commemoration. Difficult to locate in the mass of sprawling industrial buildings cluttering the edges of Prijedor, Keraterm eventually came into view. A rusty white metal fence was recognizable from photographs I had previously seen. It appeared to be largely unchanged, and the squat building with a single row of windows looked to be still in use as a warehouse. Beside Keraterm, there is a small memorial, set in long grass, under a tree. The unassuming, inconspicuous memorial was the first site of slaughter to be marked in Republika Srpska, commemorating non-Serb victims of the war in Bosnia (Clark 2014, 95). The huge cross I had seen the night before in the center of Prijedor, commemorating Bosnian Serb victims of the war in Bosnia came to mind, as I wandered away from the camp, with its half-hidden memorial, back to the road.

Out of Prijedor, a few miles down the road to Banja Luka, I turned right to find the detention camp, Trnopolje. There was no sign, or at least I could not see a sign, on entering the village. What stopped me in my tracks was a monument. I immediately recognized the imposing eagle. A few Serbian flags sat at the base of the concrete bird, stuck inside a wreath of flowers. The stomach of the eagle, a common heraldic symbol in Serbia, was defaced with a cross. Wings outstretched from the marked body, emblazoned with metal plaques explaining

the meaning of the monument, and extended down to the ground. In the immediate vicinity of the bird are a school and a community hall, buildings that housed detainees at the former detention camp, Trnopolje. I could see what I thought was one of the buildings. It was neat and tidy with two floors of large square windows and a chimney. Wandering around, I noticed kids hanging around on the trimmed grass encircling it. White paint flaked off the adjacent building, revealing the brick beneath. Scaffolding held it together. An external staircase climbed to the first floor, appearing to go nowhere. New plastic windows remained half-fitted under a corrugated metal roof. Something was being done to the place. There was, though, no public memorial to be found, remembering those who died in the camp. The eagle I saw as I entered Trnopolje commemorates the Bosnian Serb combatants who died to build the nation, Republika Srpska.

I was an odd presence in this place. Feeling a little uncomfortable being watched, I walked back across a tarmac basketball court, keeping my camera out of view. It is hard to believe that a peaceful little village, dotted with typical rural Bosnian houses, could contain such a sinister camp. This is the most disturbing thing about visiting Trnopolje: the unassuming, unremarkable, nothingness of it. Placing a camp in Trnopolje, among the rolling farmlands, away from prying eyes, reveals foresight. In the distance, I could see a few people in their gardens, tending vegetables. A horse pulling a cart full of straw and a couple of men passed me, followed in the other direction by an old man chugging a tractor along, spitting out a plume of toxic exhaust smoke. Children cycled loops of the street, in its wake, as I struggled to restart the car.

Turning away from the Kozara National Park, which dominated the skyline, I drove toward a mine. The presence of minefields and unexhumed mass graves are a feature of this landscape. Proceed with caution. Do not enter. At the perimeter fence surrounding Omarska, entry was refused and I was told not to take photographs. I parked the little car out of sight, dwarfed by lorries going in and out of the mine, and walked the edges of the site. I could see faceless blocky buildings in the distance, buildings—including the villainous torture chamber the White House, where people went never to be seen again—once used for detainees, buildings that now serve as offices for steel and mining giant AnceIorMittal. Promises made a decade ago to keep the White House intact were ignored, and the building of a memorial in and around it never came to fruition. Negotiations between Bosniak survivors and AnceIorMittal came to an abrupt end when the local Bosnian Serb authorities became aware of them (Clark 2014, 95).

There is nothing visible in Omarska to admit a detention camp was ever there. Those that now live in exile, former detainees, continue to petition AnceIorMittal. Trauma is endured privately. A spomenik-like sculpture, the AnceIorMittal Orbit in Hackney, built for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, has been reclaimed as the Omarska Memorial in Exile. The looping criss-crossing metal sculpture in exile, lying in London, could hardly be more appropriate, remembering the shocking images of emaciated inmates behind barbed wire fences at Omarska.

Driving out of a dust cloud created by vehicles much larger, I made my way through the little village of Tomašica. Twenty years after the end of the war that tore the former Yugoslavia apart, Bosnia-Herzegovina is still unearthing its dead. In October 2013, a mass grave was discovered here, containing the jumbled bones of Bosniak and Bosnian Croat victims killed by Bosnian Serb forces. When mass graves are discovered, the trauma of war is relived, albeit in a region where local authorities suppress remembering. From the mass grave I drove south, out of the Bosnian Frontier, to meet up once more with Evans, West, and the rest of the travel writers, visiting castles and waterfalls in Travnik and Jajce.

Conclusion: Confronting Trauma

The articulation of a new regional geography outlined in my journey through northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina has been deployed not as a way of writing the unique nature of a particular region, but to interrogate and breach the divide between the two political entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. As David Campbell (1998, 15) reminded those who attempt to write about the war in Bosnia, the task is to think outside the political discourses through which the representation, conduct, and resolution of the war are sought. In just such an attempt to escape the ethnonationalist context in which commemorative practices take place, different emotions—trauma, celebration, denial, forgetting, nostalgia, mourning—are evoked in my historical and experiential journey through the contested landscape of Bosanska Krajina. The frontier region has been subject to the regional machinations of those in power over the centuries, and at present is divided in two, after undergoing two extremely violent periods in the long twentieth century. There is, as this article explores, a stark difference between the ways in which these violent periods have been commemorated and remembered. The absence of official *spomenici*—and a public acknowledgement that there were atrocities committed in this region during the war in Bosnia—leaves a gap in the landscape and in the lives of people who live with traumatic memories.

Yet, dissident forms of remembrance have begun to occur in Bosnia-Herzegovina. These subversive acts of remembrance enable survivors to interrogate and tell their stories of trauma, promoting change and challenging the current divided political system (see Edkins 2003). Returning to the site of a traumatic event on a commemoration day is not, however, only an act of remembrance. Commemorative events are gatherings of the wounded; they are insistent reenactments of the past, where mourners bear witness to the testimony of survivors. Survivors of a traumatic event are able, on these rare days, to tell and retell their stories. There is an imperative to tell. Survivors do not only need to survive to tell their stories; they also need to tell their stories to survive (Laub 1995, 63).

There is no single response to hearing traumatic memories, experiences, and histories, but since the war in Bosnia—over two decades ago now—interest in the psychological traumatic reaction to violent events has grown considerably. Ethnographic research in postwar regions has begun to recognize the necessity of testimony—listening and responding

to traumatic stories—as a means to alleviate suffering. Our memory repeats to us what we have not yet come to terms with; what still haunts us (Erikson 1995, 184). Telling someone these memories seems to be—and is—for many survivors a way to permit the recurring traumatic haunting event to be forgotten (see Caruth 1995, vii). I witnessed these attempts to come to terms with an important reality, a giving up of troubling memories from the past—a dilution of a special truth—on my journey through Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although there is always a certain inaccessibility—the inaccessibility of trauma to be simply located, or understood by those who were not there—through different modes of encounter, it is possible to speak out about a crisis in a Bosnia-Herzegovina that is not yet over.

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