



Family members in Krajina Identification Project (Sejkovaca mortuary).

PHOTO:ICMP

THE MISSING AND THE MASS GRAVES

by **Johanna Mannergren Selimovic**

abstract

Nearly three decades after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thousands of people are missing and mass graves are regularly found. Relatives still search for knowledge about their loved ones in the midst of secrets, rumors and ethnonationalist denial. As the country struggles to come to terms with this dark legacy of the war, art has emerged as a space for recognition of the lingering *presence of absence* of the missing.

KEYWORDS: Bosnia and Herzegovina, missing, mass graves, ethnonationalism, presence of absence, recognition, peace.

In the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) more than 100,000 people were killed.¹ About 7,500 of them are still missing. Where are they? Where are their graves? The missing people are absent, yet they are present. They are what Ed Vulliamy calls the “unquiet bodies”; through them the violent past lingers and haunts the present.² We mourn the missing and we yearn for them and pin hopes to their absence. The mass graves, those that have been located and those that are still waiting to be discovered, are unsettled spaces where silences and stories congregate and stick to bones and mud. Often not formally marked, they are still perceived and sensed. They are not void of meaning. They exert *presence of absence*, highly productive of post-war politics.

In this essay I reflect upon the contentious memory politics

around the *nestali*; the missing. They form a powerful trope in Bosnian political discourse that speaks to the core of the problematic peace in BiH. They are a result of the ethnonationalist logic of the war, and the searches and exhumation processes seek to address this dark legacy.

Based on fieldwork and interviews mainly carried out at different moments during 2012, 2018 and 2021, the essay discusses how the search for the missing affects the everyday lives of the relatives, as they seek to counteract the collectivizing violence of ethnic cleansing and genocide through refusing erasure. Their difficult work is foremost a struggle for knowledge in the midst of secrets, rumors and denial, and hence speaks to a key topic regarding transitions from war to peace: the importance of truth and recognition long after the end of war.

How can the lingering violence of mass atrocity be acknowledged and memorialized in a highly divisive present, where on the one hand, war crimes are actively denied in an increasingly revisionist culture, and on the other hand, the missing have become a highly politicized trope used for advancing collective victimhood by elite political actors? Can aesthetic expressions create a space for remembering that encompasses presence of absence? Towards the end of the essay, I discuss an art installation that opens up possibilities to, with Jenny Edkins' words, "encircle the trauma", and give space for mourning and restoration.³

Mapping the mass graves

"I do not like the expression the missing. They are somewhere".⁴

Let's begin with some figures and logics of mass atrocity. Let's begin with some red dots on a computer screen. Each dot symbolizes a mass grave on the virtual online map created by the International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP), containing all the information available about the mass graves and their whereabouts.⁵ Some of these mass graves are huge, like the one in Tomašica in the northwest of the country in which remains of more than 400 people were found; others are smaller, containing "just" a few bodies. Many of the missing originate from the mass killing of more than 8000 Bosniak men and boys from Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb and Serb forces. It was "the largest single crime on European soil since World War II"⁶ and the events were judged as genocide by the ICTY.⁷ The forced disappearances were key tactics in the Bosnian war, used to create fear and chaos, and the interactive map demonstrates a topography of homogenizing, ethnonationalist violence. Navigating the map gives a startling insight into how profoundly these tactics have changed Bosnian everyday life for generations to come. In addition to the killed, 1.2 million people were forced to flee. Most of them have not returned. One reason is that the Dayton Peace Accord constructed a postwar state mainly along the divisions

that the ethnic cleansing had created, and the state of BiH thus consists of two entities: the Bosnian Serb Republic (*Republika Srpska*) and the Bosniak-Croat Federation. Many people are consequently no longer living in the place where their loved ones went missing and where the mass graves might be located. This affects geopolitics in the present -- when mass graves are found, they are often in territory politically controlled by the former enemy side and there is little interest from local authorities to commemorate and mark these places.⁸

DURING THE FIRST YEARS of the war, analyses of objects such as bullets, blindfolds and ligatures were important, practices

later replaced by sophisticated DNA analysis developed by the ICMP. From the beginning it was the International Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) that was in charge of exhumation and identification,⁹ now it is the Special Department for War Crimes of the BiH Prosecutor's Office.¹⁰ Other important bodies in BiH include the national Missing Persons Institute (MPI) which is mandated to investigate every "credible report" regarding mass graves. Reports

are collected from witnesses or perpetrators coming forward or from information emerging from prosecutions; however as time goes by, the number of witnesses forthcoming is declining and also their accounts are not as precise. Investigators thus seek to combine witness statements with geospatial analysis as well as analysis of aerial and satellite pictures.¹¹

In the face of such sophisticated technology and legal scaffolding, it may seem strange that relatives who are engaged in victims' associations have to take an active part in the search. They are often socioeconomically vulnerable and struggling in contexts where they have little support from local authorities. Nevertheless, they have developed strategies for advocacy, extracting knowledge, locating bodies, and making the MPI investigate their claims.

Searching for bodies and recognition

One February morning I walk on foot together with F. up a woody hill situated above a small town in central BiH. The sky is blue, and the February snow is like meringue, crunching under our city shoes as we make our way through the forest. We suddenly enter an opening in the forest, and we stand still as the rustles of the pine trees fill the silence. Underneath the snow there is a sand pit, and this is the place where F. has helped find two mass graves. We stand at one of the red dots on the ICMP map.

F. has been searching for missing people since the end of the war. One of them is her brother whom she saw for the last time on July 23, 1992. He disappeared together with 46 other men when the enemy forces emptied one of their detention camps set up in the center of the town. Three years after the war, she and other relatives got hold of some information -- someone said that trucks had been travelling up the hill to this place, the sand

"CAN AESTHETIC EXPRESSIONS CREATE A SPACE FOR REMEMBERING THAT ENCOMPASSES PRESENCE OF ABSENCE?"



A book of belongings showing photos of clothes and objects found near some of the bodies.

PHOTO:ICRC/BENOIT SCHAEFFER



Srebrenica victims' personal items help keep memories alive.

pit. Of course, this makes sense, F. thought at the time, a well-chosen place – easy to dig, out of sight. F. and her fellow members in the association informed the council and the IMP, digging began eventually and eight bodies were recovered. But F. was certain that there were more bodies hidden there. She was right: one day in 2008 someone passing through the woods found a leg sticking up from the ground. Shifting land masses following heavy rain had unearthed yet another four victims. Ten years later, when we first met, in the small office of the victim association, F. was still searching.

She made Bosnian coffee for us on a small hotplate and showed me a wall full of photographs, yellowed, tattered, from a time long gone, happy snapshots from family albums mixed with serious faces from more formal occasions. She pointed to this one and that one, my school friend, my husband's colleague, this family was wiped out, all gone... telling stories of their lives and their disappearance and the cold miserable little room become crowded with them all.

At that meeting she was upset and I ended the interview for ethical reasons. But at this time, in the midst of the forest, she is in a relaxed mood. I on the other hand want to leave, the pine trees are so tall and stand so close, I am thinking that I never before have seen such tall, dark trees. F. wants to stay, she likes being here. Listening to her talk this time, it seems as if the site functions as a forensic testimonial that speaks clearly to the present about the traumatic event, a site where the presence of absence can be lived and acknowledged, even if it is not marked.

Some people say that let them be, let them stay wherever they are. But I disagree with this, I feel that if I don't have his bones and the other family members' bones, I feel as if nothing has happened. It is as if there had been no war, no torture, as if there had been nothing.¹²

Spaces of silences and secrets

It all started with the man with the map. That is when we started digging.¹³

Paradoxically, there are in fact a lot of people who know the whereabouts of the remaining missing. There are thousands of perpetrators in BiH living ordinary lives who have never been tried for their crimes as well as bystanders who for various reasons have decided not to talk. The ICMP has a function on their interactive website for people to share anonymous information about killings and mass graves and while the number of callers is going down, there is still a trickle. Many are getting old and decide to unburden themselves before they die.¹⁴

Yet guardians of such information are potentially powerful, and some will not speak without getting something in return. Negotiations around the protection or revelation of secrets can generate material or social capital.¹⁵ F. and other survivors navigate an epistemic landscape where knowledge is gathered through rumors and whispers – and through transactions of truth for money. When her association discovered bodies the first time, it happened through an anonymous contact. After weeks of negotiations, they met a man in a petrol station café. He drew a map by hand and shared his secret. And now, once again, F. is involved in a painful discussion with another man who claims he has been told where her brother rests. She has met with him, he said he knows the perpetrator and told her details about life before the war that make her – maybe – trust him. She says he wants a sum of 5,000 Euros, and that he in turn will pass on some of the money to one of the killers. The sum is enormous to her. Even if she had the money – would it be morally possible for her to pay the perpetrator? She does not know.

The first few days after the first meeting, my feelings were first hope, hope to find my loved ones, and happiness. And then I was not able to sleep.¹⁶

Not here nor there

Forensic anthropologists talk sometimes about the biography of bones, and that there is an expectation that the findings of human remains may overcome all ambiguities. The DNA process will remove doubts of identity while found objects – a blue sweater, a plastic comb, a photograph in a wallet – will humanize the bones and provide a direct link between the living and the dead. Yet even when the graves have been found, uncertainty may prevail. In the case of BiH, this is because in order to hide the crimes, the Bosnian Serb Army re-opened a number of mass graves towards the end of the war and moved the remains on trucks to more hidden locations, especially those killed in the Srebrenica genocide. These sites have come to be known as “secondary” graves. Because of the use of heavy diggers and other machinery, many bodies were torn apart and body parts ended up in several secondary graves. Some of these graves were also reopened and the human remains were moved yet again and reburied in “tertiary” graves.¹⁷

The practice of moving bodies to secondary or tertiary graves has ongoing repercussions for the relatives that long to find out what happened to their loved ones; it means that often the search for the missing will not result in “finding the body” but rather parts of it. Religious authorities in BiH have stated that it is enough for 40 percent of the body to be buried in order for it to be a proper burial,¹⁸ yet it is a line that may be perceived as arbitrary. How do you decide when it is time to stop the search for yet another piece?

A BOSNIAN-SWEDISH young woman whose father went missing after the genocide in Srebrenica was waiting for a long time for him to be found:

On 20th March 20, 2007, the call came [...] They had found his head and his left arm. And they knew where the mass graves were [...] My Mum let us make all the decisions. 'You are his children, you decide, when they have found enough we can bury him'. And we felt that there was too little, there wasn't enough. So we waited and then there was one more call, and a third call, over the next two years. And then it was quiet for another couple of years. And then we sat down, me and my siblings. Because somehow we wanted more, you always want more, somewhere you can go. Simply a resting place where you can say a prayer and find some kind of peace. And in 2011 we decided we were going to bury him. We worked out that

we found about 36 percent of him altogether, in eight different graves.¹⁹

Rituals and (re)collectivization

It is often claimed that memorialization can contribute to the “restoration of personhood” of the missing, even in the absence of identified human remains.²⁰ Memorialization can consist of monuments, rituals, museums, plaques, often visible markers that express collective meanings. There are however few monuments to the missing in BiH, where focus has rather been on rituals and ceremonies that enact the restoration of personhood through burial; the transition from being missing to being found. The most notable is the yearly commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide that comprises a number of events, including a burial ceremony of victims that continuously are identified – in 2023, 30 victims were buried. The event attracts tens of thousands of mourners who travel from near and afar to commemorate at the Potočari burial site close to Srebrenica. These events are very important as a performative moment in which collective perpetrator/victimhood identities are upheld.

In line with the understanding that the handling of dead bodies has to do with the construction of the political and moral order of communities, these events ultimately concern sovereign power and how sovereignty can be claimed.²¹ Commemoration is thus a means to create and sustain a particular social order through reversing the dehumanization of the mass graves and the ethnic cleansing, recognizing the victims as individual humans again.

Yet these commemorative rituals are contested, precisely because of the tension between the individual and the collective. While many testify to the importance of the burial ceremony, some relatives and other activists express that they are uncomfortable by such politicized, collective mourning rituals.²² They argue that the victims in fact become inscribed in collective victimhood and become representative of a specific ethno-religious positionality, which they may not have actively embraced while alive.


Aesthetic expressions of presence of absence

And so finally I turn to art as a medium for engaging with the trauma of the missing and ask if aesthetic expressions can possibly create a space for remembering that encompasses presence of absence. In various conflict-affected contexts artists seek to approach loss through marking the voids, addressing that which “fractures representation”.²³ My own fascination with the concept of “presence of absence” emerged through an encounter with the powerful work of Doris Salcedo concerning the missing in Colombia. Her art, often in the form of installations, pins our attention to the political implications of when violent loss is not marked or mourned, yet ever-present. Likewise, Bosnian artists

“BECAUSE OF THE USE OF HEAVY DIGGERS AND OTHER MACHINERY, MANY BODIES WERE TORN APART AND BODY PARTS ENDED UP IN SEVERAL SECONDARY GRAVES.”

in BiH and in the diaspora have, in numerous works, engaged with the invisible but ever-present postwar memory politics of remembering and forgetting.²⁴

Possibly the artwork that speaks most powerfully to the experiences and the loss of F. and of T. and her family that I have highlighted here, is the nomadic exhibition ŠTO TE NEMA.²⁵ It is a travelling installation/memorial that engages with the intangible heritage of coffee rituals. The project started out in Sarajevo, where Bosnian-born American artist Aida Šehović in 2006 displayed 923 of the thimble-like Bosnian coffee cups given to her by the association Women of Srebrenica, and filled them with the frothy, thick Bosnian coffee. More or less every year since then, Šehović has organized the installation in cities all over the world, the number of cups growing each year as members of the Bosnian diaspora as well as others have added more and more. At the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in 2020, 8372 cups were laid out on the grounds of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre and laboriously filled with coffee (one for each genocide victim) and the cups will eventually be displayed in a permanent monument at the Memorial Center. In the meantime, the cups have been displayed at several museums, in Sarajevo as well as beyond BiH.

The cups are a material manifestation that reminds the onlooker of the loss of each one of those killed and missing. At the same time, the installation is a manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. It concerns the importance of the coffee ritual in BiH, as a means to engage and maintain good neighborly relations. Coffee-drinking was an intrinsic part of the upholding of the pre-war multiethnic weave in communities such as Srebrenica before the war. Furthermore, the nomadic monument was created by the artist in conjunction with a large number of people getting together and making, sharing coffee, thereby weaving new connections. The cups speak directly to the people on the yellowed photos on the wall of memory, under which F. made coffee on the small hotplate. They concern all those who confront the lingering pain of presence of absence that mass atrocity generates, long after the end of war. They remind us that mass atrocity rips apart webs of relations. They speak to the loss of sociability and the loss of lifeworlds. 

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