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Commemorating National Martyrdom through Re-Creating the Past: Vukovar, Prijedor, Derry/Londonderry, and Gernika/Guernica

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In this discussion piece, Berkeley doctoral researcher Blaze Joel offers insight into four European post-conflict societies across the continent. He finds commonalities in commemorative cultures for all the efforts of civil society actors to form reconciliatory encounters still manage through memorial re-creation to produce antagonistic memories that strengthen identities while reproducing for subsequent generations a sense of polarization. He argues that the struggle against the forgetting of suffering ultimately also keeps alive antagonistic, us-versus-them narratives. The performative aspect of commemorative practices involving re-creation and processions, reflecting their ability to appropriate public space, also demonstrates how the narratives and identities they are indicative of retain appeal.

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26 April 2017; Spain: 80th Anniversary of bombing of Guernica A boy pictured during the commemoration of 80th anniversary of bombing of Guernica in Madrid.

Commemorations form an important bedrock of modern societies, even more so in divided societies that have recently experienced conflict. Paul Connerton, for example, argues that commemorative rituals help a community both to mark certain historical or mythical experiences as communal and important and to "imply continuity with the past" through their "high degree of formality and fixity," as well as their "explicit claim to be commemorating such a continuity."[1] This is especially true in divided societies like Eastern Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country, all of which experienced ethnicized conflicts in the twentieth century that amplified and concretized differences between the various ethnic groups involved in them.

As part of my doctoral research, I have attended commemorations throughout the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country, including the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Vukovar, Croatia, on November 18, 1991; the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the ethnic cleansing of Prijedor, Bosnia, in May 1992; the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on January 30, 1972; and the eighty-fifth anniversary of the bombing of Gernika, Spain, on April 26, 1937.[2] All of these sites form the core of one ethnic group's – Croat, Bosniak, Northern Irish Catholic, and Basque – narrative of martyrdom at the hands of an opposing ethnic group – Serb, Bosnian Serb, Protestant/British, and Spanish, respectively.

> While these are not the only four commemorations in Europe that involve re-creating the past, the dynamics of the reenactments are particularly significant given the realities of social division that are perpetuated by the memories of the respective conflicts.

In attending these memorial ceremonies and thinking about them in comparison with one another, one key aspect stood out to me: all of them feature a re-creation of the past as the central moment of their commemorative festivities. While these are not the only four commemorations in Europe that involve re-creating the past, the dynamics of the reenactments are particularly significant given the realities of social division that are perpetuated by the memories of the respective conflicts.

The Day of Remembrance for the victims of Vukovar 18.11.2016., Vukovar, Croatia – Memorial ceremonies began in the yard of the General Hospital in Vukovar to mark Vukovar Remembrance Day, the 25th anniversary of the destruction of the town in the military aggression by Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitary forces at the start of the 1991-1995 Homeland War. After the ceremony in the hospital yard, the participants walk in a Remembrance Procession to the Homeland War Memorial Cemetery where state and other delegations will lay wreaths and light candles in memory of Croatian soldiers and civilians killed during the siege of the town. Caption by Imago.

Vukovar, Croatia – Homeland War Memorial Cemetery.

Vukovar

The annual November 18 commemorations at Vukovar have been enshrined in law since 2019 as Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja. They memorialize the fall of the city after an 87-day siege and the Ovčara Massacre, in which 261 people were taken from the Vukovar city hospital to a farm in the village of Ovčara and executed. The central element of Remembrance Day in Vukovar is the Column of Memory (*Kolona Sjećanja*), a procession which begins at the Memorial Hospital (now part-museum, part-working hospital) to the Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of the Homeland War, where the city's defenders (*branitelji*) are buried. Once the marchers, who usually number in the tens of thousands, reach the cemetery, there is a wreath laying ceremony and a memorial mass. Commemorations began in Vukovar in 1998, the year that the city was returned to Croatia following the conclusion of the mission of the UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium. From the beginning, a memorial march was incorporated as part of the annual commemoration and, in 1999, it was referred to in the Croatian press as a "Way of the Cross."[3]

White Armband Day 31.05.2022, Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo by Blaze Joel.

White Armband Day 31.05.2017., Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Prijedor

At the end of May 1992, Bosnian Serbs in the city of Prijedor began attacking the surrounding majority-Bosniak villages of Hambarine and Kozarac. The final week of May also witnessed the opening of the three concentration camps of the "Prijedor Triangle" – Trnopolje, Keraterm, and Omarska. The week is now marked with several commemorations, including those in Hambarine, Kozarac, and Trnopolje. But the culmination is White Armband Day, held every May 31 since 2012. The event commemorates the date on which Serb nationalists "order[ed] all non-Serbs to mark their houses with white flags or sheets, and to wear a white armband if they left their homes."[4] The commemoration features a gathering in the city's main square by people wearing white armbands, thus re-creating the conditions non-Serbs faced in 1992. The re-creation has an additional level that is not as present in the other commemorations, however in that it seeks to overcome the "erasure" of the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks from the historical memory of the city. As the organizer of the first White Armband Day, Refik Hodžić, said "Victims in Prijedor aren't seen, and I wanted to show them 'You can't erase me.'"[5]

Derry / Londonderry, January 30, 2022; a march commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on January 30, 1972.

Derry/Londonderry

The Bloody Sunday commemorations memorialize the fourteen Northern Irish Catholics killed on January 30, 1972, by the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment of the British Army while participating in a civil rights march through the Catholic Bogside neighborhood of Derry/Londonderry. Commemorations began in 1973 and every year since they have centered on a re-creation of the Civil Rights march from 1972,[6] even as the theme of the commemorations has shifted over the years: from seeking recognition and statements of international solidarity through petitioning for a new inquiry into the event to demanding prosecutions for the Parachute Regiment soldiers involved. The route of the commemorative march passes reminders of not just Bloody Sunday, but of the Troubles as a whole. The march ends at the Bloody Sunday monument (constructed for the 1974 commemoration) at Free Derry Corner, where several murals retell the events of Free Derry, from the August 1969 Battle of the Bogside to the July-August 1972 Operation Motorman. En route, the march passes several murals that memorialize the 1981 Hunger Strikers, who are also commemorated with a memorial on Free Derry Corner.

Gernika/Guernica, April 2022; a woman commemorates the eighty-fifth anniversary of the bombing of Gernika, Spain, on April 26, 1937. Photo by Blaze Joel.

Gernika/Guernica

The April 26, 1937, bombing of Gernika (Spanish: Guernica) by the German Condor Legion as part of the Spanish Civil War could not be commemorated for over 40 years due to the Franco dictatorship. Nonetheless, the experience formed a core part of Basque historical memory and cultural identity. It was frequently invoked by Basque nationalists, including ETA, in their publications as a justification for their resistance to the Spanish state. The first major commemorations occurred in 1987 for the fiftieth anniversary and included twenty airplanes that flew over the town, dropping 450 bouquets made up of a red and white carnation.[7] In the years since, the re-created aspect of the event has changed to the "Four Minutes" – from 3:45-3:49 pm – in which people gather on the site of the old market and at the air raid shelters for a moment of silence as air raid sirens sound and the bells of the main church ring, just as they did at 3:45 pm on April 26, 1937.

> These antagonistic memory cultures, especially those that deliberately minimize and erase the suffering of one group, undermine the possibilities for common or mutual understandings between the ethnic groups on the ground, further entrenching exclusivist feelings and polarization between them by minimizing the social impact of both the peace deals that ended the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and Basque Country, and the numerous civil society organizations that seek to promote dialogue between

the ethnic groups

Analysis

As I have shown, re-creation forms a common aspect of commemorative practices across various post-conflict European divided societies. Why is this so? Connerton argues that "we experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects[…]. And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect to that present."[8] Repetitive commemorations not only "legitimate [the] present social order,"[9] but also take on an added importance in divided societies. As Sara McDowell and Máire Braniff posit, "commemoration of the past […] reminds societies […] that differences in history, tradition, and experience run deep, and the wounds that are sidestepped or ignored remain testament to the willful neglect of increasingly complex and contested histories."[10]

All four of the commemorations described above focus on building the in-group while passing on the history and experience of martyrdom to future generations, as well as asserting, as is especially evident in the case of White Armband Day, the in-group's history of suffering in order to ensure that it cannot be whitewashed or erased. In divided societies, commemoration can become one more potential wedge between communities that experienced ethnic conflict. This is especially true for the communities in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country that commemorate their victimhood in these events, as they also have to compete with the commemorative cultures of the oppositional ethnic groups, which, at best, also make no reference to shared suffering of the various ethnic groups and, at worst, seek to actively deny or erase the suffering of the other group.

For example, Serb commemorative culture in Eastern Croatia is centered upon the Serb experience in World War II, as enshrined in Yugoslav-era monuments. Many of these monuments make no reference at all to the 1990s and those that do only memorialize ethnic Serbs. Bosnian Serbs in Prijedor also highlight their experience in WWII, but in a way that homogenizes that suffering with the 1990s in order to establish a "continuity of persecution" between the two eras. Protestants in Derry/Londonderry continue to commemorate the 1688-1689 siege of the city by the Catholic Jacobite forces as their own "martyrdom moment." In fact, murals around the city declare that Derry/Londonderry Protestants are "still under siege." Under Franco, the Spanish government highlighted their own martyrdom at sites such as the Valley of the Fallen and Belchite, which was destroyed by Spanish Republican forces in September 1937 and left as a ruin by the Franco government as a memorial to Francoist suffering. The current Spanish government has still not acknowledged the Spanish role in the bombing. In the face of these narrative challenges, memorial re-enactments serve not only as commemorations, but also as claims made about the supposedly true nature of the suffering and dynamics of the ethnicized conflicts.

Regardless of intention, however, the memorial cultures described here are all mono-ethnic. While

commemorating one's own suffering is obviously not in itself a negative or problematic thing, elements of the memory cultures of these regions have become means of further enshrining the exclusivism amplified and concretized by the conflicts being commemorated because they only mark the suffering of one group by the other and do not recognize the other sides' experiences in the conflicts. In this context, performative re-creation further ossifies the us-versus-them narrative, meaning the memorial practices hinder reconciliation in the regions and keep memory antagonistic between the respective ethnic groups. Finally, these commemorations – as well as things like the monuments and murals that are common throughout the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country – are extremely visible and extremely public displays of this antagonistic memory. The saturation and popularity of these narratives help to keep the divides alive and part of the common social experience, even long after the three conflicts have ended. These antagonistic memory cultures, especially those that deliberately minimize and erase the suffering of one group, undermine the possibilities for common or mutual understandings between the ethnic groups on the ground, further entrenching exclusivist feelings and polarization between them by minimizing the social impact of both the peace deals that ended the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and Basque Country, and the numerous civil society organizations that seek to promote dialogue between the ethnic groups.

Notes

[1] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 48.

[2] Gernika is the Basque spelling of the town more commonly known by its Spanish name Guernica.

[3] *Večernji List* 19 November 1998, *Večernji List* 19 November 1999.

[4] Nidžara Ahmetašević, "Bosnia's Unending War," *The New Yorker*, 4 November 2015 . [accessed August 9, 2022]

[5] Nidžara Ahmetašević, "Bosnia's Unending War," *The New Yorker*, 4 November 2015 . [accessed August 9, 2022]

[6] *The Derry Journal* 30 January 1973.

[7] *DEIA* 26 April 1987.

[8] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 2.

[9] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 3.

[10] McDowell and Braniff, *Commemoration as Conflict*, 177–178.

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