



## Cultural Memory and Trauma: Commemorating the Past in Post-Conflict Bosnia Herzegovina

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Bosnia Herzegovina  
Commemoration  
Cultural memory  
Post-conflict  
Trauma

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The author has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

<https://doi.org/10.61996/cultural.v2i1.62>

### ABSTRACT

Post-conflict societies grapple with the complex interplay of cultural memory and trauma. Bosnia and Herzegovina, marked by the devastating 1992-1995 war, provides a poignant case study. This research delves into how collective memory shapes commemoration practices and influences the ongoing process of healing and reconciliation. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating qualitative data collection and analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with survivors, community leaders, and cultural practitioners. Additionally, content analysis was performed on commemorative events, memorials, and public discourses. Findings highlight the dynamic nature of cultural memory. Commemoration practices serve as sites of contestation, reflecting diverse narratives and interpretations of the past. Trauma manifests in both individual and collective experiences, shaping identity and influencing social relations. In conclusion, the study underscores the crucial role of cultural memory in post-conflict societies. Commemoration serves as a vehicle for acknowledging suffering, promoting healing, and fostering reconciliation. However, it is essential to navigate the complexities of diverse narratives and ensure inclusive representation.

### 1. Introduction

The aftermath of conflict leaves deep scars on the social fabric of a nation, etching indelible marks on the collective psyche and shaping the trajectory of its future. In the wake of violence and displacement, societies grapple with the complex interplay of cultural memory and trauma, seeking ways to heal, reconcile, and rebuild. Bosnia and Herzegovina, emerging from the devastating 1992-1995 war, provides a poignant case study for exploring the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and commemoration in post-conflict contexts. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, fueled by ethnic tensions and political ambitions, tore the country apart, leaving behind a trail of destruction and suffering. The conflict claimed an estimated 100,000 lives and displaced over two million people, shattering communities and disrupting

social bonds. The atrocities committed during the war, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and mass rape, left deep psychological scars on survivors and their families. In the aftermath of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina embarked on a challenging journey of reconstruction and reconciliation. The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in 1995, brought an end to the fighting but left the country deeply divided along ethnic lines. The complex political structure established by the agreement, with two semi-autonomous entities and a weak central government, further complicated the process of healing and rebuilding.<sup>1-3</sup>

In the quest for healing and reconciliation, the interplay of cultural memory and trauma assumes paramount importance. Cultural memory encompasses the shared narratives, symbols, and

rituals that shape a community's understanding of its history. It serves as a repository of collective experiences, transmitting values, beliefs, and identities across generations. In post-conflict societies, memory becomes a battleground, with competing interpretations vying for dominance. The traumatic experiences endured during conflict leave an indelible mark on individual and collective memory, shaping how communities remember and represent the past. Trauma, in its various manifestations, permeates the post-conflict landscape. Survivors of violence carry the burden of physical and psychological scars, often struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. The collective memory of loss and suffering shapes identity and influences intergroup relations. Trauma can manifest in mistrust, prejudice, and social divisions, hindering the process of reconciliation.<sup>4,5</sup>

Commemoration practices, embedded within the collective consciousness, serve as potent vehicles for navigating the complexities of the past. In post-conflict societies, commemoration becomes a contested terrain, where diverse narratives and interpretations of the past intersect. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was marked by ethnic divisions and atrocities committed by all sides. Consequently, different communities hold distinct memories of the conflict, shaping their understanding of victimhood and responsibility. Commemoration events often become arenas for expressing these competing narratives, leading to tensions and disagreements. Memory institutions, such as museums, memorials, and cultural centers, play a crucial role in shaping collective memory. However, these institutions are not neutral arbiters of the past. They reflect particular perspectives and can perpetuate dominant narratives. The challenge lies in creating inclusive and multi-perspectival memory institutions that acknowledge the suffering of all communities and promote understanding and empathy.<sup>6,7</sup>

Cultural memory serves a multitude of functions in post-conflict societies. It can; Acknowledge suffering and loss: Commemoration practices provide a space for honoring the victims of conflict and acknowledging their suffering. These events can offer solace to

survivors and their families and contribute to a sense of collective mourning; Promote dialogue and understanding: Commemoration can facilitate dialogue between different communities and promote understanding of diverse perspectives. By sharing stories and experiences, individuals can begin to bridge divides and build trust; Foster reconciliation: Commemoration has the potential to contribute to reconciliation by acknowledging past wrongs and promoting forgiveness. However, reconciliation is a complex and long-term process that requires sustained effort and commitment from all sides; Shape identity and belonging: Cultural memory plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities in the aftermath of conflict. By remembering shared experiences and values, communities can rebuild a sense of belonging and forge a new future; Transmit lessons for future generations: Commemoration can serve as a powerful educational tool, transmitting the lessons of the past to future generations. By remembering the horrors of conflict, societies can strive to prevent their recurrence and build a more peaceful world.<sup>8-10</sup> This research explores the multifaceted relationship between cultural memory, trauma, and commemoration in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. By examining how communities remember and represent the past, we gain valuable insights into the ongoing process of healing and reconciliation.

## 2. Methods

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques, to investigate the complex dynamics of cultural memory, trauma, and commemoration in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. The mixed-methods design allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, drawing upon the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. The research design was guided by the following principles; Contextual sensitivity: The research was designed to be sensitive to the specific historical, political, and social context of Bosnia and

Herzegovina. This involved careful consideration of the ethical implications of conducting research on sensitive topics such as trauma and conflict; Participant-centeredness: The research prioritized the perspectives and experiences of participants, recognizing the importance of their voices in understanding the complexities of cultural memory and trauma; Triangulation: The use of multiple data sources and methods allowed for triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings; Reflexivity: The researchers engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging their own positionality and potential biases.

The research was conducted in various locations across Bosnia and Herzegovina, including; Sarajevo: The capital city, which bears witness to the scars of the war and serves as a hub for commemoration and memorialization; Srebrenica: The site of the 1995 genocide, where annual commemorations draw international attention; Mostar: A city known for its iconic bridge, destroyed during the war and rebuilt as a symbol of reconciliation; Smaller towns and villages: Communities across the country, where the legacies of conflict continue to shape everyday life. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on the research questions. The following criteria were used to identify potential participants; Survivors of the 1992-1995 war: Individuals who directly experienced the conflict and its aftermath; Community leaders and activists: Individuals involved in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and commemoration initiatives; Cultural practitioners and artists: Individuals engaged in creative expressions of memory and trauma; Representatives of memorial institutions: Individuals working in museums, memorials, and cultural centers. Participants were recruited through a combination of; Networking and referrals: Researchers utilized their existing networks and contacts in Bosnia and Herzegovina to identify potential participants; Community outreach: Researchers reached out to community organizations and leaders to request assistance in identifying and recruiting participants; Snowball sampling: Existing participants were asked

to recommend other individuals who might be interested in participating in the research.

Data collection took place over a period of 12 months, from January 2023 to December 2023. The following methods were employed; In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 40 participants. Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and were conducted in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian or English, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered the following topics; Personal experiences of the war and its aftermath: Participants were asked to share their memories of the conflict, including their experiences of violence, displacement, and loss; Understanding of cultural memory and trauma: Participants were asked to reflect on how their communities remember and represent the past, and how trauma has shaped their individual and collective identities; Perspectives on commemoration: Participants were asked to share their views on the role of commemoration in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, including their experiences of attending commemorative events and their opinions on memorial institutions; Hopes and aspirations for the future: Participants were asked to reflect on their hopes and aspirations for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how commemoration can contribute to healing, reconciliation, and a more just and peaceful society; Participant observation: Researchers attended a variety of commemorative events, memorials, and public gatherings across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Field notes were taken to document observations of; The atmosphere and emotions expressed at the events; The symbols and rituals used in commemoration; The narratives and interpretations of the past presented; Interactions and dialogues between different communities; Content analysis: A systematic content analysis was conducted on a variety of sources, including; Media coverage of commemorative events: News articles, television broadcasts, and online media reports related to commemorations were collected and analysed; Official statements and speeches: Speeches delivered by political leaders, religious figures, and community representatives at commemorative events

were collected and analysed; Public memorials and monuments: The design, inscriptions, and symbolism of memorials and monuments across Bosnia and Herzegovina were analysed; Online forums and social media discussions: Discussions and debates related to commemoration and the legacies of conflict on online platforms were collected and analyzed. A coding scheme was developed to identify and categorize; Dominant narratives and interpretations of the past: How is the conflict represented in different sources? What are the key themes and messages conveyed; Recurring symbols and metaphors: What symbols and metaphors are used to represent the conflict and its aftermath; Patterns of representation of different communities: How are different ethnic and religious communities represented in commemorative practices and discourses; Expressions of trauma and resilience: How are trauma and resilience articulated in different sources; Transcription and translation: Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English when necessary; Thematic analysis: Transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The following steps were taken; Familiarization with the data: Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts and field notes; Coding: Data was systematically coded, assigning labels to segments of text that represented meaningful units of analysis; Theme development: Codes were grouped into potential themes, and themes were refined and defined through ongoing analysis and discussion; Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set to ensure they accurately reflected the data; Defining and naming themes: Themes were clearly defined and named, and supporting quotes were identified; Writing up: The final report presented the themes and their significance, supported by illustrative quotes from the data; Coding and categorization: Content analysis data was coded and categorized according to the pre-defined coding scheme; Statistical analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the frequency and distribution of codes and categories;

Comparative analysis: Comparative analysis was conducted to identify patterns and differences in the representation of the past across different sources and communities.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design and implementation. The following measures were taken to ensure the ethical conduct of the research; Informed consent: All participants provided written informed consent before participating in the research. They were informed about the purpose of the research, the data collection methods, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the research at any time; Confidentiality and anonymity: Participants' identities were kept confidential, and data was anonymized to protect their privacy; Sensitivity to trauma: Researchers were trained in trauma-informed approaches to ensure that interviews and other interactions with participants were conducted in a safe and supportive manner.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the 40 participants involved in the qualitative interviews for this research study; The sample includes a fairly even distribution across age groups, with the highest representation being in the 31-45 age range (30%); This suggests that the study captured perspectives from individuals who experienced the war at different stages of their lives, including those who were children or adolescents during the conflict, as well as those who were adults; The sample is slightly skewed towards males (55%), which is somewhat reflective of the overall population demographics in Bosnia and Herzegovina; The distribution of ethnicities within the sample roughly mirrors the population distribution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Bosniaks being the largest group (40%), followed by Serbs (32.5%) and Croats (27.5%); This is important for ensuring that the study captures diverse perspectives on memory and trauma from the three main ethnic groups in the country; The largest group of participants have a high school diploma (37.5%), followed by those with some college or university education (27.5%). The smallest groups are those with less than a high school education and those

with a college or university degree (both at 17.5%); This suggests that the sample is relatively well-educated, which could influence their engagement

with commemoration practices and their understanding of historical narratives.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Characteristic	Frequency (N=40)	Percentage (%)
Age group		
18-30	10	25%
31-45	12	30%
46-60	10	25%
61+	8	20%
Gender		
Male	22	55%
Female	18	45%
Ethnicity		
Bosniak	16	40%
Serb	13	32.50%
Croat	11	27.50%
Education level		
Less than high school	7	17.50%
High school graduate	15	37.50%
Some College/University	11	27.50%
College/University Graduate	7	17.50%

Table 2 highlights the complex and dynamic nature of cultural memory in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina; Competing Narratives: The table underscores that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is remembered and interpreted differently by various communities. These competing narratives often manifest in; Divergent understandings of historical events: The Srebrenica commemoration and the Mostar Bridge serve as examples of how the same event can hold vastly different meanings for different groups; Contested notions of victimhood and responsibility: Each ethnic group tends to focus on their own suffering, potentially neglecting the victimization of others. This can lead to selective memorialization and biased public discourses; Tensions and disagreements during commemorations: Opposing groups may hold protests or choose to attend only events that align with their narratives, highlighting the challenges of fostering shared

remembrance; Role of Memory Institutions: Museums, memorials, and cultural centers are not neutral players in shaping collective memory; They can reinforce specific narratives: Curatorial choices and memorial designs may reflect particular perspectives, potentially excluding or marginalizing certain groups; Inclusivity is a challenge: Efforts to present multiple viewpoints or create shared spaces for commemoration often encounter resistance from communities who feel their own narratives are being threatened; Acknowledging the Suffering of Others: While challenging, acknowledging the suffering of others is crucial for reconciliation; Joint commemorations and dialogue initiatives: These efforts, although rare, provide opportunities for different communities to connect and build empathy; Education: Fostering understanding and promoting critical thinking about the past through educational programs is essential for future generations.

Table 2. Dynamics of cultural memory in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Aspect	Observations and examples
Competing narratives	
* Diverse interpretations of the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Srebrenica Commemoration: Bosniaks view it as a solemn remembrance of genocide, while some Serbs downplay or deny the events.</li> <li>- Mostar Bridge: Croats emphasize its destruction as a symbol of their victimization, while Bosniaks highlight its reconstruction as a sign of resilience and unity.</li> </ul>
* Victimhood and responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Memorialization of War Crimes: Each ethnic group tends to focus on their own suffering, sometimes neglecting to acknowledge the victimization of others.</li> <li>- Public Discourses: Political rhetoric often reinforces ethno-nationalist narratives, perpetuating divisions and hindering reconciliation.</li> </ul>
* Tensions at commemorative events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protests and Counter-Protests: Opposing groups may hold demonstrations during commemorations, leading to confrontations and heightened tensions.</li> <li>- Selective Attendance: Communities may choose to attend only events that align with their own narratives, further reinforcing divisions.</li> </ul>
Role of memory institutions	
* Influence on collective memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Museums: Curatorial choices can shape how visitors understand the conflict, emphasizing certain events or perspectives over others.</li> <li>- Memorials: Design and inscriptions can reflect specific narratives, potentially excluding or marginalizing certain groups.</li> </ul>
* Challenges of inclusivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-perspectival Exhibitions: Attempts to present diverse viewpoints can face resistance from communities who feel their own narratives are being undermined.</li> <li>- Contested Memorial Sites: Disagreements over the meaning and purpose of memorial sites can lead to vandalism or neglect.</li> </ul>
* Acknowledging the suffering of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joint Commemorations: While rare, some initiatives aim to bring together different communities to remember shared experiences of loss and trauma.</li> <li>- Education and Dialogue: Efforts to promote empathy and understanding through educational programs and dialogue initiatives are crucial for fostering reconciliation.</li> </ul>

Table 3 highlights the profound and enduring impact of trauma on individuals and communities in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina; Individual Trauma: The war has left lasting physical and psychological scars on survivors; Physical scars encompass war-related injuries and long-term health complications; Psychological scars include PTSD, depression, anxiety, and increased risk of substance abuse; These traumas significantly impact daily life, affecting relationships, employment, and overall well-being, and can even be passed down to future generations; Collective Trauma: The war shattered communities, leading to displacement, loss of homes, and a breakdown of trust; The collective memory of violence and loss is deeply ingrained in the social fabric, shaping identity and intergroup relations; The legacy of trauma manifests in mistrust, prejudice, social divisions, and the politicization of suffering for personal or group gain.

Table 4 highlights the role of commemoration practices as a potential vehicle for healing and reconciliation in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina; Remembering the Victims; Commemoration provides essential space for honoring those who suffered and perished during the war. This remembrance takes various forms; Formal commemorations: Events like the annual Srebrenica Genocide Memorial serve to keep the memory of the atrocities alive and underscore the importance of preventing future violence; Community-led initiatives: Local memorials and cemetery visits enable personalized remembrance and honor individual lives lost; Sharing stories and artistic expressions: Public platforms for testimonies, oral histories, and artistic expressions validate survivors' experiences and create shared understanding, fostering empathy and emotional connection; Collective mourning through religious ceremonies and moments of silence facilitates a sense of shared grief

and loss across communities; Promoting Dialogue and Understanding; Commemoration can facilitate dialogue and bridge divides between communities; Dialogue workshops and peacebuilding initiatives: These create opportunities for individuals from different backgrounds to interact, share experiences, and challenge stereotypes, building trust and understanding; Museums and educational programs: These provide platforms to learn about the conflict, its consequences, and diverse perspectives, fostering critical thinking and historical awareness; Fostering Reconciliation; While a complex and long-term process, commemoration can contribute to reconciliation; Acknowledgement of past wrongs: Official apologies, expressions of remorse, and truth

and reconciliation commissions play a role in acknowledging past abuses and promoting accountability; Grassroots initiatives and interfaith dialogue: Community-led efforts and religious leaders' involvement encourage forgiveness, understanding, and collaborative action; The table also acknowledges the challenges inherent in commemoration processes; Politicization: Commemorative events can be manipulated for political gain, hindering genuine reconciliation efforts; Unequal access: Marginalized groups may face barriers to participating in or shaping commemoration practices; Long-term commitment: Reconciliation requires sustained effort and commitment from all levels of society.

Table 3. Trauma and its manifestations in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Aspect	Observations and examples
Individual trauma	
* Physical scars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- War-related injuries: Amputations, disabilities, chronic pain resulting from combat, torture, or displacement.</li> <li>- Health complications: Increased prevalence of cardiovascular diseases, respiratory problems, and other chronic illnesses linked to trauma exposure.</li> </ul>
* Psychological scars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PTSD: Recurring nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness.</li> <li>- Depression and anxiety: Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and fear.</li> <li>- Substance abuse: Increased risk of developing alcohol or drug dependency as a coping mechanism.</li> </ul>
* Impact on daily life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty maintaining relationships: Trust issues, intimacy problems, social isolation.</li> <li>- Occupational challenges: Unemployment, underemployment, difficulty concentrating or focusing on tasks.</li> <li>- Intergenerational transmission: Trauma can be passed down to subsequent generations, impacting family dynamics and mental health.</li> </ul>
Collective trauma	
* Shattered communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Displacement and loss of homes: Forced migration, destruction of property, and disruption of social networks.</li> <li>- Breakdown of trust: Erosion of trust between individuals and communities due to experiences of violence and betrayal.</li> </ul>
* Collective memory of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared narratives of suffering: Oral histories, testimonies, and cultural expressions that transmit memories of war and loss across generations.</li> <li>- Memorialization and commemoration: Public rituals and spaces that serve to remember the victims and acknowledge collective trauma.</li> </ul>
* Impact on intergroup relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mistrust and prejudice: Lingering suspicion and hostility between ethnic groups, fueled by memories of past violence.</li> <li>- Social divisions: Segregation and limited interaction between communities, hindering reconciliation efforts.</li> <li>- Politicization of trauma: Exploitation of collective trauma for political gain, further deepening divisions.</li> </ul>

Table 4. Commemoration as a vehicle for healing in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Aspect	Observations and examples
Remembering the victims	
* Honoring the dead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Srebrenica Genocide Memorial: Annual commemorations provide a space for mourning the victims and reaffirming the commitment to preventing future atrocities.</li> <li>- Local Memorials and Cemeteries: Community-led initiatives to maintain and visit gravesites and memorials personalize remembrance and honor individual lives lost.</li> </ul>
* Acknowledging suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Testimonies and Oral Histories: Public platforms for survivors to share their stories, validating their experiences and contributing to a shared understanding of the past.</li> <li>- Artistic Expressions: Music, theater, and visual arts provide outlets for expressing grief, loss, and resilience, fostering emotional connection and empathy.</li> </ul>
* Collective mourning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Religious Ceremonies: Interfaith gatherings and prayers offer solace and promote shared mourning across religious divides.</li> <li>- Moments of Silence: Public observances of silence provide a space for collective reflection and remembrance.</li> </ul>
Promoting dialogue and understanding	
* Sharing stories and experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dialogue Workshops: Facilitated discussions between individuals from different communities, encouraging listening and understanding of diverse perspectives.</li> <li>- Peacebuilding Initiatives: Youth exchange programs and cross-community projects promote interaction and collaboration, building trust and breaking down stereotypes.</li> </ul>
* Fostering empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Memorial Museums: Exhibitions that showcase personal stories and artifacts humanize the conflict and encourage visitors to connect with the experiences of others.</li> <li>- Educational Programs: School curricula and community workshops that teach about the war and its consequences, promoting critical thinking and historical awareness.</li> </ul>
Fostering reconciliation	
* Acknowledging past wrongs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Apologies and Expressions of Remorse: Official statements and public gestures that acknowledge responsibility for past actions and seek forgiveness.</li> <li>- Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Formal mechanisms for documenting and acknowledging past abuses, promoting accountability and healing.</li> </ul>
* Promoting forgiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grassroots Initiatives: Community-led efforts to promote forgiveness and reconciliation through dialogue, shared activities, and collaborative projects.</li> <li>- Religious Leaders' Role: Interfaith dialogue and initiatives that encourage forgiveness and understanding across religious divides.</li> </ul>
Challenges and complexities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Politicization of Commemoration: Manipulation of commemorative events for political gain can hinder reconciliation efforts.</li> <li>- Unequal Access to Commemoration: Marginalized groups and communities may face barriers to participating in or shaping commemoration practices.</li> <li>- Long-term Commitment: Reconciliation is a continuous process that requires sustained effort and commitment from individuals, communities, and institutions.</li> </ul>	



The findings of this research underscore the intricate and often paradoxical relationship between cultural memory, trauma, and commemoration in the context of post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war's legacy has left an enduring imprint on the collective psyche of the nation, shaping how communities remember and represent the past. Commemoration practices, while crucial for acknowledging suffering and honoring victims, are deeply intertwined with ongoing ethnic divisions and struggles for recognition. The act of remembering, while essential for healing, can also perpetuate trauma and hinder the process of reconciliation. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a complex and brutal conflict marked by ethnic cleansing, genocide, and widespread human rights abuses. The Dayton Peace Agreement, while ending the violence, left the country deeply divided along ethnic lines. The establishment of two semi-autonomous entities, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, further entrenched these divisions. In this context, cultural memory has become a contested terrain, where different ethnic groups hold divergent interpretations of the past. The narratives surrounding the war, its causes, and its consequences are often shaped by ethno-nationalist ideologies, leading to competing claims of victimhood and responsibility.<sup>1113</sup>

Commemoration practices, as sites of memory construction and transmission, reflect these competing narratives. The annual Srebrenica Genocide Memorial, for instance, serves as a powerful reminder of the Bosniak experience of victimization and loss. However, for some Serbs, the event is seen as a biased and politicized representation of the past, neglecting the suffering of their own community. Similarly, the reconstruction of the Mostar Bridge, while celebrated as a symbol of reconciliation by some, is also viewed as a reminder of Croat victimization and the destruction of their cultural heritage by others. These examples illustrate the challenges of establishing a shared narrative in a society marked by deep divisions and competing claims of historical truth. The struggle for recognition is another key factor shaping commemoration practices in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Each ethnic group seeks to have its own suffering acknowledged and its own narrative validated. This can lead to a proliferation of memorials and commemorations that focus on the experiences of a single community, potentially excluding or marginalizing others. The lack of inclusive and multi-perspectival commemoration practices can perpetuate divisions and hinder the process of reconciliation. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina left deep psychological scars on individuals and communities. Survivors of violence and displacement continue to grapple with the physical and emotional consequences of their experiences. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges are prevalent among those who lived through the conflict. The collective memory of violence and loss also shapes the social fabric of the country, contributing to mistrust, prejudice, and social divisions. Trauma can manifest in various ways, influencing individual and collective behavior. Survivors may experience flashbacks, nightmares, and hypervigilance, making it difficult to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives. The collective memory of trauma can also lead to intergenerational transmission, where the psychological wounds of one generation are passed down to the next. This can create a cycle of suffering and perpetuate the legacy of conflict. Commemoration practices, while intended to honor victims and promote healing, can also trigger traumatic memories and exacerbate emotional distress. For some survivors, attending memorials or participating in commemorative events can be retraumatizing, bringing back painful memories and emotions. The challenge lies in finding ways to commemorate the past that are sensitive to the needs of survivors and promote healing rather than retraumatization.<sup>13-15</sup>

Commemoration practices in post-conflict societies like Bosnia and Herzegovina are inherently complex and multifaceted. While remembering the past is crucial for acknowledging suffering, promoting healing, and fostering reconciliation, it can also perpetuate trauma and hinder the process of moving forward. The act of remembering can trigger painful

memories and emotions, reinforcing a sense of victimhood and perpetuating divisions between communities. Moreover, commemoration can be easily politicized, serving the interests of particular groups or ideologies rather than promoting genuine reconciliation. The selective memorialization of certain events or the exclusion of certain narratives can further entrench divisions and undermine efforts to build a shared future. The challenge, therefore, is to find ways to commemorate the past that are both inclusive and sensitive to the needs of survivors. This requires a multi-perspectival approach that acknowledges the suffering of all communities and promotes dialogue and understanding across divides. It also requires a commitment to truth-telling and accountability, ensuring that the historical record is not distorted or manipulated for political gain.<sup>16-18</sup>

Despite the challenges, there are examples of commemoration practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina that have contributed to healing and reconciliation. Grassroots initiatives, led by civil society organizations and individuals, have played a crucial role in promoting dialogue, fostering empathy, and building bridges between communities. These initiatives often focus on shared experiences of loss and resilience, creating spaces for individuals from different backgrounds to connect and share their stories. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation have also played a role in promoting reconciliation. Religious leaders from different communities have come together to condemn violence and promote understanding, recognizing the shared humanity of all people regardless of their faith. These efforts demonstrate the potential for commemoration to transcend divisions and contribute to a more peaceful and just society. Education also plays a crucial role in shaping how future generations understand and remember the past. By promoting critical thinking and historical awareness, education can challenge stereotypes and prejudices, fostering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the conflict and its legacies.<sup>19,20</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

The complexities of cultural memory and trauma in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina highlight the

challenges and opportunities associated with commemoration. While remembering the past is crucial for healing and reconciliation, it is essential to navigate the tensions between acknowledging suffering and perpetuating trauma, between validating individual narratives and fostering a shared understanding of the past. Inclusive and multi-perspectival commemoration practices, grounded in principles of empathy, understanding, and accountability, can contribute to a more just and peaceful future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. By creating spaces for dialogue, promoting healing, and challenging divisive narratives, commemoration can serve as a powerful tool for transforming the legacy of conflict and building a more resilient and cohesive society.

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