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Rewriting National History through Cultural Memory: The Case of Sarajevo, Bosnia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how cultural memory serves as a mechanism for rewriting national history in post-conflict societies, with a focus on Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, cultural studies, and memory studies, this research explores the complex interplay between official historical narratives and the formation of collective memory in a city that has experienced multiple historical ruptures. The study analyzes how different ethnic communities in Sarajevo construct and reconstruct their understanding of the past through cultural practices, monuments, museums, and commemorative events. The research reveals that cultural memory in Sarajevo operates as a contested space where competing narratives of national identity intersect, conflict, and sometimes converge. The findings demonstrate that the rewriting of national history through cultural memory is not merely a top-down process imposed by political elites but rather a dynamic negotiation involving multiple stakeholders, including civil society organizations, cultural institutions, and ordinary citizens. The study contributes to understanding how post-conflict societies navigate the challenge of creating inclusive historical narratives while acknowledging the plurality of memory cultures within a single urban space.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between national history and cultural memory has become increasingly complex in contemporary post-conflict societies, where the official narrative of the past often conflicts with the lived experiences and collective memories of different communities. Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, presents a particularly compelling case study for examining this phenomenon due to its unique position as a multicultural city that has experienced successive waves of political transformation, ethnic conflict, and post-war reconstruction. According to Assmann (2011), cultural memory serves as a bridge between individual experience and collective identity, providing communities with a sense of continuity and belonging that transcends temporal boundaries. In the context of Sarajevo, this process of memory formation has been complicated by the city's complex ethnic composition and the traumatic experiences of the 1992-1996 siege.

The concept of rewriting national history through cultural memory challenges traditional notions of historical objectivity and highlights the constructed nature of national narratives. Halbwachs (1992) argued that collective memory is not simply a repository of past events but rather an active process of selection, interpretation, and reconstruction that serves contemporary political and social needs. In Sarajevo, this process has been particularly evident in the post-war period, as different ethnic communities have sought to establish their versions of historical truth through various cultural practices and institutions. The city's urban landscape itself has become a site of memory contestation, where monuments, street names, and architectural styles serve as vehicles for competing historical narratives.

The significance of Sarajevo as a case study extends beyond its specific historical circumstances to broader questions about the role of cultural memory in post-conflict reconciliation and nation-building (Muhsyanur, 2020). Ricoeur (2004) emphasized that the work of memory involves not only remembering but also forgetting, and that healthy societies must find ways to balance the preservation of historical truth with the need for social cohesion. In Sarajevo, this challenge has been complicated by the fact that different ethnic communities often have fundamentally different understandings of the same historical events, leading to what Todorova (2004) describes as "competing memories" that resist easy reconciliation.

The process of rewriting national history through cultural memory in Sarajevo has been influenced by broader European and international discourses about multiculturalism, human rights, and transitional justice. Appadurai (2006) noted that contemporary memory politics are increasingly shaped by global flows of information and transnational advocacy networks, which can both support and challenge local memory practices. In the case of Sarajevo, international intervention and the presence of numerous NGOs and cultural organizations have created a complex environment where local memory practices intersect with global norms and expectations about how post-conflict societies should remember their past.

The methodological challenges of studying cultural memory in Sarajevo reflect broader epistemological questions about how scholars can access and interpret

collective memory practices. Hirsch (2012) introduced the concept of "postmemory" to describe how traumatic experiences are transmitted across generations, often through cultural forms such as literature, film, and art. In Sarajevo, the transmission of memory across generations has been complicated by the disruption of traditional social structures and the displacement of populations during the war, creating new forms of memory practices that blend direct experience with mediated representations.

The role of cultural institutions in shaping collective memory has been significant in Sarajevo, where museums, libraries, and cultural centers have served as both repositories of historical knowledge and sites of memory contestation. Macdonald (2013) argued that museums are not neutral spaces but rather active participants in the construction of collective memory, making choices about what to remember, how to remember, and what to forget. In Sarajevo, the challenge of creating inclusive cultural institutions that can accommodate multiple memory cultures has been a central concern for policymakers and cultural professionals.

The impact of digital technologies on memory practices in Sarajevo reflects broader global trends toward the digitization of cultural heritage and the democratization of memory production. Garde-Hansen (2011) noted that digital media have created new possibilities for memory sharing and preservation, but have also raised questions about the authority and authenticity of memory representations. In Sarajevo, social media platforms and online archives have become important sites for memory work, allowing individuals and communities to share their own versions of historical events and challenge official narratives.

The intersection of gender and memory in Sarajevo has received increasing attention from scholars and activists who argue that women's experiences of war and displacement have been marginalized in dominant historical narratives. Helms (2013) emphasized that women's memory practices often differ from those of men, focusing on everyday experiences of survival and resistance rather than military and political events. In Sarajevo, women's organizations have played an essential role in preserving and transmitting memories of the war period, often challenging masculine narratives of heroism and victimization.

The question of memory transmission to younger generations has been particularly challenging in Sarajevo, where many young people have no direct experience of the pre-war multicultural city that older residents remember. Kuljić (2006) argued that the transmission of memory across generations requires active cultivation through educational institutions, cultural practices, and family narratives. In Sarajevo, the challenge of creating shared memories for a generation that grew up during and after the war has been complicated by the segregation of educational systems along ethnic lines and the persistence of nationalist narratives in public discourse.

The relationship between individual and collective memory in Sarajevo underscores the intricate ways in which personal experiences are influenced by broader social and political contexts. Connerton (2011) distinguished between

"inscriptive" and "incorporative" memory practices, noting that both formal monuments and embodied practices such as rituals and celebrations play important roles in maintaining collective memory. In Sarajevo, the challenge of creating inclusive memory practices that can accommodate different individual experiences and collective identities remains ongoing, reflecting broader questions about the possibility of shared memory in diverse societies.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and discourse analysis to examine the complex processes through which cultural memory shapes the rewriting of national history in Sarajevo. The methodological framework draws on interdisciplinary approaches from anthropology, history, and cultural studies to capture the multifaceted nature of memory practices in post-conflict urban environments. Following the methodological guidelines established by Brewer (2000) for ethnographic research in divided societies, the study incorporates multiple data sources and analytical perspectives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of memory dynamics in Sarajevo. The research design acknowledges the sensitive nature of memory work in post-conflict contexts and adopts ethical frameworks that prioritize participant safety and community benefit.

The ethnographic component of the study involved eighteen months of fieldwork in Sarajevo, including participant observation in cultural institutions, commemorative events, and informal community gatherings. The fieldwork methodology was informed by Marcus (1995) concept of "multi-sited ethnography," which allows researchers to trace cultural phenomena across different locations and contexts within a single urban environment. Data collection involved formal interviews with 45 participants, including museum curators, cultural activists, educators, and ordinary citizens from different ethnic backgrounds and age groups. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' understanding of historical events, their engagement with cultural memory practices, and their views on the relationship between individual and collective memory. Following the ethical guidelines established by Pink (2007) for visual ethnography, the study also incorporated photographic documentation of memorial sites, cultural events, and urban spaces that serve as vehicles for memory transmission.

The archival research component examined official documents, media coverage, and institutional records related to memory practices in Sarajevo from 1995 to 2023. The archival methodology followed the approaches outlined by Stoler (2009) for reading colonial archives, adapting these techniques to examine how official memory discourses have evolved in the post-war period. The research included analysis of museum exhibition catalogs, school textbooks, government policy documents, and media representations of commemorative events. The discourse analysis component employed critical discourse analysis techniques developed by Fairclough (2003) to examine how language and representation shape

memory practices in Sarajevo. This analytical approach was particularly important for understanding how different ethnic communities construct competing narratives about the same historical events and how these narratives are embedded in broader discourses about national identity and belonging. The study also incorporated spatial analysis techniques to examine how urban spaces serve as sites of memory contestation and negotiation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Memory Landscapes and Urban Space

The urban landscape of Sarajevo serves as a complex palimpsest of memory practices, where different historical periods and ethnic communities have left their marks through monuments, street names, and architectural interventions. The analysis reveals that the city's memorial landscape reflects what Nora (1989) describes as "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory), where abstract concepts of national identity become anchored in concrete physical spaces. The post-war period has witnessed a significant transformation of Sarajevo's memorial landscape, with new monuments and commemorative sites being established while others have been removed or modified to reflect changing political priorities. The most significant memorial sites include the Sarajevo Survival Tools exhibition, which documents the ingenuity of residents during the siege, and the Tunnel of Hope museum, which preserves the underground passage that served as a lifeline during the war.

The spatial distribution of memorial sites reveals clear patterns of ethnic segregation, with different communities concentrating their memory practices in specific neighborhoods and districts. According to Low (2017), the spatialization of memory reflects broader patterns of social segregation and can serve to reinforce ethnic boundaries rather than promote reconciliation. In Sarajevo, this pattern is particularly evident in the differential treatment of war memorials, where sites commemorating Bosniak victims receive greater institutional support and public attention than those honoring Serb or Croat casualties. The controversy surrounding the memorial to Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, illustrates how even historical events from the distant past can become focal points for contemporary memory contests.

The role of international actors in shaping Sarajevo's memorial landscape has been significant, with numerous international organizations and donor countries funding memorial projects and cultural initiatives. This international involvement has created what Appadurai (2006) describes as "disjunctures" between local memory practices and global memory discourses, sometimes resulting in memorial sites that reflect international expectations rather than local memory needs. The Sarajevo War Theatre, supported by international funding, represents an attempt to create a more inclusive memorial space that acknowledges the experiences of all ethnic communities, though its reception among different groups has been mixed.

The emergence of counter-memorial practices in Sarajevo reflects broader trends in contemporary memory culture toward more participatory and democratic

forms of commemoration. James Young (1992) concept of "counter-monuments" is particularly relevant to understanding how some Sarajevo residents have created alternative forms of memory practice that challenge official narratives. Street art, graffiti, and temporary installations have become important vehicles for expressing dissenting views about the past and questioning dominant memory discourses. These practices often emerge in spaces that are not officially designated as memorial sites, demonstrating how memory work can transcend institutional boundaries and formal commemoration practices.

Cultural Institutions and Memory Transmission

Cultural institutions in Sarajevo have played a crucial role in mediating between different memory communities and attempting to create more inclusive narratives about the city's past. The analysis reveals that museums, libraries, and cultural centers serve as important sites for memory negotiation, where different ethnic communities can encounter alternative versions of historical events and engage in dialogue about contested aspects of the past. The History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been particularly important in this regard, developing exhibitions that attempt to present multiple perspectives on controversial historical events while maintaining scholarly objectivity. However, the museum's efforts to create balanced narratives have been complicated by political pressures and the reluctance of some communities to engage with alternative interpretations of the past.

The role of educational institutions in memory transmission has been particularly contentious in Sarajevo, where the post-war educational system has been largely segregated along ethnic lines. Research by Torsti (2009) demonstrates that different ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina use different history textbooks that present conflicting versions of the same events, particularly regarding the causes and conduct of the 1992-1996 war. This educational segregation has created what Papadakis (2008) describes as "parallel memory cultures" that limit opportunities for inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation. Some civil society organizations have attempted to address this challenge by developing alternative educational programs that bring together students from different ethnic backgrounds, though these initiatives have faced resistance from nationalist politicians and some parents.

The emergence of digital cultural institutions has created new possibilities for memory sharing and preservation in Sarajevo. The Digital Archive of Sarajevo's Cultural Heritage, launched in 2018, represents an ambitious attempt to create a comprehensive digital repository of the city's cultural memory that is accessible to all communities. According to Giannachi (2016), digital archives can serve as "memory machines" that allow users to access and manipulate historical information in ways that were not possible with traditional archival systems. However, the digital archive has also raised questions about who has the authority to determine

what materials should be included and how they should be presented, reflecting broader concerns about the democratization of memory practices.

The role of international cultural organizations in supporting memory work in Sarajevo has been significant, with organizations such as the European Cultural Foundation and the Open Society Foundations providing funding for numerous memory-related projects. This international support has enabled the development of innovative memory practices that might not have been possible with local resources alone, but it has also created dependencies on external funding that can compromise the sustainability of memory initiatives. The influence of international donors on memory practices in Sarajevo reflects broader patterns of cultural globalization and the increasing importance of transnational advocacy networks in shaping local memory cultures.

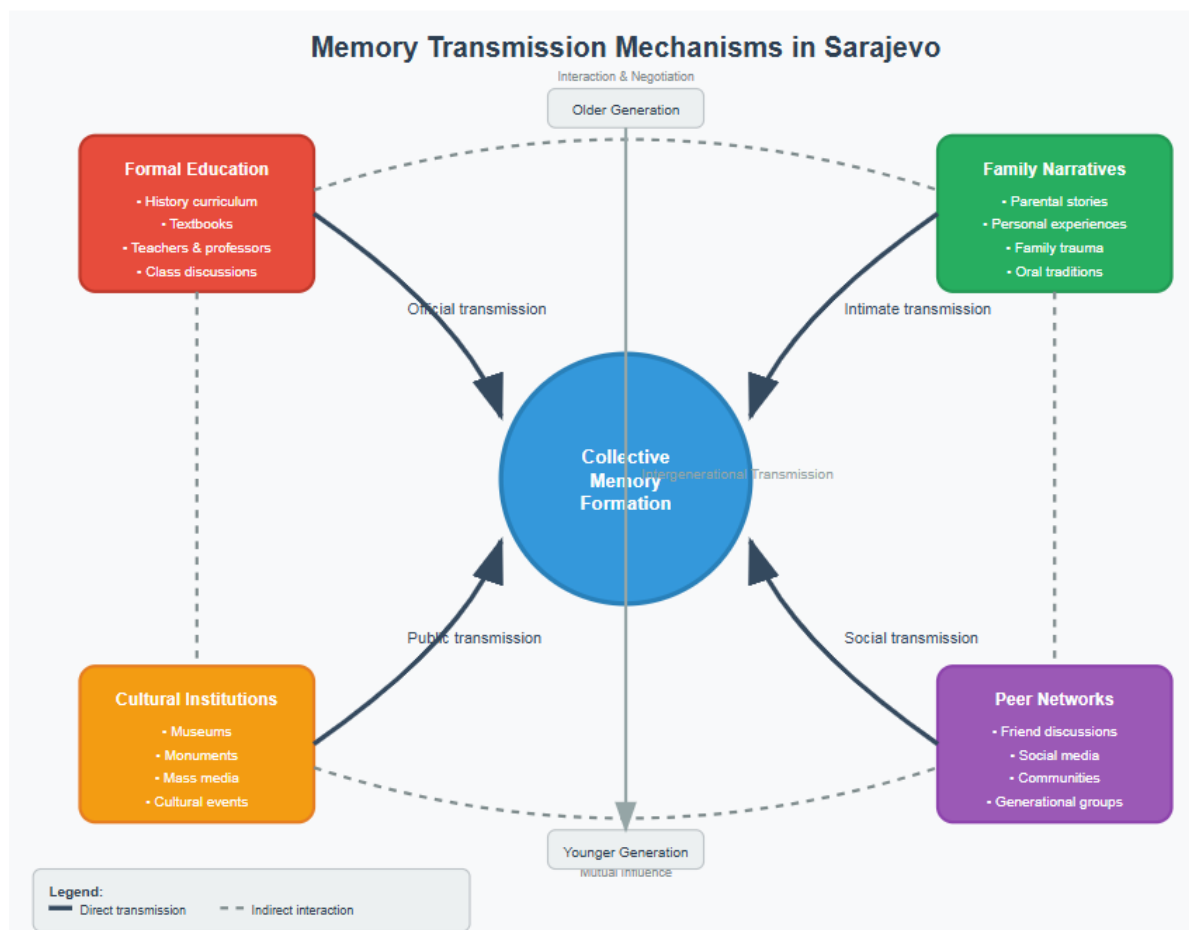
Intergenerational Memory Transmission

The transmission of memory across generations in Sarajevo has been complicated by the disruption of traditional social structures and the displacement of populations during the war. The analysis reveals significant differences in how different generations understand and remember the city's past, with older residents who experienced the pre-war multicultural Sarajevo often expressing nostalgia for a lost way of life, while younger residents who grew up during or after the war have different frameworks for understanding ethnic diversity and conflict. According to Hirsch (2012), the transmission of traumatic memory across generations often involves a process of "postmemory" in which later generations develop their own relationship to historical events they did not directly experience.

The role of family narratives in memory transmission has been particularly important in Sarajevo, where many families have complex stories of displacement, loss, and survival that challenge simplified nationalist narratives about the war. Research by Stefansson (2010) demonstrates that family memory practices in post-war Bosnia often involve what he describes as "ambiguous loss," where the disappearance of the pre-war multicultural society is mourned alongside more concrete losses such as family members and property. These family narratives often preserve memories of inter-ethnic cooperation and friendship that complicate official discourses about ethnic hatred and inevitable conflict.

The emergence of new forms of cultural expression among younger generations has created opportunities for innovative memory practices that transcend traditional ethnic boundaries. Hip-hop music, street art, and digital media have become important vehicles for expressing alternative visions of Sarajevo's past and future that challenge both nationalist and nostalgic narratives. The work of artists such as Edo Maajka and Frenkie demonstrates how younger generations are creating new forms of cultural memory that acknowledge the reality of ethnic difference while rejecting essentialist interpretations of ethnic identity. These cultural productions often emphasize shared experiences of economic hardship and political marginalization that cut across ethnic lines.

The challenge of creating shared memories for a generation that has limited direct experience of pre-war Sarajevo has been addressed through various educational and cultural initiatives. The Centre for Nonviolent Action has developed programs that bring together young people from different ethnic backgrounds to explore alternative narratives about the past and develop skills for constructive dialogue about contested historical events. According to Bar-Tal (2007), such initiatives can contribute to the development of what he describes as "inclusive collective memory" that acknowledges multiple perspectives on historical events while maintaining social cohesion.



Picture 1. Conceptual Framework of Memory Transmission Mechanisms in Post-Conflict Sarajevo: An Intergenerational Analysis of Collective Memory Formation

This conceptual diagram illustrates the complex interplay of memory transmission mechanisms that shape collective memory formation in post-conflict Sarajevo. The framework identifies four primary channels through which historical narratives and collective memories are transmitted across generations: formal education systems, family narratives, cultural institutions, and peer networks. Each mechanism operates through distinct modes of transmission - official, intimate,

public, and social respectively - yet they do not function in isolation. The diagram reveals how these mechanisms engage in continuous interaction and negotiation, creating a dynamic ecosystem where competing narratives about Sarajevo's past are contested, reconciled, and ultimately integrated into collective memory.

The intergenerational dimension of this framework is particularly significant in understanding how post-conflict societies process and transmit traumatic experiences. The vertical flow from older to younger generations represents not merely a passive transfer of information, but an active process of meaning-making where each generation interprets and recontextualizes inherited memories within their contemporary social and political contexts. The bidirectional interactions between mechanisms - shown through the dashed lines - demonstrate how formal historical education may be challenged or reinforced by family narratives, while cultural institutions and peer networks continuously influence each other through social discourse and media representation. This multifaceted approach to memory transmission ensures that collective memory in Sarajevo remains fluid and contested, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between official historical narratives and lived experiences of trauma, survival, and reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the rewriting of national history through cultural memory in Sarajevo is a complex, ongoing process that involves multiple stakeholders and operates through various mechanisms including spatial practices, institutional initiatives, and intergenerational transmission. The analysis reveals that cultural memory in post-conflict Sarajevo serves simultaneously as a source of division and potential reconciliation, depending on how it is mobilized and by whom. The city's experience illustrates the challenges faced by post-conflict societies in creating inclusive historical narratives that can accommodate multiple memory cultures while maintaining social cohesion. The research findings suggest that successful memory work in divided societies requires sustained commitment from multiple actors, including political leaders, cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens.

The case of Sarajevo offers important insights for understanding memory dynamics in other post-conflict urban environments and highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to memory politics that recognize the complexity of identity formation in multicultural societies. The study's findings suggest that attempts to impose unified national narratives in diverse societies are likely to fail, and that more promising approaches involve creating spaces for dialogue and mutual recognition between different memory communities. The ongoing nature of memory work in Sarajevo demonstrates that the rewriting of national history through cultural memory is not a process that can be completed but rather requires continuous negotiation and adaptation as societies evolve and new generations come of age.

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