

“Forgetting Equals Killing:” Loss and Remembrance of the Missing Children in Post-War Kosovo

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Abstract

The Kosovo War of 1999 has had a devastating and enduring impact on individual and social lives of the civilian population. This article provides an in-depth understanding of the impact of wartime atrocities on community experiences, by examining the role of political memory construction in stimulating the production of various sites for recounting alternative memory. Based on extensive ethnographic research, I particularly focus on the collective engagement and the mechanisms of reformulation and transmission of social memory among the parents of missing children. I argue that the pain of loss gets materialized, visualized and publicly asserted through various mediums in an attempt to cope with, as well as resist, societal forgetting. In this article, I refrain from giving a totalizing interpretation of collective memory in post-war Kosovo, and argue instead that multiple and fragmented “acts of remembrance” co-exist, as moulded in collective action situated in the public domain.

Key words: acts of remembrance, political memory, societal forgetting, missing children, Kosovo war

Introduction

It is widely accepted among anthropologists that individual memories have a social dimension, and may be exterior or interior to the body as anchored in the private or public domain. As such, they are interactively constituted and integrated within social frameworks and narratives, which give them shape and meaning. Collective memory construction in Kosovo has mostly been studied through so-called publicly circulated signs, practices, and rituals, such as commemorations, memory texts or memorials (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Ströhle 2012; Luci 2014). However, memory as a scholarly field has been explored by anthropologists through different approaches: as moral knowledge and practice (Lambek 1996; Werbner 1998), as stored in the body and bodily practices (Connerton 1989; Sermetakis 1994; Casey 2000; Climo and Cattell 2002; Kidron 2009), and as a practice to cope with traumatic experiences (Antze and Lambek 1996). It is the last scope within which I wish to situate this article, due to the fact that I regard the traumatic memory of loss as an individual as much as a collective experience. In particular, I focus on its production, cultural shaping, and mediation in the public realm, and consider collective remembrance through social acts as a means to deal with the losses as well as to resist societal forgetting.

This article is based on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016, mainly with two Kosovar Albanian parents’ associations: Mother’s Call from Gjakova and Parent’s Voice from Mitrovica. Due to Kosovo’s declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008 following the war in 1999, Kosovo and Kosovar Albanians themselves provide a unique and abundant terrain to disentangle the dichotomy of remembering-forgetting. Dealing with the past has thus been a complex and multifold process, especially because the memory construction was adapted to the nation-state building agenda and national identity, respectively.

When the law 04/L-023 of the missing persons was approved in 2011, it encountered strong opposition from some Kosovar Albanian parents. The missing, who were regarded as *të pagjetur* (unaccounted for/yet to be found—hence potentially recoverable) were now categorized as *të zhdukur* (disappeared, hence dead or lost/or possibly unrecoverable). By regarding them as the latter (*të zhdukur*), the issue was likely to be seen as an officially closed chapter, with parents being encouraged to accept their missing children as potentially unrecoverable. Such official societal forgetting of select narratives, as Paul Connerton (2011) observes, is constitutive of the project of the formation of a new identity. For this purpose, forgetting becomes an intrinsic part of the process, with specific narratives being preserved in collective memory and others falling into abeyance or being discarded by officials as impractical in managing the current identity (Connerton 2011). However, unlike the case of the victims of rape and sexual violence (predominantly women) who have been met with a humiliated silence, the missing are actively remembered on an individual and social level since their disappearance. As they would otherwise fall into abeyance, the burden of keeping them from a societal forgetting drew heavily upon parents.

To remember and elicit their stories in the public realm was considered firstly to be an ethical responsibility towards the missing children from the parents who equate public forgetting with killing. Parents are aware that children may have endured extreme forms of violence, and their bodies may be lying in inappropriate places without recompense. In lack of serious engagement from political authorities, remembering is considered a strong parental and moral obligation, which opens the door for a possible recovery of the bodies. On the other hand, the absence of religious, cultural, and political conventions to give meaning to these unresolved losses, or to provide a substitute to the death ritual, necessitates memorization in order to bear witness to the unaccounted for's existence and individual stories. As a matter of fact, remembering becomes crucial to social justice to clarify their fate, but also to provide documentation of very recent national history for future generations—an endeavour often pondered in moral terms in individual imagination.

The ways in which these memories are channelled is my exclusive focus in this article. A communal interpretation of the past animates alternative memory-works or “acts of remembrance” (Winter 2006: 6). In order to avoid referring to memory as an abstract, vague and without-agency concept,¹ Jay Winter claims that different collectives remember differently, whereas individuals’ remember in association with other people and engage in acts of remembrance together (Winter 2006: 4). In line with his argument, I look at the creation of parents’ various acts of remembrance, their alternative spaces, and the means utilized to assert these memories in the public realm. While these acts of remembrance shape and influence memory at a national level, they simultaneously unpack memory’s manifold nature.

A Note on Political Memory in Kosovo

Various competing narratives exist about the Kosovo War, which have in turn forged contradictory interpretations of the past. The Kosovo War was a result of intensified inter-ethnic violence in the 1980’s, after Josip Broz Tito’s death, when the new communist leader Slobodan Milošević introduced and promoted an extreme Serbian-nationalist agenda. The oppression of the Kosovar Albanian population increased drastically and culminated in 1998,

when the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) openly confronted the Serbian police forces. The war ended in June 1999 with a 78-day military intervention by NATO, which forced the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to withdraw its troops from Kosovo. During the conflict period as many as 863,000 people were forced to flee Kosovo whereas 590,000 were internally displaced (Independent International Commission in Kosovo 2000). The war left behind more than 13,000 victims (Humanitarian Law Centre 2011), with the vast majority being Kosovar Albanians, while there is evidence of widespread, systematic rape and torture. As to this day, there are over 1660 missing persons (International Committee of Red Cross 2016).

After eight years under administration from the UNMIK (UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo), the Kosovo Assembly declared independence from Serbia on February 17th, 2008. The legitimization of the quest for independence and the reorientation of national identity fuelled the construction of a political memory, which consecutively produced a particular interpretation of the past. Commonly, the process of political memory construction promotes particular memories which are “staged, used and abused for political action and formation of group identities” (Assmann 2010: 41). In the Kosovar context, the main fractures produced by this interpretation were the entities of martyr and victim, which, as contested and blurry as they are, have influenced the experience of violence and collective memory during and after the war. Anthropologists Anna Di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers (2006), have observed that Kosovar memory politics have been built around a master narrative of armed resistance and self-sacrifice. This narrative elicits contestations and disagreements, thus marginalizing contested memories that would destabilize this storyline. As they put it:

The national myth making activity of Albanian memory entrepreneurs in Kosovo have used cultural scripts taken from the patriarchal tradition. They are based on the resistance until death and the trans-generational obligation to remember and complete the work of martyrs ... [T]he master narrative performs two functions: retrospectively it has shifted the focus from the “shameful” experiences of victimization/humiliation to imparting pride. Prospectively, it provides an icon of national solidarity, strengthens Albanian national political identity and makes claim to independence non-negotiable. (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006, 526-527)

A discourse of martyrdom and glorification of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters, as built around local customary codes of honourable manhood² and self-sacrifice, established a legitimizing potential for remembrance and commemoration employed in all *lieux de memoire* (see Ströhle 2012; Luci 2014). This, in turn, left little space for civilian victims to accommodate their experiences, attach meaning to their losses, and help them mourn publicly. Much can be said about the fact that memory construction is never unitary, hegemonic or static, and that sharp divisions between history and memory, and individual and collective do not stand, due to memories being both shared and fragmented. However, at this point it suffices to say that this narrative which has produced a hierarchy of categories of the victims of war, has redefined the experience of loss and memory in post-war Kosovo. Unlike in the Turkish-Cypriot context, where being martyr or *shehit* means to be killed (Cassia 2005), in the case of Kosovo, being a martyr suggests self-sacrificing through armed resistance. Hence, the missing persons did not belong to the category of martyr, because they did not fit into the narrative which implies that a sacred and honourable death was related to local codes of manhood and death for a bigger cause.

This exclusion was translated into the social appraisal of these losses as individualized and private tragedies of a victim’s miserable fate. This attitude has resulted in parents feeling uncomfortable in the gaze of the others, due to public preconceptions that their loved ones’ “socially devalued death as wasted, destroyed lives proven to be of no importance, is humiliating

to the living” (Rowlands 2001: 137). This observation came to be realized when parents asserted their feeling that others *s'ta dijnë* (have no sympathy) for their loss, which in Albanian suggests refusing to know or give merit to something.

An inconsiderate approach from institutions towards their loss came up many times while they were explaining how painful it was to be categorized as parents whose children “were killed by Serbians” instead of “those who gave their life for Kosovo.” This captures perfectly the lack of social and political recognition of their loss as honourable, which evokes a sense of useless loss, and by extension useless suffering. Nevertheless, a lack of official discourses and practices to remember and commemorate the missing is generative of an alternative memory-work. It is this memory-work that will be elaborated upon in the rest of this article.

Public Expressions of Grief: The Mothers of Gjakova

An existential collapse, fear, and hope were the unifying features of the parents' experiences right after the war. When her only son was taken from her home, Nesrete, who now is the head of Mother's Call, found herself locked in the room, suffering from deep grief. This state continued until she was taken to Srebrenica in Bosnia by the war commission, the site of the largest genocide in Europe after World War II. There she met mothers of the victims, who after having gone through similarly horrific experiences, had somehow managed to rebuild their lives. Nesrete was captivated by the strength and courage they showed and by the fact they had quit crying. They told her that she should also stop crying because the body of her son would “stand on water” and that she must be strong and knock on every door to find him. There was a widespread belief among the mothers that their tears would do harm to the bodies of their children as they will be standing on them. Tears, *mërzia* (grief), and *mall* (a feeling of missing someone) were perceived as the cause of the children no longer appearing in their dreams, as well as stifling the indefatigability and the strength to look for their bodies.

Such beliefs, in which crying, apathy and grief are highly discouraged, should not be confused with the impassive and reasonable acceptance of death, or a lack of maternal love within a specific context of violence. This theme is brilliantly elaborated upon by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) in her ethnographic account on the infant death in Brazil. She challenges the idea of motherhood as a universal biological instinct, arguing instead that in the context of material deprivation, different meanings of mother-love emerge. My aim is not centred on such an analysis. Rather, I claim that these beliefs related to maternal love and grief, have primarily served to draw strength and subvert gendered ideologies in which women are bearers of the culturally ascribed role of mourner. This role was enforced by the marginalized position of the mothers of the missing within the Kosovar post-war context. Moreover, such socialization of grief turns into a collective action and political activism, leading to creation of associations such as Mother's Call in Gjakova, which organize various activities every year in order to “prevent their case from going into oblivion.”

Factually, engaging the public dimension of experience has turned into a vital part of the so-called “Mothers of Gjakova” lives. Some of them keep photographs of their sons and daughters in their purse ready to be displayed within those demonstrations. As Mihrije, whose daughter is unaccounted for, describes, “they [the government] thought and hoped that after a while we would get tired, but we did not, perhaps physically you do, but never otherwise, because only when I do something for her I feel happy.” Nesrete, on the other hand, tells me that her life trajectory is limited to home, the association's office, and one square-meter of the street to protest, because

only within those spaces she feels alive. Public activism here becomes a successful method to cope with personal anguish. In the Cypriot context, Paul Sant Cassia (2005: 111) identifies such activism as “grief work,” which implies “the public statement of grief that could not be terminated naturally.” Therefore, it forcefully creates alternative ways to be communicated and coped with.

To receive public visibility of such un-narrated experiences, assert their demands for unity with their loved ones, and generate remembrance, mothers focus on the bodies as their main means. Allen Feldman (2003: 62) describes the body as holding a space for a social memory which gains visibility, collective resonance and publicness. In the case of traumatic memory, Feldman (2003: 62) notes that the body serves as a vehicle through which power, history and memory becomes dramatized and visualized (see also: Kleinman and Kleinman 1994). The Mothers, via protest and public bodily expression of grief, continuously visualize these tensions and further develop strategies for the survival of the memory. Collective action is a reaction of social and political marginality that provides a means in claiming some degree of influence in the public domain. In doing so, they assert their memories and demands in a socially sanctioned, yet visible and to some extent effective manner. This public and dramatic re-enactment of private grief through bodies imposes upon the society the necessity to recognize suffering and to think seriously about the question of guilt (Das 1995).

The question of guilt relates to an event I witnessed during my fieldwork. In January 2014, the Mothers succeeded in blocking a bus of Serbian pilgrims entering the local church on the Orthodox Christmas while carrying the list of the accused Serbian war criminals. Larger protests were then sparked when the ethnically Serb Cabinet Minister of Kosovo, Aleksandar Jablanović, called the mothers of the missing “savages.” He even claimed later that he was not aware of any war crimes committed by Serbian forces in Kosovo. I was, in fact, surprised by how fast Jablanović, whose name I had never heard before, turned into a hot topic throughout January in Prishtina. The fact that the Mothers were considered “savages” did not come as a huge surprise due to an internal “nesting Orientalism” in former Yugoslavia (Bakić-Hayden 1995), a pattern of reproduction of Eastern and Western dichotomies whereby Albanians were positioned as a contrasting, backward “other.” What was unacceptable for the Kosovar Albanians was the fact that by dehumanizing the Mothers, he not only refused to acknowledge the pain of their loss, but also denied that the crime had happened at all. Consequently, Jablanović’s denial of Serb war crimes in Kosovo reawakened hatred among all war-affected Albanians, with the Mothers coming to stand as symbols of national suffering, and the living evidence of such crimes. Thousands of people gathered in the biggest and most violent protest since independence in 2008, demanding the removal of Jablanović. He was finally dismissed; an act, which the Mothers said made them forget their pain for a while.

To impose and legitimize the recovery of missing bodies, as well as the condemnation of war criminals, the Mothers deploy what anthropologist Maya Todeschini has identified as “maternal trope” (Todeschini 2001: 136). Motherhood, among other discourses, is deployed to legitimize their demands and enable a passage of grief to emerge within the public realm. Inside the office of the Mothers’ Call association in Gjakova, there is hardly a span of wall uncovered by statement pictures, posters and other materials carried within all protests undertaken. The largest wall is covered with the pictures of killed and missing civilians alongside the phrase from one protest, saying: “Let the tears of the mother be a demand and may Gjakova never be repeated again.” Other similar statements are likewise built on discourses of motherhood, yet add the language of universal parental love, as well as the medical one. Among the hundreds of demands

directed to institutions and international leaders in Kosovo, these discourses are depicted within one of the following “Message of the Mothers”:

We turned our tears, pain, and anger into strength; we will turn this strength into morale, and we are determined to stay together as we did in the most difficult moments of our painful history ... Europe should do it [find the missing] on behalf of humanism, of which it speaks a lot, and must not forget that we love our children as much as they love theirs and that our children are as valuable to us as theirs are to them. Do not play with the emotions of traumatized families, do not provoke the patience of the mothers and do not open the mothers’ bleeding wounds anymore, please solve this urgent problem (Kumnova and Efendija 2003: 35).

In this text, we see a transformation of individual grief into powerful public idioms. It is framed within historical and cultural discourses of maternal pain and strength, feelings of universal parenthood, and the universally recognized medical discourse of trauma, since it is directed to the international community. Drawing on these idioms, especially on motherhood, they create a position from which they speak authoritatively on their suffering, stories, and demands. Lacking political power to directly influence the events and policies, and in the absence of an institutional framework to accommodate, contextualize and recognize their stories, the Mothers use their bodies and such legitimizing idioms to assert their memories and make their claims publicly. By engaging in collective activities in a struggle for recognition and acknowledgment, they give voice to their lasting anguish, making public a traumatic memory that may otherwise be forgotten or kept within the body.

Memorizing Loss: Photographs

The most enduring activity of parents’ associations such as Mothers’ Calls and Parents’ Voice, is the placement of photographs of the missing on the front fence of the Parliament building in Prishtina. They returned even after a screen containing the missing person’s names was revealed in 2013, an object that for the parents was considered as a poor substitute for a decent memorial. The scepticism of the parents towards the screen was primarily due to its materiality and short durability. On a symbolic level, the screen differs from the conventional forms of memorials by which the martyrs are remembered, hereby excluding the missing from the existing war narrative. As such, it fails to remember and represent the role of the missing in the Kosovo War, in a way that parents advocate for.

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the photographs were returned and placed right in front of the Parliament, a place where they cannot go unnoticed by political subjects and the wider international community, as they sit right in front of their work place. As photography is an object in context, there is a logical connection between the location displayed, its function, and the representational thought the photographs convey.



Photo 1

A photograph's noeme, wrote Roland Barthes (1984), is its reference, meaning that the material carries the subject with itself; they are glued together. This instills photography with an aura of factuality, as it contains an undeniable reality of a past that, in Barthes' words, "has been" (Barthes 1984: 77). Starting from this assumption, the missing persons' photographs within the public sphere serve two purposes. Firstly, as something which "has been," it projects the past into the present. In this sense, it enables a memorization and materialization of a loss in absence, suggested by the disappearance of bodies as well as a public memorial that serves to materialize that loss. Hence, it is a potent cultural object to recall the missing persons, emphasizing their existence not as a unified category but as distinct personhoods with names attached to faces. Secondly, they are placed into the public sphere in the same square of dozens of other memorials. This implicates precisely "what has been forgotten." Here photographs disturb the existing official narrative that seeks to contain war in the past, as they continue to speak of ongoing and unresolved questions. At this point, some reflection of Richard Werbner (1998) might be useful. The tensions around the interpretation of the past, he argues, create a suppressed, un-commemorated or "buried memory" which in turn produces "unfinished narratives"—"a popular history in which the past is perceived to be unfinished, festering into the present which motivates people to call again and again for a public resolution to their predicament" (Werbner 1998: 9-10). Photographs here exemplify this tension and are a means to call attention to unfinished narratives. They gain a performative quality, are directed towards an audience, and live public lives as unresolved questions and absences. As such, they question and invite the local and international community to pay attention, reflect and learn about the losses. In other words, photographs perform, testify,

and memorize the existence of the missing, while at the same time existing as a quest for transitional justice to clarify their fate.

Let us now consider the photographs in a different semi-public context, namely the Mother's Call office. The front wall is covered by photographs coupled with the words: "My spirit is talking to you, do not trample on my blood" (Photo 2). I asked Nesrete about the significance of the wall's photographs, to which she replied that they talk to us and that photographs utter more than a thousand words. Similarly, at the Parent's Voice office in Mitrovica, next to the pictures is written: "Have you done enough for us?" (Photo 3)



Photo 2



Photo 3

Such numerous statements attached to photographs apparently voicing the sufferings and worries of the missing people themselves serve as a means to legitimize the parents' own demands. One may ask why it is the photographs and not other objects that become the voices of the missing. Here, I find the thoughts of an already classic work by Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation" (1981) very illuminating. He uses the metaphor of a mirror to understand why a picture cannot be reduced simply to representation. As he puts it: "When I see someone in a mirror I see *him*, not his representation. This remains so even if the mirror is a distorting mirror and even if the mirror is placed where it is intentionally" (Scruton 1981, 595). Therefore, photography acts as a surrogate or mirror of the missing, enabling parents to speak and demand in their name without rendering this act as peculiar. In particular, in the case at hand, it charges a responsibility towards the living via an acceptable and authorizing voice made possible by the photographs.

In addition to memorization and accusation, photographs have additional significance for parents. As mirrors or surrogates of the missing persons, they mediate communication as well as homage. Since there is no body to mourn, photographs serve as miniature memento, thus opening new spaces and rituals to confront and cope with the loss. Parents for some years paid homage and replaced old photographs with new ones in front of Parliament, on the anniversary of children's disappearance. Such places have turned into concrete sites of memory and mourning (Winter 1995), where parents channel their grief and pay homage to their loved ones. Remembering through ritualistic action with others, as a form of commemoration, provides an instance where individual memories are made public; it creates and keeps alive a social memory mediated by photographs.

Cemeteries

Given that disappearance leaves no body to bury, no definite moment of death, and no tomb, the role of burial to memorize and mourn the loss cannot be realized. Commonly, in historical trauma and cases of massive loss, mourning customs have to be reinvented, as in the case of First and Second post-war Europe, where sites of memory and mourning in the form of large scale monuments have been constructed accordingly (Young 1993; Winter 1995). In the previous sections, I have discussed an articulation of social memory in public spheres through activism and photographs. Here, I want to move to another form of memorization and remembrance that also marks an unfinished past: cemeteries.

I remember the first time I visited Krusha in 2015; the village was severely affected by the war, having endured extreme forms of violence and destruction. The head of the village accompanied me to the war cemetery, where the village's victims had been buried. At that time, they were preparing charges against the war criminals, which he described to me via the Jewish trope (Živković 2000): "Krusha had been an Auschwitz of sorts in which all possible forms of crimes were committed." As we walked around the cemetery he told me that the villagers had taken the initiative, with the facilitation of the Ministry of Environment, to build a memorial and commemorate the killed civilians, as inspired by the model of the Vietnam War soldiers' cemetery in America (Photo 4). There were the graves of heroes, of the fallen – meaning civilians – and, right in the corner, the empty graves of the missing. I must confess that this came as a big surprise to me, especially when I realized that Krusha was not the only place where empty graves of the missing had been built. In Gjakova, within cemeteries for civilians, as well as in few private graveyards, the empty graves were aligned next to other dead family members.



Photo 4

Considering that the cemetery is a site in which the proximity and communication with the deceased person is conducted, empty graves served other purposes here. It should be noted that they were initially not built by the parents themselves; they are mostly part of collective graves which have left places open hoping to be filled with the bodies. Through cemeteries, therefore, the locals have integrated these persons as members of the collective. In this sense, they are not a substitute for the body or ritualistic devices to help parents terminate mourning or alleviate grief. On the contrary, Fetije in Krusha, whose son's empty grave is left in the cemetery, felt even more sadness seeing it empty and nameless. It is interesting, however, that for some parents these graves are appropriated, with some of them having the engraved names of their children. I noted that in several interviews that I conducted with the parents, there did exist an approval of empty graves, or at least they imputed logic behind them. In contrast to photographs, cemeteries have a permanent durability, which enables them a long-term memorization, whereby it prevents their children's identities from disappearing. Anthropology of absence would have considered these phenomena as present absences, whereas the empty graves can be seen as means by which absence is ordered, remembered and turned into matter (Billie, Hastrup, and Soerensen 2010; Hockey, Komaromy, and Woodthorpe 2010). Like photographs, they provide visibility and draw attention to absences. Unlike photographs, however, they are simultaneously impersonal yet durable, attaining a primacy for long-term memorization and remembrance.

The Obelisk

Although the photographs, empty graves, and protests overlap in an attempt to remember and resist forgetting, the version of the story I explore here is slightly different. In the midst of my fieldwork, I witnessed a substantial shift in the politics of memory in Kosovo. For the first time in sixteen years, "The week of the disappeared" was dedicated to the missing persons. It was marked by numerous activities, including a session in Parliament, homages, and commemorative ceremonies. On the last day—April 27th, 2015—which is also the National Day of Missing Persons, Nesrete and Bajram, the heads of two associations, were invited to reveal a new obelisk dedicated to the missing, located only few steps further from the photographs and the screen. The obelisk was comprised of white marble in an abstract, descriptive style, with which only an understanding of context may illuminate deeper meaning, as at the time there was no direct sign or dedication given (photo 5).⁴



Photo 5

Seemingly, the perceptions of the past were being reworked. The obelisk, along with other institutionalized commemorations and activities, testified as recognition of the missing upon the national stage and was welcomed by the parents. At the same time, this attempt to bring in a new interpretation of the past made them sceptical, leading them to call this sudden remembrance and commemoration into question as serious support, or purely as a response to the formation of the Special Court. Kosovo has approved the EU pledge for creating the aforementioned Special Court to deal with crimes, allegedly committed during and immediately after the war by individual members of KLA, some of whom now hold high political positions. This court will investigate crimes, abductions and persecutions against civilians of all ethnicities, including Albanians who were believed to be collaborators of the Serbian regime. In that case, the master narrative of male heroic sacrifice needs a reorientation, with the attention shifting to civilian victims by publicly presenting the victimizing aspect of war.

Immediately after the announcement of the establishment of the Special Court in December 2014, former Prime Minister and former political leader of the KLA, Hashim Thaçi (now President) for the first time accused Serbia of genocide in the Kosovo War, proclaiming that the war crimes should be documented. The missing, more so than any other war category, became proof of the pure, just, and sacred quality of the KLA defence, providing evidence for a genocide charge precisely due to their absence. The use of the term “genocide” is the ultimate form of victimization, casting the role of passive victims, for which the missing stand as a metaphor.³ As missing persons were killed and then systematically taken to Serbia to be thrown in the Danube River, burnt, or buried in mass graves, they typify the brutal organized and institutionalized

methods used by the Milošević regime. The missing therefore became a potential tool, rather than a hindrance, to the maintenance of the Kosovar political elite's legitimacy and authority.

Considering that the war ended 16 years ago, and that the missing have been unaccounted for since, this re-evaluation seems odd to most of parents, proving again that "the past is read from the present: when present changes, the past also has to change" (Watson 1994: 1). After the revealing of the obelisk, Kosovo Parliament Speaker Kadri Veseli took the opportunity to make a political statement claiming that regardless Kosovo's dedication for good neighbour relations with Serbia, this cannot be achieved unless the spirits of the missing rested in their fatherland (Top Channel 2015). On the other hand, then Prime Minister of Kosovo Isa Mustafa recalled that the war victims are the synonym of Kosovar national pain and memory (KOHA 2015). The missing have turned into political symbols of ethnic victimhood, a mirror of barbarism of the Other, and a barrier to reconciliation. Katherine Verdery refers to this repositioning and the associations of dead bodies with different kinds of values, as "dead body politics" (Verdery 1999: 20). She argues that "dead body politics" has an important effect of inserting such revaluations into the lives of persons, families and groups (Verdery 1999: 20); a claim I do not wish to contest. However, in the case of Kosovo, this remains to be seen, as revaluation is done only in terms of remembrance without resolving the tension of the missing bodies. Hence, right after the obelisk was revealed, a protest took place where a mother approached the head of Parliament to remind him again that no matter what, the bodies' absence should be accounted for.

Notwithstanding the weight of a social and political acknowledgement in helping parents come to terms with the loss, this act does not solve the problem of actually recovering the bodies. Parents continue to engage in acts of remembrance in a daily struggle to come to terms with their losses.

Conclusion

A politically motivated depiction of the past, as a tool of political elites, obscures alternative individual and collective memories of Kosovar Albanian war victims whilst simultaneously stimulating the emergence of various alternative memory-works. Throughout this article I have explored the ways in which the Kosovar Albanian parents of missing children collectively engage in the transmission of their memories into the public realm through a wide range of acts of remembrance. These endeavours significantly alter the dominant narratives of the past, resist societal forgetting, and persist in resolving this tension.

This article has uncovered publicly shared alternative histories of the violent recent past, produced amidst a backdrop of state-sponsored political memory, which has indirectly rendered these stories silent. My aim was to identify particular discursive practices, representations of the past, and the mediums through which they are channelled. I have particularly focused on public activism, photographs, and cemeteries, analysing the ways that these acts disturb the existing narratives while bespeaking of the multifold nature of social memory. The obelisk, on the other hand, proves that collective memory is never a static, but rather a dynamic process that continually adjusts to present developments and affairs.

At a more personal level, for Kosovar Albanian parents, an alternative memory-work and acts of remembrance are sources for coping with personal loss as much as they are a vehicle for resolving the issue of the missing. By persistently materializing and memorizing the loss in public domain for such purposes, parents become agents of collective memory construction. This memory intrudes with but does not subvert the dominant one. The stories presented and actions undertaken

are caught around a definitive craving for social and political recognition, support, and accountability in their desperate need to know the fates of their loved ones. Considering these stories to be cravings, I claim that they reveal the existential and social turmoil the parents are caught in, and are a way to cope with, amplify and publicize their demands.

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Notes

¹ Assmann (2010), similarly dislikes the term because of its vagueness. She replaces it with three other different concepts: social, cultural and political memory. Sontag (2003) on the other hand takes a more radical position by disregarding the term completely, noting that memory is individual and dies with each person. For her, what it is called collective memory is in fact stipulation as society cannot remember without a memory, which in her understanding is only found within the psychical structure of human brain.

² Collective memory in Kosovo was built through a recycled patriarchal tradition based on local kinship relations and obligations where nation came to stand as a metaphor of kin. Local concepts such as of *besa* (word of honor) and *amanet* (last will, ancestors pledge, a cross generational obligation sanctioned by the principles of honor and shame) lifted at the level of nation obliged faithfulness (*besa*) and duty to fulfill the martyrs' will (*amanet*), namely independence and unity. This narrative has built a ritually formalized memory around triumph and sublime sacrifice, see Luci (2014).

³ Concepts such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and armed conflict are interchangeably used by different sides including Kosovar and Serbian authorities, and the international community. Armed conflict and ethnic cleansing remain largely accepted terms among international organizations for the last Kosovo war (compared to Bosnia where Srebrenica is internationally recognized as genocide), whereas the Kosovar side insists on the occurrence of genocide. For anthropological discussions assessing the wars of 1990s in former Yugoslavia, see the debate in *Anthropological Theory* 2005, 5(2).

⁴ A dedication was added to the obelisk later that year after parents' request.