

HERITAGE AND MEMORY STUDIES

FORGET  REMEMBER

Orli Fridman

Memory Activism and Digital Practices after Conflict

Unwanted Memories

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Memory Activism and Digital Practices after Conflict

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Preface

The 'Arab House' was one of the weekly meeting points for the youth movement I was a member of while growing up in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. Deserted and derelict, it stood on the outskirts of our city where we entered the orange groves, one of many unnoticed structures that dotted our landscape; bare, desolate, or covered in graffiti. We saw through these objects, never engaging with their histories or pasts. I cannot recall ever bothering to wonder who named our meeting point the 'Arab House', or why that relic of a house was given *that* name. Did anyone ever live there? What was the history of the Arab House? We simply never asked. It would take me many more years to begin to engage with critical questions about the silence that surrounded 'Arab Houses' across the country, which were becoming more visible as I grew more politically aware. Those houses came to represent the Palestinian Nakba, and how it was concealed right there before our eyes, within Israeli landscapes and narratives.

Years later, in the mid-to-late 1990s, during coursework for my master's degree at Tel Aviv University, I was first introduced to what would become the field of memory studies. This forced me to ask difficult questions about 'Arab Houses', among other things. It was also then that I became acquainted with the notion of collective memory, which I have been drawn to ever since. I embarked on a small-scale research project to explore the claims and joint actions of descendants of the destroyed village of Ikrith, in the upper Galilee – where a promise was made by authorities in 1948 that its Palestinian residents would be allowed to return after the war, but that promise was never fulfilled. As the Ikrith activists and their families planned their action for the date that Israel celebrated its Day of Independence, this became my first experience with alternative commemoration as an act of civic protest.

So strong was my mnemonic upbringing and socialization at that time that taking part in alternative commemorative events generated a sense of profound uneasiness in me. Eventually and inevitably, though, my exposure to these actions led to a departure from the comfortable collective consensus of Israel's master commemorative narrative and rituals. Peeling back the layers of social injustices that had been maintained over the years by structures of silence and denial meant that not only were 'Arab Houses' visible to me everywhere, but also, and to an even greater degree, the lack of empathy and blindness that had been produced by the sense of righteous victimization on which my generation was raised. In the political atmosphere of the early



2000s, following the final collapse of the Oslo Process, the space for critical inquiries in Israeli society was significantly shrinking, but it was impossible to *unbecome* politically aware.

Thus, my own political journey has introduced me to Palestinian counter-memories that extend from places near to where I grew up, yet which were unknown to me. It has also revealed the struggle within Israeli society – where civic action to resist the occupation, and engagement with the Palestinian Nakba demanding its place within Jewish-Israeli collective memory and narratives, are unwanted, unwelcomed, marginalized, and regarded as acts of betrayal. Witnessing this in my own society has in many ways informed and shaped my search for comparative perspectives, for actors and groups beyond Israel who dare to ask about unwanted pasts, and demand to know, see, and acknowledge the pain of others, openly confronting the structures that enable ‘states of denial’. This set me on an intellectual journey that took me away from the Middle East in the early 2000s, through the US – where I undertook a PhD in the field of peace and conflict studies – and to the Balkans and Serbia, for my dissertation research. But what was meant to be a short-term engagement has become a life-long venture.

In Serbia, I have often been asked, ‘How come you’re *here*?’ (*Otkud ti tu?*); meaning, why is *Serbia* the topic of my academic inquiry? Indeed, this was the first question many people asked me in my early days in Belgrade. At the time, my reasoning was linked to previous experience in political education with encounters between groups in conflict, having worked with Israelis and Palestinians, and later with students from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. As the wars in post-Yugoslav states were coming to an end, violence was on the rise in Israel and Palestine, where the Second Intifada was unfolding; and as the Israeli occupation deepened in the years that followed, the Israeli public turned its eyes away, pacified by the rhetoric of self-victimization entangled with denial. In the participants from Serbia, I recognized this rhetoric in the narratives they shared about the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

At the time, I thought my position as an outsider would allow me to conduct research in Serbia that could broaden my view, that I could ask more questions and look more analytically at my inquiry into alternative and counter-memories in societies in conflict, as this had become too emotional and politically charged in my own country, where taking a civic stand against the Israeli occupation was marked as disloyalty. Yet I remained in Belgrade, and years later, my view of Serbia is no longer that of an outsider – though I am not really an insider, either. Am I still a guest? An observer? Am I

becoming a local? Can we ever become local, even when we adopt new cultures and languages, or new memoryscapes in our own research? These questions are no longer solely academic for me, and the position of memory activists in Serbia, who are also marked as disloyal, is no longer a question I can approach only from afar. The future and destiny of people in Serbia has become entwined with mine.

My academic research into the social dynamics of official denial has long emphasized a comparative perspective, and my early inquiries explored the prevalence of networks of anti-denial groups and their civic actions worldwide, in places like Argentina and South Africa, as well as in Serbia. But in Serbia, I was inspired to study the anti-war activism that emerged in the 1990s, and its legacy in the aftermath of the wars. An awareness that had developed with my own choice to see those relics of 'Arab Houses' in Israel allowed me to trace the similar political journeys of anti-war activists in the Balkans. Over time, memory activism from below has become the frame for my analysis of alternative commemorative rituals shaped by local actors in Serbia and the region, first in civic street actions and later in hashtag memory activism. Notably, I have used the framework I present here in the context of Serbia and the post-Yugoslav region in other recent works, which have taken me back to the memoryscapes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The study of 'unwanted memories' – those unseen relics of destroyed villages or ethnically cleansed communities – requires us, to some degree, to step outside of our own societal boundaries, to ignore what one is permitted to ask, see, name, point out, or choose to remember. I borrow the term 'unwanted memories' from some of the activists I have studied over almost two decades in Serbia. Tamara Šmidling and Jasmina Lazović, both with the Belgrade-based Center for Public History, have used it when discussing their work, referring to memories of the 1990s as 'unwanted and suppressed'. With that in mind, and guided by my own experience with unwanted memories and with the pasts concealed right in front of us, this book traces the actions of memory activists from several generations, some of whom have come to work with memory as a continuation of their earlier engagement with anti-war or peace activism. It examines how they understand their own actions and claims, how they choose to frame and position them, and the ways in which generational belonging informs their activism and their political imagination.

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Introduction

Memory Activism and Alternative Commemorative Practices after Conflict

Abstract

This chapter introduces the book's inquiries into the mnemonic practices and claims of memory activists as they engage with remembrance and alternative knowledge production of otherwise silenced and unwanted pasts. It presents a framework for the analysis of non-state commemorations as alternative commemorative events, as they become apparent in the aftermath of war and violence. By utilizing Ann Rigney's memory-activism nexus (2018), it examines the ways in which memory activists, as local actors, claim agency and space by establishing alternative commemorative events marked on alternative calendars. Finally, the methodological approach of this study is discussed, and a generational lens is proposed as a means of delving deeper into the shifts in and nuances of the practices of memory activists.

Keywords: alternative commemoration, alternative calendars, memory activism, generational lens, agency, commemorative solidarity

It was on 10 July 2004 that I first joined the Women in Black in their hour-long silent vigil in Republic Square in downtown Belgrade. On that warm summer evening, in the heart of their city, they gathered as they have been doing since 1996, to commemorate the ninth anniversary of mass crimes committed in Srebrenica and to remember the victims as victims of genocide. At the time, I was studying the group's anti-war activism and its legacy, which I thought had turned towards peace activism. Yet, as I was observing the commemorative event that summer, and in the summers that followed, and later in other annual commemorations I was able to join and document throughout the years, it became clear to me: anti-war activists had already begun to profoundly engage with questions that demanded they

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look backwards, into the very recent past – to memory, counter-memory, and alternative commemorations. In the coming years, I was able to identify the creation of those alternative commemorations as part of what I present here as the foundation of an alternative civic commemorative calendar in Serbia, which has established an annual cycle of remembrance related to memory of the wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia. This work is central to the inquiry of this book: the work and mnemonic practices and claims of memory activists as they engage with remembrance and alternative knowledge production of otherwise silenced and unwanted pasts. In other words, the work of memory activists traced in this book is the work of those who labour with memory (Jelin 2003).

I embark on this effort by proposing a framework for the study of mnemonic practices as seen in memory activism through engagement with alternative commemorations. I examine the ways in which memory activists, as local actors, claim agency and space by establishing alternative commemorative events marked on alternative calendars. Through an examination of counter-memories generated by non-state actors, I utilize Ann Rigney's memory-activism nexus (2018), allowing for actions and demands from below – as put forward by memory activists – to be placed at the forefront of our engagement with the study of alternative commemorations. Such alternative commemorative events are the primary focus of this study, which analyses the strategies and practices of actors as activists in the study of memory activism, onsite as well as online.

As the discussion of memory activism and its formation after conflict unfolds in this text, I also introduce a framework for the analysis of non-state commemorations as alternative commemorative events, as these become apparent in the aftermath of war and violence. I then present my methodological approach, proposing a generational lens as a means of delving deeper and gaining more insight into the shifts in and nuances of the practices of memory activists. I argue that this approach is key to further advancing the memory-activism nexus.

Memory activism and memory of activism after conflict

Memory work, like any other kind of physical or mental labour, is embedded in complex class, gender, and power relations that 'determine what is remembered or forgotten, by whom and for what end' (Gillis 1994, 3). The idea that memory, and its construction, involves labour is hardly new. As Elizabeth Jelin (2003) has argued in *State Repression and the Labors of*

Memory, 'to assert that memory involves labor is to incorporate it into the activity that generates and transforms the social world' (5). Jelin examined social disputes over memories that occur 'when human beings are actively involved in the process of symbolic transformation and elaboration of meaning of the past. Human beings who "labor" on and with memories of the past' (2003, 5). Throughout this book, I take a special interest in the dynamics and practices such labour entails, as I document and explore the work of memory activists in Serbia as they engage with unwanted memories of the wars of the 1990s. These are placed alongside other related mnemonic themes and events from the past, open to interpretation in today's Serbia and across the post-Yugoslav region.

At first glance, as Rigney (2018) has noted, memory and activism may seem as if they are poles apart, with the former oriented towards the past and the latter towards the future. On second glance, however, there is no doubt that they are deeply entangled (371). This linkage of memory and activism has become more visible in recent years as a growing area of research. My aim in this book is to contribute to ongoing discussions in memory activism through analysis of the practices shaping alternative commemorations and alternative civic calendars. Rigney (2018) has mapped out the *memory-activism nexus* that is essential to my inquiry; this nexus centres the interplay between *memory activism*, *memory of activism*, and *memory in activism*. While *memory activism* reflects how actors struggle to produce cultural memory to steer and shape future remembrance, *memory of activism* traces the ways earlier struggles are culturally recollected (see Reading and Katriel 2015), and *memory in activism* concerns the ways in which the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present (see Chigney 2018). Empirical evidence from Serbia presented in this book will shed light on and advance discussions about the first two of these notions: *memory activism* that has materialized after 2000, out of the feminist anti-war activism of the 1990s; and *memory of activism* that has only more recently been integrated into the work of a new generation of memory activists.

As it has begun to emerge in Serbia, *memory of activism* engages with the remembrance of legacies of anti-war activism that took place in the 1990s. Both *memory activism* and *memory of activism* emphasize the centrality and importance of civic action and of work with civic memories. As this study shows, analysis of the creation of alternative civic calendars and their role in memory activism – as the foundation of engagement with counter-memories – facilitates an understanding and framing of this labour. I will return to the importance of civic memories and of memory activism as a

civic action from below, but first I define memory activism and outline its contours as examined throughout this book.

Recent studies position memory activism as activism oriented towards the past, but seeking change in the future. In her study of memory activism as a knowledge-based effort for consciousness-raising in Israel-Palestine, Yifat Gutman (2017) underlines efforts for political change undertaken outside the channels of the state. While the political motivation behind memory-activist initiatives may vary widely, this book is focused on the work of memory activists aiming to advance change towards peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of violent conflict.¹ When employed as a strategy of peace activism, memory activism is considered to be oriented towards first the past, then the future. Aiming to advance our understanding of memory activism as a strand of peace activism, I build my argument on Gutman's definition of memory activism as the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels 'in order to influence public debate, primarily towards greater equality, plurality, and reconciliation' (2017, 55).

In the case of Serbia, there are various mnemonic actors working with the support and blessing of the state on issues related to the legacies of the wars of the 1990s, yet my interest is in the work and mnemonic practices of those actors who produce and promote alternative and counter-memories to those sponsored by the state. More specifically, I trace the ways in which memory activists assert and engage with oppositional knowledge in public spaces, as they establish alternative commemorative rituals and alternative calendars. The creation of oppositional knowledge rests on 'the production and dissemination of alternative understandings and visions', which Coy et al. (2008) argue can shift 'the normative centre of society' (para 5.7). Such past-oriented politics challenges social movements and peace activism, which have traditionally been future oriented. Yet, while peace activists often 'bracket contested and polarizing pasts in order to highlight common ground' (Goldfarb as cited in Gutman 2017, 55), the perspective of memory activists on the past tends to underscore divisions and bring various contested or controversial worldviews to the forefront.

As Jelin (2003) has observed, controversies regarding knowledge and meaning of the past surface at the very moment events take place – and even more so in the aftermath of conflict, war, repressive authoritarian rule, or

1 With the growth of right-wing populism worldwide, more attention has been given in recent studies to the rise of illiberal memory (Rosenfeld 2021; Pisanty 2021), the role of far-right activists in memory politics (Bull and Hansen 2016), and to memory work in nationalist movements (Vermeersch 2019).

mass atrocities. Though violence may end, and armed conflict may cease, clashes often continue over narratives and representations of the past. The past becomes a contested sphere and social disputes arise over memories, their social legitimization, and claims to 'truth'. Once memories become the object of conflict and struggle, in what Kuljić has called 'civil wars of memory' (2009), various actors may generate meanings of the past framed by the power relations in which their actions are embedded (Jelin 2003). Mnemonic actors may be state actors generating hegemonic frameworks to administrate memory of past events (McQuaid and Gensburger 2019), or non-state actors as memory activists. This book features the latter – activists who insist on civic and alternative memories, typically generated from the bottom up in opposition to the state.²

This engagement of memory activists with memory can be manifested as protest. And as Wüstenberg (2017) has shown, in cases where activists employ contentious tactics, they may intentionally seek to provoke a reaction from wider society. Memory as protest may then entail the commemorative work of memory activists, as they put forward content that challenges prevailing notions of what is considered acceptable remembrance in public space, in a search for change. By emphasizing the role and significance of memory activism as a strand of peace activism in societies after conflict and of civic claims and actions, I seek to address the following questions: How does the social organization of memory shape processes of post-conflict remembrance? What is the role of memory activists and of alternative commemorative events in these processes of constructing the past following violence and war? And what is the role of memory activism in generating civic engagement, empathy, and hope after conflict? In discussing the dynamics of memory work and memory activism, and the tensions between state-sponsored and alternative counter-memories, this text underlines the importance and role of spaces of memory as vibrant arenas of political struggle, civic activism, and hope. Memory regimes and mnemonic actors, monuments and museums, state calendars, commemorative actions, and commemorative events are all part of the social organization of memory, mirroring the administration of memory and memory policy (Gensburger and Lefranc 2020). These shape the politics of memory (Kubik and Bernhard 2014) during and after conflict. I approach this realm of memory politics

2 In other case studies, as Jenny Wüstenberg (2017) shows in her analysis of memory activism in Germany, memory movements may emerge in opposition to the state but eventually come to engage deeply with state institutions and even become increasingly integrated with the state over time.

as a space of civic activity, as I trace civic forms of mnemonic articulations manifested in the action and claims of memory activists from below.

Agentic activism: a positive turn in memory studies, a local turn in peace and conflict studies

As a field, memory studies has long gravitated towards violence and its collective legacies. Reading and Katriel note in *Cultural Memories of Non-Violent Struggles* (2015) that the field has placed a great deal of emphasis on examining the cultural memories of war and atrocity, but much less focus on the cultural memories of nonviolent struggle (1). Ann Rigney (2018) has advanced this discussion by setting up a new research agenda, introducing a ‘positive turn’ in memory studies that aims to capture transmission of positivity (370). Acknowledging the hope in activism, and the ‘civic virtue’ in *memory of activism*, allows for a broader framework in which we can critically engage in documenting and analysing the work of memory activists. Hope, as it informs civic action and motivates the struggle for a better life, ‘helps reframe historical violence as a struggle for a cause rather than a matter of victimization; as a matter of civic engagement rather than paranoia’ (Rigney 2018, 371). By placing hope in the memory-activism nexus and recognizing its potential to mobilize notions of agency rather than merely of victimhood, we can approach memory activists as active citizens and even as ‘willful subjects’ (Ahmed 2014 as quoted in Rigney 2018, 373). In fact, Reading and Katriel (2015) propose an alternative line of memory work in which the linkage between struggle and violence is disrupted and ‘agency comes to be associated with the rejection of violence.’ They stress the role of memory work in the constitution of human agency, resistance, and resilience.

Agency constitutes a bridge between my two fields of study – memory studies and peace and conflict studies – and its significance in the memory-activism nexus reflects ongoing discussions about the ‘local turn’ and a focus on the local,³ as well as the power of action from below which stands at the heart of critiques of the liberal peace project (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Richmond 2006). For example, the study of

3 Two distinct local turns are discussed in the literature on peacebuilding and peace activism. The first began in the early 1990s with the work of John Paul Lederach, and the second emerged with the work of the critical school in peace and conflict studies (Paffenholz 2015). Mostly, these turns indicate a move towards further examination of the civic emancipatory variation of peace, which methodologically encompasses the top-down and bottom-up practices and initiatives (Richmond 2006).

'everyday peace' and of 'bottom-up peace' recognizes the agency and significance of actors at the sub-state level (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Similarly, the study of alternative commemorative events, the core of the work of the memory activists I outline here, draws our attention to bottom-up actions that occur outside the channels of the state, and to the agency of actors engaged in reinterpreting the past as they put forward memory-related demands. When analysed in the context of societies marked by official states of denial and a silencing of the past, this frames the work of memory activists as they claim space to shape memoryscapes from below. Official denial, as Stanley Cohen (2001) defined it in his study of the typologies of denial, is not a personal matter but is built into the ideological façade of a state. In such cases, 'the social conditions that give rise to atrocities merge into the official techniques for denying these realities' (Cohen 2001, 10).

Activists are engaged in anti-denial work when they labour with memories that are portrayed differently from those put forward by the state, and insist on local commemorative initiatives and actions related to crimes or atrocities that would otherwise be erased and consequently remain absent from public debate. Various practices – from alternative commemorative events marked on alternative calendars and the establishment of alternative commemorative rituals, to demands for monuments to be built or plaques to be placed, to the production of art or educational materials that inform the public about silenced past events – allow people to interact with this history. These commemorative claims are often made onsite, at the locations past atrocities occurred, such as where mass crimes were committed or concentration camps were established. Yet more recently, these claims also manifest online, as part of the hashtag memory activism that has accompanied the digital turn in memory studies (see Chapter 4), allowing us to analyse internet-based commemorations as digital mnemonic practices.

In establishing platforms for alternative commemorations, activists form what Athena Athanasiou (2017) has called networks of 'commemorative solidarity' as well as camaraderie with the 'other' community. Hope can be incorporated into discussions of memory politics when victims from the 'other side' – who have often been marked as a dehumanized ethnic enemy – are acknowledged within mnemonic regimes that insist on remembering and commemorating only victims from their 'own side'. I approach the work of actors who are forming such networks of commemorative solidarity, and thus of hope, as the work of creating platforms that claim space for greater tolerance and compassion towards 'the other'; which can be situated within platforms for peace formation.

In his ongoing exploration of the relationship between various forms of conflict and peace, Oliver Richmond (2013) has engaged with local forms of peacebuilding that he identifies as peace formation. According to Richmond, by looking at smaller scale and often invisible local attempts at peace formation, some answers emerge to the pressing question of 'how large-scale peacebuilding may be significantly improved and made more representative of the lives, needs, rights and ambitions of its subjects' (2013, 380). As part of his critique of the liberal peace framework, he has highlighted the problem that peace is often made internationally, with local participation but not local impetus. He defines peace formation as 'the processes where ... local agents of peacebuilding ... find ways of establishing peace processes and dynamic local forms of peace ... which occurs through ... politicized processes representing resistance and critical agency' (Richmond 2013, 383). Though he is well aware of the danger of romanticizing the local, Richmond underlines peace formation as locally situated in the political, social, economic, and historical contexts of a conflict and featuring contributors driven to act by an emancipatory notion of peace (2013, 386). Such actors, even if very few and marginalized, differ from external actors in their local agency – meaning, in their 'capacity related to critical, discursive agency and social praxis' (Foucault as quoted in Richmond 2013, 387).

Accordingly, the aim of such actors is not merely to establish a liberal peace but to lead society towards a more emancipatory and empathic form of peace in both local and international contexts (Richmond 2013, 388). To that end, I show how memory activists in Serbia, in their local and then regional mnemonic actions and claims, and whether occurring online or onsite, can be viewed as a driving force of empathy and commemorative solidarity against silence, denial, and the glorification of war crimes. Further, I argue that the emancipatory element in the local turn in peace and conflict studies can be traced in this case in an uncompromising rejection of victimization narratives and in alternative commemorative action emerging from below, and I show how such actions framed as civic actions – despite their current marginality, internal divisions, and weaknesses – constitute and construct networks of peace formation towards emancipatory peace. Memory activism, in both its local and regional forms (see Chapter 5), and in its networks of commemorative solidarity, can therefore be placed among other emerging and growing networks seeking to establish regional solidarity. In order to contextualize these networks' acts of alternative commemoration, and to clearly articulate their role and position within the analysis of memory activism as a political civic action from below, I next turn to existing frameworks for the study of commemorations.

Non-state commemorations: alternative commemorative events after conflict

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by the appearance of a growing body of literature exploring the social construction of collective memory and the role of commemorative rituals and narratives in contemporary social life, and their impact on the political sphere. As John Gillis (1994) argued, any commemorative activity is, by definition, both social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, the results of which may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest and struggle (5). In her seminal book *Recovered Roots* (1995), Yael Zerubavel advanced our understanding of the concept of commemorations as central to the dynamics of memory *change*. According to her, through commemorative rituals such as the celebration of a communal festival, participation in a memorial service, or observance of a holiday, 'groups create, articulate, and negotiate their shared memories of particular events' (Zerubavel 1995, 5). It is the recurrence of commemorative performances and mnemonic rituals that contributes to an overall sense of continuity of collective memory. Thus, understanding commemorations themselves is one way to gain insight into how societies deal with their violent past(s), or even more broadly, with difficult pasts involving disputes, tensions, and conflict or trauma (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2009).

Schwartz (2001) describes commemoration as the tangible public presentation and articulation of collective memory, which may include written texts (e.g., poems and eulogies), music (e.g., anthems and inspirational songs), icons, monuments, shrines, naming practices (e.g., streets), history books, museums, and mnemonic rituals. While these are most often created and promoted by state institutions and state actors, in this text, my interest is in commemorative events that are alternative, occurring outside state channels and led by non-state actors – in this case, memory activists who engage publicly with the production and dissemination of alternative content related to counter-memories of difficult pasts. In Serbia, this entails commemorative events that break through silence and denial, especially actions that call out and stand against the glorification of war crimes. It is the work of activists who choose to uncover suppressed and otherwise unwanted memories by forming networks of commemorative solidarity.

To trace alternative commemorations, one must explore the social timeline(s) constructed by mnemonic communities, such as families, ethnic groups, and nations (E. Zerubavel 2003a, 2003b; Irwin-Zarecka 1994); or in this study, anti-nationalist and anti-war memory activists. Examining

calendars as 'sites of memory' (Nora 1989) allows us to better grasp the processes at work in the social organization of memory, particularly as it relates to the establishment of commemorative holidays and rituals after conflict. In his analysis of national calendars, Eviatar Zerubavel (2003a) showed how the institutionalization of commemorative holidays helps establish an annual cycle of remembrance, noting that our social environments affect not only what we remember but also *when* we remember it. This kind of 'mnemonic editing' of a group's past may also imply the mnemonic obliteration of entire populations, groups, or events (E. Zerubavel 2003b). Hence, this act of editing is crucial to the study of state-sponsored and alternative commemorative events alike, as it shapes memory in post-war societies, impacting not only processes of conflict management but of peace formation as well. Indeed, in the aftermath of conflict, fragmented and contested narratives, as well as memories about past perpetrators or victims, dates of victory and defeat, and dates of mass war crimes and atrocities, can be marked on or completely omitted from the calendar.

Two forms of commemoration of difficult pasts are thus likely to emerge, depending on the political context, with multivocal commemoration more common in consensual political cultures, and fragmented commemoration more common in conflicted political settings (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2009 and 2002). Fragmented commemoration is at the heart of my inquiry and may include multiple commemorations in different spaces and times where diverse discourses of the past are voiced and aimed at disparate audiences (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002, 32). In such cases, the commemoration of the past becomes contested territory where groups engaged in political conflict promote competing views of the past in order to gain control over the political centre (Y. Zerubavel 1995). The past is then openly contested, as rival parties (rival mnemonic communities) engage in a battle over its interpretation. These mnemonic battles (Y. Zerubavel 1995; E. Zerubavel 2003b) may involve entire groups and are often fought in public forums.

Because fragmented commemorations entail the framing of narratives of difficult pasts, each act of commemoration reproduces a *commemorative narrative* – a story about a particular past that imparts a moral message to group members. By reconstructing only segments of the past, this narrative is thus fragmentary in nature. Yet, together, these contribute to the formation of a *master commemorative narrative* that structures collective memory (Y. Zerubavel 1995). This master commemorative narrative is focused on the distinct social identity of a group, its historical development, and the formation of a nation, so that the power of collective memory does not lie in its accurate and systematic mapping of the past but in establishing the

symbols that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance in the present.

As framed by Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002), commemorative narratives, especially those of painful pasts, may consist of three components: 1) commemoration of the protagonist(s); 2) commemoration of an event itself; and 3) commemoration of an event's context (35). Accordingly, analysis of fragmented commemorative practices as they emerge must be accompanied by an exploration of time, how spaces are chosen, and which discourses prevail. In a fragmented arena of competing views of the past, the establishment of alternative commemorative events and the creation of alternative calendars become a vibrant ground for analysis. For when memory activists engage in memory work in the aftermath of conflict, they challenge hegemonic and state-sponsored memory and interpretations of the past. Often engaged in what is conceived as a struggle against oblivion, silence, and denial, these activists insist on remembering and reminding others about the past, so as not to repeat it.

Generational belonging in memory activism

By tracing the creation of networks of commemorative solidarity through the case of memory activism in Serbia as a continuation of anti-war activism, it is possible to more broadly examine the creation of alternative commemorative practices in fragmented societies. In many societies where internal divisions manifest in participation in commemorations that take place outside state channels, such networks of commemorative solidarity shed light on the presence of unwanted memories that are otherwise silenced, denied, and gradually erased from public knowledge over years. Thus, many memory activists view their work, practices, and claims through the lens of their generational belonging. This led me to conduct field research over a longer period, extending several phases of fieldwork across a span of nearly two decades, stretching from 2004 to 2020. A generational lens guided my inquiry into both *memory activism* and *memory of activism*, in relation to the unwanted memories of the wars of the 1990s. As I followed changes and innovations in mnemonic practices over time, I was able to centre my analysis on the nuances of generational mnemonic claims when positioned as counter-memories, from below.

Through direct and participant observation conducted as I joined silent vigils of the Women in Black in Belgrade, beginning in 2004, I asserted the importance of alternative commemorative practices and calendars in

the study of memory activism. Joining street actions in other towns and accompanying the Women in Black on their annual journey to Potočari in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 11 July (from 2004 to 2007) allowed me to point to those commemorations as rituals that are in fact repeated yearly. As of 2004, I also began following and documenting the actions of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), which was then a new NGO in Serbia. As the organization developed into a regional actor, I followed the work of their other branches as well, mostly in Croatia and Kosovo, as they generated regional networks of commemorative solidarity, forming what I call a 'region of memory activism' (see Chapter 5).⁴

Through this generational lens, I demonstrate the non-static nature of memory activism as civic engagement. In the late 2010s, for example, following the creation of the Centre for Public History (Centar za primenjenu istoriju, hereafter CPI) in Belgrade, I traced their memory work and was able to situate it within other pre-existing networks of action. By following their programme of guided tours to sites of suppressed memories and joining a 2019 tour to Batajnica, on the outskirts of Belgrade, I observed and documented the way they interact with hidden and unwanted pasts in their own city's silenced memoryscapes. My previous inquiry into the study of anti-war activism as it was transforming into memory activism has also facilitated my broader analysis here in the context of actions taken by other groups and actors in Serbian civil society, the work of whom I followed in earlier phases of my research. As I previously argued (Fridman 2011), in the early 2000s, the interconnectivity of the work of the Women in Black – which often took place at the Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) – with documentation and knowledge production at the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) and the alternative educational programme at the Center for Women's Studies created a network of actors engaged in the commemorative practices I analyse in this text through the framework of memory activism.

The generational dynamics of memory activism are exemplified in some ways by the slogan 'Not in my name', which accompanied the actions of the Women in Black throughout the 1990s and has continued to mark their mnemonic position and claim well into the 2000s. I show how this slogan allowed the group to articulate their generation's anti-war positions, but also how, in the decade following the wars, their actions evolved into a fight against denial and oblivion in their society. As I traced memory

4 Though I discuss and feature the group's engagement with memory activism here, on other occasions I was also able to capture and analyse their work related to Serb-Albanian relations, which goes beyond merely mnemonic issues (Fridman 2013, 2020).

activism through the documentation of alternative commemorative events, I identified shifts in mnemonic claims, tactics, and practices from below, as they were revealed through the generational belonging of activists. This culminated in 2015, when younger activists came forward with a new slogan, arguing that they were ‘Too young to remember, determined never to forget.’

Around the same time, memory activism was becoming more visible online and as a form of hashtag activism on social media platforms. Later in this book, I introduce the #hashtag #memoryactivism framework for analysing the specific ways memory activists use hashtags, an effort that crystallized as I followed their activism using the hashtag #NisuNašiHeroji (#NotOurHeroes), and which revealed how generational belonging shaped their claims. This phase of my fieldwork extended well into 2020 and took place on the internet as I traced and documented the growing presence of online commemorations and digital commemorative practices. I approached a number of hashtags as case studies, introducing the analysis of hashtags as another form of mnemonic practice utilized by memory activists. As I analysed social media platforms from this angle, I was able to show how these digital platforms have become not only new methodological sites for field research, but also – and crucially – additional sites for the study of memory contestations. By choosing to trace the online engagement of activists through hashtags as they became digital media users, I also demonstrate how this digital form of content dissemination allows for the production of alternative knowledge through online memory activism.

In addition to the participant observation I conducted at commemorative events and on guided tours, I also conducted semi-structured interviews accompanied by many hours of conversation, as well as a discourse analysis of documents, visual materials, and online platforms that have become commemorative platforms to unwanted and otherwise silenced memories of the past. Over the course of all the phases of my data collection, I conducted some 100 in-depth interviews with activists, as well as with their opponents and supporters. Interviewees included the founders, members, and former members of groups I have followed and write about here, as well as digital media users and the activists behind certain hashtags.

As I spent more time examining changes in the practices of memory activists in Serbia, the generational lens applied to the wars of the 1990s and to experiences of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia brought certain patterns into clearer focus. Approaching memory activists through their generational belonging in fact brings in several biological generations in which people experienced and engaged with the events of the 1990s – they may have been adults, young adults, or children, or even born after the wars

ended. Through analysis of my data, I have identified a first and second generation of memory activists, as well as what I consider an in-between generation. The first generation was clearly drawn to memory activism through earlier intense engagement with anti-war activism, having come of age in socialist Yugoslavia and having experienced the 1990s as adults. The second generation, born in the early or late 1990s, carries almost no living memories or experience of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, though some may recall the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (then rump Yugoslavia) and the war in Kosovo. For this second generation, life in socialist Yugoslavia belongs to their parents, and knowledge about its break-up is something they had to critically educate themselves about, as this topic was not necessarily openly discussed in their households nor taught in schools they attended. I have also come to recognize an in-between generation, who were born during the last decade of socialist Yugoslavia, came of age in the 1990s, and experienced the wars as children or teenagers. Clearly, these generations of memory activists do not act separately, but interact with and learn from one another in actions that both continue and evolve their practices and forms of engagement with legacies of the 1990s.

In utilizing the generational lens as my methodological framework for the study of memory activism, I take inspiration from the work of other memory studies scholars who have traced the dynamics of memory across generations. I found particularly useful the works of authors who detail other cases of societies that have emerged from periods of difficult and violent pasts, such as writings on post-dictatorship Spain (Aguilar and Ramirez-Barat 2019) or the post-dictatorship generation in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay (Ros 2012). These informed my methodological inquiry as I was framing the generational belonging of memory activists in terms of how it shaped their commemorative practices. I also took inspiration from a number of post-Yugoslav studies that adopt a generational lens and claim a variety of generational positionings. In *The last Yugoslav Generation*, for instance, Ljubica Spasovska (2017) studied the generation that came into adulthood in the final decade of Yugoslavia (1981-1991) as she explored how Yugoslav youth in the 1980s attempted to rearticulate, question, and rethink Yugoslav socialism and the very notion of Yugoslavism. Milica Popović (2017) also took up this methodological challenge in her study of the last generation of Yugoslav Pioneers, whom she defined as people born in Yugoslavia between 1974 and 1982, analysing what she identified as two of their main political demands: the first against the erasure of their Yugoslav identity, and the other against neoliberal policies and for socio-economic equality (45). Finally, in her Mostar-based study, *How Generations Remember*, Monika Palmberger

(2016) explored the ways in which members of three generations – the ‘First Yugoslavs’, the ‘last Yugoslavs’, and the ‘post-Yugoslavs’ – have positioned themselves differently in relation to the significant political, social, and economic changes Bosnia and Herzegovina has faced in recent years. Her concept of ‘generational positioning’ contributes to my exploration of the ways in which generations of memory activists in Serbia have approached and positioned themselves vis-à-vis the changes and legacies introduced into society by the wars of the 1990s.

Like most authors who utilize this generational lens to advance their analysis (see also Assmann 2006; Kuljić 2008), I turned to the Mannheimian tradition in the sociology of knowledge, seeking a working definition of the term ‘generation’. According to Karl Mannheim, a generation exists if a number of birth cohorts share a historical experience that creates a community of perception. This redefines generations not as objective periods but as subjectively defined cohorts (Olick 2007, 25), acknowledging that generations are not a purely biological but an eminently social phenomenon. In other words, a common location in historical time and space creates a predisposition towards a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action (Mannheim as quoted in Aguilar and Ramirez-Barat 2019, 223). Rather than seeking to analyse the boundaries of generations, I trace the continuation of and change in mnemonic actions, practices, and claims among generations of memory activists. In that sense, Jenny Wüstenberg’s work on memory activism in Germany (2017) has also contributed to my methodological framing and understandings, as she reviewed the post-war generational variations among actors in contentious politics of memory.

Studies of the ‘generation after’, as in Marianne Hirsch’s seminal work on *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), have informed our engagement with the concept of ‘postmemory’ as a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. Thus, ‘postmemory’ enables us ‘to describe the relations that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up’ (Hirsch 2012, 5). The ongoing effect in the present of events that happened in the past have been analysed in the literature as they emerge within categories of victims, perpetrators, or bystanders; though Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ mainly focuses on the experience and cultural production of second generations as the descendants of victims and is not generally used to characterize the divergent experiences and memories of descendants of perpetrators or bystanders, it does support

an inquiry that leads us to grapple with questions of responsibility as a political category.⁵

In this book, I am interested in how these questions of responsibility – which have emerged in the empirical evidence – are viewed through the generational lens, as I frame and analyse the work of memory activists after conflict. The ongoing engagement of memory activists with alternative commemorations has forced them to face these questions of political responsibility, and they have done so in a number of ways, with their different claims in relation to responsibility and to the discomfiting memories of the wars of the 1990s dictated by their generational belonging. What every generation of memory activists in Serbia has in common, though, is that they have chosen to put forward their memory work as anti-denial activism, and to do so through various methods and practices, all of which insist on engagement with unwanted memories. This kind of engagement with the wars of the 1990s requires networks of intergenerational cooperation, especially in street actions that take place in public spaces. Notably, the notion of ‘unwanted memories’ emerged from activists themselves. I, in turn, have woven the work of these activists together with unwanted memories, which serve as the connecting thread through the mnemonic actions and claims I put forward and explore in this book.

Outline of the book

Grounding this study is the framework of memory activism, in one of its forms that most interests me – as a strand of peace activism and of civic activism against denial and silence. More specifically, the book traces the practices of memory activists as they disseminate alternative knowledge after conflict through alternative commemorations and alternative civic calendars, onsite and online, and shows how these activists claim agency rather than victimhood through acts of commemorative solidarity that frame their positions and rituals within existing memory politics and regimes of memory. The book’s empirical inquiry, seen through the generational lens of local memory activists, then traces the evolution of mnemonic positions, demands, slogans, and rituals as they have developed around alternative

5 Michael Rothberg (2019) went on to propose the theory of implication, which allows us to continue to engage with the question of historical responsibility as ‘one that describes the implication of people in events that are temporally and/or spatially distant and in which they have not played or do not play a direct role as perpetrators or victims’ (60).

civic calendars. The appearance and significance of *memory of activism* is also explored, as it has emerged in recent years among the second generation of memory activists. Finally, while it is mostly the work of memory activists in Serbia that this study speaks to, this work is placed within the broader context of the post-Yugoslav space to argue that we should understand the region as a 'region of memory activism', in which *memory activism* and *memory of activism* are now evident in the work and claims of local actors engaged with the legacies of the wars of the 1990s. I show that this labour cannot be understood in a national context only, as it requires the multi-scalar analysis of memory creation, from the local and national to the regional and even global (De Cesari and Rigney 2014).

Each chapter engages in a dialogue with existing literature in the fields of memory studies, peace and conflict studies, and Southeast European or Balkan studies. Much of the recent literature on legacies of the wars that followed Yugoslavia's dissolution has relied heavily on transitional justice frameworks and Dealing with the Past discourses, but I turn here to memory studies, and more specifically to memory activism, to advance the discussion further and engage with analysis of the agency of actors and their civic actions from below. Additionally, I show how this turn to memory studies and to memory politics is in fact taking place among activists and local actors themselves, not only among scholars.

Setting the stage for the presentation of the empirical evidence about memory activism in Serbia and in the wider post-Yugoslav region, Chapter 1 examines the fragmentation of memory through the notion of unwanted and silenced memories as manifested in the practices of *memory activism* and *memory of activism*. It first discusses how memories and experiences of the wars of the 1990s still shape memories of everyday life in Serbia at that time. Subsequently, the ongoing process of editing and shaping the new (post-Yugoslav) calendar of Serbia is analysed, especially its very limited acknowledgement of the wars of the 1990s. Placing the memories of these wars in the context of the current administration of memory allows for critical engagement with the counter-memories and alternative commemorations and calendars put forth by memory activists. The chapter also captures the politics of disappointment in Serbia in the aftermath of the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, revealing the substance of the study of both hope and agency in memory activism as anti-denial activism and a strand of peace activism.

In Chapter 2, I explore the mnemonic claims of actors whose actions extend from the anti-war groups already formed in Serbia in the early 1990s, by tracing the emergence of the first generation of memory activists after

the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. I then analyse the initial appearance of alternative calendars and alternative commemorative rituals, which have become the contested territory of counter-memories. The chapter exposes the tension between state-sponsored and alternative commemorative events, such as in the street actions of the Women in Black. When the wars of the 1990s ended, and their anti-war actions turned towards memory activism, I argue that the 'Not in my name' slogan became the symbol of this first generation – not only of their stand against the memory politics of victimization, silence, denial, and glorification of war crimes, but also of their generational belonging. I show, too, how their alternative acts of commemoration have been shaped by claiming solidarity with and expressing empathy towards victims across the region.

The non-static nature of memory activism is discussed in Chapter 3, where I analyse the work of the second generation of memory activists, as it developed after 2010, as well as that of the in-between generation. The chapter traces processes of continuity and change in memory activism in Serbia, as well as innovations in the mnemonic practices of activists in the context of existing commemorative rituals. This is most clearly seen through analysis of the annual Srebrenica commemorations in Belgrade. Beyond commemorations alone, examining the emergence of *memory of activism* I identify newer practices related to memory of the war in Kosovo and to the existence of mass graves in Serbia, specifically those on the outskirts of Belgrade (in Batajnica). The chapter then takes readers on a journey through CPI's guided tours and various artistic productions related to memory of the 1990s in Serbia, including documentary and feature films such as the work of Ognjen Glavonić.

Memory activism in the digital sphere began to take shape among the second generation of memory activists, and in Chapter 4, I propose the #hashtag #memoryactivism framework as an analytical approach to the study of digital memory activism and online commemorations. Using this framework, I examine the growing presence of these phenomena on social media in the context of the 'connective turn' in memory studies. The use of hashtags as a mnemonic practice is also analysed in this chapter. By studying a number of hashtags, each of which is treated as a case study related to unwanted memories of the wars of the 1990s in Serbia, I trace the ways in which memory activists utilize hashtags and online platforms to engage with (locally) forbidden ideas, with commemoration, and with disputed memories and terminologies.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, I position memory activism related to the 1990s regionally, claiming the post-Yugoslav space as a 'region of memory activism', which allows for an exploration of growing platforms of alternative

counter-memories as civic engagement. The chapter analyses the perspectives and claims of the memory activists presented in previous chapters, vis-à-vis other forms of regional civic engagement occurring from below. When generated from below by local actors and grounded in a critical civic emancipatory peace, these actions advance our understanding of memory activism and transcend national borders.

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