

VALENTINA OTMAČIĆ

**MEMORY OF GOOD THINGS:
MOBILIZING LEGACIES OF
INTER-ETHNIC SOLIDARITY
AND COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT
A CULTURE OF SHARED FUTURE
IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE**

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and Collaboration to Support a Culture of Shared
Future in Southeast Europe**

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Author:

Valentina Otmačić

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Memory of Good Things: Mobilizing Legacies of Inter-ethnic Solidarity and Collaboration to Support a Culture of Shared Future in Southeast Europe

A. Problem

The official narratives dominating the accounts of the past in the countries ensuing from former Yugoslavia are almost exclusively preoccupied with violence. Focusing on “our heroes” and “their villains”, these narratives strongly contribute to the persistence of nationalist agendas and the deepening of inter-ethnic cleavages in the region. At the same time, *the lived experiences of collaboration, friendship, and joint achievements of members of different ethnic groups from former Yugoslavia, although plentiful, seem to be ignored and gradually forgotten.*

So far, the experiences of positive inter-ethnic relationships have not garnered much attention from academia, civil society, or the media. With the strong focus remaining on “dealing with the past” and “confronting the

past” – common references which suggest that the past is something burdened that needs to be “faced and dealt with”, therefore something negative *per se* -- the wealth of narratives and lessons learned through positive inter-ethnic experiences is being disregarded by most actors in the society. As such, they risk vanishing from the collective memory.

Defined as a widely shared knowledge of past social events that may not have been personally experienced but are collectively constructed through communicative social functions (Schuman, Scott 1989), collective memories have multiple uses. Among others, they are a symbolic resource that can be mobilized politically to legitimize a political agenda for the present and future (Liu, Hilton 2005). Importantly, historical memory is a lens and a motivational tool, as people make sense of new situations by comparing them to previous experiences (Wang 2018).

The focus on violence and victimhood in history and memory studies is not unique to the territories of the former Yugoslavia. Warning about this global trend and the challenges it poses to our imaginaries of the future, imagined in terms of the absence of something bad rather than in terms of the presence of something desirable, Rigney (2018) and a handful of other scholars call for the development of concepts, methods, and empirical studies to capture the transmission of positive forms of attachment across space and time, centered on the concept of “hope” as an alternative to “paranoid nationalism”. This research responds to their call by exploring the memory of inter-ethnic solidarity and collaboration in three communities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, namely the communities of Gorski Kotar (Croatia), Tuzla, and Baljvine (Bosnia-Herzegovina), which successfully resisted inter-ethnic violence and segregation during the 1991–1995 wars.

While mechanisms for deploying negative memories of inter-group hostilities to mobilize for violence have been studied extensively, there is a *gap in the knowledge on the activation of positive collective memories of inter-group solidarity and collaboration to support nonviolent political agendas*. This research aims to address this gap, firstly by looking back and facilitating learning from the strategic uses of positive past in the practices of the above-mentioned ethnically diverse communities, and secondly by looking forward and identifying opportunities and potential actions that would support the strategic deployment of positive past narratives to support a shared future in which, as expressed by the wartime mayor of Tuzla, “national, political and religious differences among citizens will not be considered a curse, but a source of beauty and wealth” (Bešlagić 1998: 23).

B. Method

Memory of Good Things is interdisciplinary research integrating theoretical and conceptual frameworks and knowledge stemming from memory studies, peace and conflict studies, sociology, social psychology, history, and political science. It focuses on the theme of strategic use of positive memories of the joint past to support the construction of a hopeful joint future in multiethnic societies. The scope of the research is limited to examining what Assmann and Czaplicka refer to as ‘communicative memory’ (Assmann, Czaplicka 1995), i.e. the memory that is still preserved among living generations, with a time span of 80-100 years.

The main methods used in the research include the *study of selected primary historical and archival sources and semi-structured interviews*. Three *community case studies* were developed, one for each community, followed by a

cross-case comparative analysis of commonalities, differences, and patterns that emerged.

Outlining the main features of inter-ethnic solidarity and collaboration in the multiethnic communities of Gorski Kotar (Croatia), Tuzla, and Baljvine (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and their resistance to inter-ethnic violence during the 1991-1995 wars, the research delves into the deployment of collective memories of positive joint past to preserve local level cohesion in those three localities. Furthermore, it explores how are the experiences of positive joint past in these three communities currently commemorated and integrated (or not) into the public memory at the local and national levels, analyzing some of the current obstacles and opportunities for a more deliberate remembering, reaffirming and deploying of collective memories and narratives of positive inter-ethnic past to support the culture of shared future in former Yugoslav space and other multiethnic societies.

C. Key Findings and Insights

Inter-ethnic solidarity and cooperation have been a long-term feature of community life in all three studied communities. Tuzla has long had a strongly multi-ethnic character, with over ten languages spoken in the city at the beginning of the 20th century (Bajrić 2000). During the 1990s, the three largest ethnic groups, namely Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, resisted together the ethnic segregation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the extremely harsh wartime conditions, including daily shelling and hunger. The region of Gorski Kotar has been inhabited by Croats and Serbs since the 16th century, the latter arriving in the region during the establishment of a buffer zone aimed at protecting the Austro-Hungarian Empire from Ottoman incursions. Unlike other ethnically mixed regions in Croatia, during the 1990s the inhabitants of Gorski Kotar did not

divide along ethnic lines but collaborated towards the joint goal of keeping the war outside of their region. In the village of Baljvine Serbs and Bosniaks (Muslims) have been living together for decades, protecting each other from multiple perils. While Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks engaged in inter-ethnic violence in the nearby towns of Mrkonjić Grad and Jajce, only a dozen kilometers away in Baljvine inter-ethnic collaboration and solidarity prevailed. As a result, at the end of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the mosque of Baljvine was the only undamaged and active mosque in the territory of Republika Srpska (Walasek 2015).

The feeling that living together makes part of the essence of the community, its conditio sine qua non, was expressed in all three locations, with strong local territorial identification (i.e. importance and pride of being Tuzlak, Baljvinac, Goranin) reining in the salience of ethnic identification. In Tuzla and Gorski Kotar living together was further juxtaposed with the concept of co-existence or living next to each other.

While inter-ethnic relations in all three communities have been overwhelmingly characterized by solidarity and cooperation, *some local incidents with ethnic identity elements were also recorded in the past, particularly in Gorski Kotar during WWII. Although dominant discourses of violence instigated from Serbia and Croatia during the 1990s invested major efforts to awaken and instrumentalize such “memory of bad things” to divide people along ethnic lines and mobilize them for inter-ethnic violence, interview data shows that the memory of those local incidents left only a limited mark on the inter-ethnic trust in this community and had little influence on the 1991-1995 choices. As noted by an interviewee from Gorski Kotar (Serb, male):*

Look, one of my two grandfathers left with the Chetniks, and the other one joined the Partisans...

They had no political ideas, the people back then... it was more like... whichever army came first picked them up, and they had no choice but to join.

On the other hand, the *strong anti-fascist tradition of Gorski Kotar and Tuzla emerged as one of the most powerful binding factors*, particularly in Tuzla where anti-nationalism is perceived and communicated as a historical approach fully integrated into the anti-fascist tradition.¹ Both Gorski Kotar and Tuzla were “liberated territories” at some point during WWII, a terminology these communities also applied during 1991-1995 to designate their freedom from ethnonationalism. For a better understanding of the influence of anti-fascist tradition on wartime behaviour at a community level, further research should be conducted.

In Baljvine, *positive memories of WWII behavior were key to the prevention of 1990s inter-ethnic violence*. During WWII Bosniaks protected Serbs from Ustashas, who entered the village ready to kill the Serbs. According to Zupančič (Zupančič 2023), the memory of that event is very much alive in the village, and during the 1990s the Serbs felt the need to reciprocate by protecting the Bosniaks against the Army of Republika Srpska. Corroborating this observation, Kočan and other note that “historical trajectories as seen by the villagers functioned as a strategic connector for preserving (relatively) solid interethnic relations” (Kočan, Vuga Beršnak, Zupančič 2024) and “managed to prevent the instrumentalization of myths and historical memories that would allow the process of ‘Othering’” (ibid.).

Overall, the research findings confirm not only that all three communities had and cherished positive inter-ethnic collective memories, but also that they *actively mobilized those memories to prevent violence during the 1991-1995*

¹ See the official webpage of Tuzla city: <https://grad.tuzla.ba/tuzla/antifasisticka-tradicija/> (accessed 12 May 2024).

conflict, proving correct the hypothesis that the past can be instrumentalized for good. Examples of such mobilization are multiple and diverse.

Strongly differing from the dominant Croatian discourse on the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) and its personnel as the occupying, evil enemy force, during tense moments in autumn 1991 Radio Delnice in Gorski Kotar (News, 19 September 1991) reminded its listeners:

The people of Gorski Kotar lived until nowadays with soldiers from all over Yugoslavia without distinguishing them from their own sons. There was no holiday, event, or occasion that we did not share. During the public works the hardworking hands of the soldiers and officers provided towns and villages [of Gorski Kotar] with many public goods. We have spent many New Year's Eves in the Army Halls, many have created their families here ...

In Tuzla, which has been under continuous armed attacks from the surrounding mountains, the city authorities, as well as the anti-nationalist local media and civil society organizations, repeatedly reminded citizens of the positive joint history of all three ethnic groups. In a public statement issued on 9 June 1992 (Bešlagić, 1998, 39–40), the mayor insisted:

We have been living together in Tuzla for centuries [...] We are all together, Muslims, Croats and Serbs, as well as other citizens, threatened by the same aggressor. Let me remind you that during WWII we preserved our city from nationalism. The mayor then was Hadži Hasanaga Paši, and the mufti was a man by the name of Kurt. Together with the citizens of Tuzla they refused to permit genocide against the Serbs and did not allow the Orthodox church and the bishop's palace to be burned down [...] This is Tuzla, and in Tuzla, we will not allow any vandalism or barbaric behavior.

The *main aims of the promotion of positive past memories* during wartime, as can be concluded from the analysis of the wartime texts and the interviews with several key actors from the researched communities, were to *reduce tensions and fear* of community members belonging to different ethnic groups, to *align around common objectives* and make *everyone feel responsible* for the faith of the community. The strategic goal was to *instigate hope that in the present, just like in the past, the problems will be overcome with joint efforts and without bloodshed*. A specific “historical consciousness” was observed in all three areas, including awareness of the influence of the past on the present, and of the present on the future. Sense of interdependence, reciprocity, and desire not to “break” the chain of positive relations stood out: “In the thousand-year chain of Tuzlan history, we are the link that has been hardest hit and we are the link that must not break” (Bešlagić 1998: 162).

The analysis of *public memory spaces and instruments*, such as existing commemorative events, history textbooks, monuments, museums, and other memory sites in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, showed that the *narratives of positive inter-ethnic experiences of these and other communities are absent from such spaces*. This is at least partially due to the fact that these memories challenge the still dominant ethnonationalist narratives about war, pertaining to the group of so-called *dangerous memories* (Zembylas, Bekerman 2008) or re-memorizing the past in new ways that are disruptive to taken-for-granted assumptions about a group’s identity.

Keeping in power mainly by recycling old nationalist narratives, of which fear and hostility towards ethnic others is an integral part, ethnic elites in the former Yugoslav republics suppress a counternarrative of inter-ethnic friendship and solidarity. In other words, ethnic have

captured not only the imaginaries of the population in this region (i.e. what is possible) but also their memories (i.e. what they experienced, what they remember). Both the *memories of the positive past and the imaginaries of the positive future need to be uncaptured and mobilized* to support the shaping of a progressive, nonviolent, and just society in Southeast Europe.

Currently, *commemoration and recognition in former Yugoslav spaces seem to be reserved for victims or perpetrators of violence*, with no space in public memory for those who preserved lives by nonviolent means. As tools for nation-building and indoctrination, *history textbooks currently contribute to further polarization of ethnic groups in the region* and do not integrate the narratives of communities that opted for multiethnic living together, even during the war. Moreover, and very worryingly, the analysis provided by several authors shows that most of the existing history textbooks in the former Yugoslav republics contribute to the normalization and sense of the inevitability of violence.

At the local level, in the three communities, memories of the positive inter-ethnic past are mostly transmitted orally. In the village of Baljvine, this is also the only identified means of preserving the memory of good inter-ethnic relations. The city of Tuzla, on the other hand, is the most proactive of the three communities in recognizing and promoting its history of multiethnic cooperation and resistance to ethnic segregation through official channels, linking it to its antifascist history of WWII, as well as to its current political orientation. In the region of Gorski Kotar, there are sporadic attempts to commemorate significant moments of successful resistance to ethnic divisions and violence during the 1990s, such as the nonviolent withdrawal of the Yugoslav People's Army on 5 November 1991, or the handover of arms from Serb communities

to the official police forces of Croatia in 1992. However, these efforts are not receiving the deserved attention or recognition, but are mostly met with indifference or skepticism. In addition to the persevering nationalist discourses and supra-local level, another potential contributor to the lack of promotion of memories of the positive past in the three localities is their current difficult current socio-economic circumstances – including brain drain, deficient infrastructure, and similar – requiring these communities to prioritize present-day challenges over the positive memories of the past.

The rapid development of the field of memory studies and the diversity of innovative approaches to public memory present opportunities for the promotion of the memory of positive interethnic relations. Furthermore, the renewed interest in finding effective tools for dealing with widespread violence, triggered by the recent increase in prominent violent conflicts, presents another opportunity to boost visibility and the potential positive impact of these narratives. Non-formal education opportunities, as well as highly motivated educators in the formal educational system, are another avenue that has yet to be sufficiently explored and mobilized.

D. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this research indicate that the positive inter-ethnic past can be a powerful resource for ethnic violence prevention which can be deliberately mobilized to promote non-violent political agendas, at least at the community level. This conclusion is rooted in the analysis of the experiences and narratives of three ethnically mixed communities which, during the 1991-1995 violent conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, strategically deployed memories of their own positive inter-ethnic past to refute dominant discourses of division, reduce tensions among

community members of different ethnic belongings, promote shared-responsibility and instigate hope instead of fear.

However, such positive experiences and the related narratives remain absent from public memory spaces in both countries, while the three communities struggle with their preservation and promotion at the local level.

Due to the significant positive impact that they can have on present and future of multi-ethnic societies, there is a need to mobilize several actors in the society to ensure that memories of good things, i.e. narratives of lived experiences of positive inter-ethnic past, are preserved and promoted. It is therefore recommended:

To scholars engaging in the study of modern history and society of the former Yugoslav space:

- To look beyond the dominant narratives of ethnic divisions and violence and document further cases of deployment of positive inter-ethnic memories at all levels;
- To study the dynamics of non-occurrence of violence during wartime and the trans-ethnic and anti-nationalist forms of belonging in former Yugoslavia and beyond.

To actors engaged in the fields of public memory and memory activism:

- To support the communities that successfully resisted ethnonationalist violence in finding ways and means of preserving and celebrating their own experiences and narratives of the positive past;
- To identify and implement creative methods of promoting narratives of (successful) resistance to ethnicized violence and memories of the positive past in public memory spaces at national and trans-national levels;
- To support networking and collaboration between

different communities with positive inter-ethnic memories, within and beyond the post-Yugoslav space.

To authors and decision-makers engaged in the process of writing, reviewing, and/or approving school history textbooks:

- To include experiences and narratives of resistance to ethnicized violence at a community level, as well as at other levels, into history textbooks.

To history teachers and other educators (e.g. those engaged in teaching ethics, civic education, or non-formal education):

- To include the experiences and narratives of the communities who resisted ethnicized violence into their teaching programs;
- To promote critical thinking about the 1991-1995 wars based on those experiences and narratives.

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