

# Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

---

Volume 25

Article 10

---

2020

## Power Structures and Divergent Historical Narratives in Post-Conflict Societies

Christopher Lindrud

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lindrud, Christopher (2020) "Power Structures and Divergent Historical Narratives in Post-Conflict Societies," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 25 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol25/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## **Power Structures and Divergent Historical Narratives in Post-Conflict Societies**

**Christopher Lindrud**

Memory is fickle, as perception of the present often distorts the past. It is with this memory, however, that we shape our identities through personal experiences along with historical narratives told by others about the past. In post-conflict societies, multiple narratives attempting to make sense of the past are often at odds with each other, vying for cultural dominance and official recognition. After the signing of treaties and the restoration of democracy, conflicting narratives linger until they eventually retrograde from the physical realm into the hearts and memories of everyday citizens. Multiple interpretations of the same event may exist, even among members of the same ethnic group, class, or gender. Negotiating divisions between victims, repressors, and intersecting identities is further complicated during the process of commemorating sites of genocide, because the historical narrative must be factual while also taking cultural and political sensitivities into consideration. However, given the inherently divisive nature of memory construction, multiple groups often vie for control of the official historical narrative surrounding a site of genocide as a means to legitimize their political power and solidify their preferred social mores in the wake of the conflict. Ultimately, internal and external power structures impact how sites of genocide are commemorated. The genocide sites at Auschwitz and Srebrenica exemplify how varying levels of international, national, and local support determine which narratives are emphasized or omitted.

*Historical Perspectives*, Series II, Volume XXV, 2020

In 1947, the Polish communist government, under the influence of the Soviet Union, established an official Holocaust museum at Auschwitz at the behest of the Jewish community. While the Jewish Holocaust was mentioned at the museum, Auschwitz soon became a communist propaganda tool, emphasizing “the Red Army’s victory over Nazi Germany rather than presenting the historical truth.”<sup>1</sup> The historical truth, that the Red Army was a part of the Allied war effort and committed wartime atrocities against Poles and various ethnic and religious minorities, was not featured at the museum. Eventually, the significance of the Jewish Holocaust was diminished. Instead, Auschwitz became “an important symbol used in legitimating new geopolitical alliances...by emphasizing Nazi Germany’s crimes, moreover, Communists were minimizing the Soviet Union’s own offenses...against its own civil population or Poland’s.”<sup>2</sup> Controlling the historical narrative surrounding Auschwitz became a critical propaganda tool for the Soviet Union; they casted themselves as the ultimate victors and valiant saviors of Eastern Europe, therefore legitimizing the continued post-war Soviet dominion over the region.

Under the heavy-handed influence of the Soviets, the Polish communist government suppressed the wide range of religious and ethnic affiliations within Poland in favor of a singular, unifying communist identity. The memorial site at Auschwitz is one key example of the government’s attempt to promote communist unity. By suppressing the Jewish Holocaust narrative in favor of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Sommer, “Auschwitz Today: Personal Observations and Reflections about Visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and Memorial,” *Dans Les Cahiers Irice*, no. 7 (2011): 87–94.

<sup>2</sup> Genevieve Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Communist Poland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 104.

Soviet friendly and politically convenient “triumph over fascism” narrative, the government erased and replaced Jews’ unique Holocaust narratives, as well as those of other marginalized religious and ethnic groups. For example, a Polish communist propaganda publication in 1963, *The Victims of Fascism*, listed the groups interned at Auschwitz as “Americans, Austrians, Belgians, Britons, Bulgarians, Chinese, Croats, Czechs, Dutchmen, Egyptians, Frenchmen, Germans, Greeks, Gypsies, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, Letts, Lithuanians, Norwegians, Persians, Poles, Romanians, Russians (and other citizens of the Soviet Union), Slovaks, Spaniards, Swiss, Turks, and Yugoslavs.”<sup>3</sup> Communist propaganda represented Jews as if they were just one of many groups pursued in the Holocaust rather than the primary target. The communist government also represented Poles as one of *many* victims, though Polish nationalists favored a narrative recasting themselves as the *main* victims. Although both groups were officially recognized as victims, Jews and Polish nationalists alike resented their diminished victim status, which equated their suffering to that of much smaller groups like the Chinese or Persians.

Auschwitz became a quasi-mythicized propaganda tool and focal point of pro-communist, anti-capitalist political rhetoric. Speaking to a crowd of thirty thousand enthusiastic civilians in 1950, the Vice Premier of the Polish communist government, Antoni Korzycki, spoke of the concentration camp as “the wild beast representing capitalist imperialism in all its hideousness that revealed itself...that is why it is no accident that on this day, the fifth anniversary of the liberation of anti-fascist fighters around the world we hold here, on the fields of Birkenau, a commemorative

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

ceremony.”<sup>4</sup> Communist politicians used the tangible remains of Auschwitz to promote an intangible, ideological dichotomy between the Soviet communist heroes and the capitalist Nazi villains. Auschwitz was used as a political tool to both validate the acclaimed merits of the new Polish government and to propagandize the potential dangers of rogue capitalism supposedly championed by the West.

When Polish nationalists objected to the communist narrative, the communist government attempted to appease them by validating their victim narrative by portraying “Polish Citizens” as martyrs and the Soviets as their valiant savior from fascism. As the Soviet-sympathizing Poles consolidated power within the Polish government, “the Jewish experience of the war became politicized and saw its fate landed with that of the Polish experience.”<sup>5</sup> Jewish history was absorbed into the larger Polish history, as Auschwitz became a place that exclusively persecuted “Polish citizens” rather than Polish Jews. The communist government allowed the Polish nationalist victim narrative to exist at Auschwitz as long as it did not undermine the overarching Soviet hero narrative; however, minority groups without a politically useful narrative, like the Jews, were omitted from the historical narrative of Auschwitz. Although Soviet ideology explicitly rejected ties to both religious and national identities—in favor of promoting an overarching and globally unified communist identity—the Soviets leveraged the political convenience of the Polish nationalist narrative. On one hand, the Polish nationalist narrative amplified anti-German and anti-Western sentiment, two

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Sommer, “Auschwitz Today,” 87–94.

linchpins of Soviet ideology. On the other hand, the Polish nationalist narrative undermined the Jewish narrative, furthering the Soviet stance that religious identity was dispensable and unimportant.

The influential undercurrent of Polish nationalists wanted to twist the historical interpretation of the Holocaust in its favor. These nationalists perceived both the communist government and ethnic minorities, like Jews, as disloyal fifth columns that prevented a sovereign and “ethnically pure” Polish state. Ethnic and political divisions increased in the decades following WWII, with Catholic Polish nationalists growing increasingly suspicious of Jews and communists. Many Jews “supported the communist regime because it promised equality and social mobility, that, after 1945, they were allowed to occupy positions once prohibited.”<sup>6</sup> A minority of Jews adopted Slavic surnames to fit the Soviet mold and to better integrate into an antisemitic Polish society while still privately preserving their religious identities. However, this caused great suspicion among Catholic Poles, who felt threatened by what they considered to be a Jewish elite power play through communist collaboration; “The result was a consolidation of two traditional stereotypes, the Polish-Catholic on the one hand, and the Judeo-Communist on the other...A Polish-Catholic was now, as always, a defender of the fatherland, with its tradition, culture and religion, against the communist power imposed by the Soviets and exercised on their behalf by the Jews.”<sup>7</sup> By attempting to erase religious identities, the Soviets and Soviet-sympathizing Poles stoked fears among Polish nationalists that Jews were secretly

---

<sup>6</sup> Carla Tonini, “The Jews in Poland after the Second World War. Most Recent Contributions of Polish Historiography,” *Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Aleksander Smolar, “Jews as a Polish Problem,” *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (1987): 31–73.

plotting to destroy the “traditional” (i.e., Catholic) Polish identity. Auschwitz became an increasingly important site to validate the Polish nationalists’ martyr narrative, as opposed to the allegedly “unpatriotic” Jewish Holocaust narrative.

Antisemitic suspicion culminated with the 1968 political crisis in Poland. Polish nationalists scapegoated Jews for a myriad of political, social, and economic failures, which were actually products of myopic policies enacted by the communist government. The Polish economy stagnated, and the end of the Prague Spring in neighboring Czechoslovakia heightened ethno-political tensions across the Soviet-controlled region. Subsequently, Polish nationalists perceived internal and neighboring conflicts as evidence of an impending Judeo-communist takeover.

Being integrated into the communist government power structure provided some Jews with a sense of security against the Polish nationalists. However, increasing Soviet-Israeli tensions decreased even politically powerful Jews’ protection. In response to the Soviet Union’s tenuous diplomatic relations with Israel, the Polish communist government, essentially a puppet state of the USSR, launched an antisemitic propaganda campaign, which forced “20,000 Jews to flee the country, leading to the Jewish presence in Poland of 12,000 people.”<sup>8</sup> In the wake of renewed Jewish persecution in Poland, “anti-Semitism, once used as a weapon against the ruling establishment, now serve[d] as evidence that the establishment ha[d] finally broken free from a foreign element. The government was no longer Jewish-cosmopolitan; it had become Polish-national.”<sup>9</sup> Until then, Jews could participate in

---

<sup>8</sup> Tonini, “The Jews in Poland after the Second World War.”

<sup>9</sup> Smolar, “Jews as a Polish Problem,” 31–73.

the political system in Poland, while still remaining subservient to the greater will of the Soviet Union. Yet, once relations between Israel and the Eastern Block soured, Jews were purged from nearly all political institutions in communist Poland.

With an even smaller contingent of Jews remaining in Poland, the Auschwitz Museum became exclusively “dedicated to the commemoration of the international anti-fascist struggle and martyrology...the word Jew could hardly be found at all.”<sup>10</sup> Immediately after WWII, the communist government gave Jewish groups space, albeit limited, to commemorate Jewish victims of the Holocaust. But as the decades progressed, political, social, and economic factors, both internally and internationally, resulted in negative, inaccurate, and myopic portrayals of Jewish experiences of the Holocaust. On one hand, Polish nationalists depicted Jews as communist collaborators. On the other, rather than taking responsibility for its role in perpetuating political and social sectarianism in conjunction with pervasive economic inequality, the communist government scapegoated Jews as the source of the country’s deterioration.

After the 1968 Jewish political purge, Polish nationalists assumed the positions of power left vacant by the expelled Jewish population. Political and ethnic tensions both within the Polish communist administration and Polish society as a whole translated into a paralleled exclusion of the Jewish victim narrative at the Auschwitz Museum. Instead, Auschwitz became a battleground between the Polish nationalist victim narrative and communist “triumph over fascism” narrative. Nationalists and communists vied for power within the national bureaucracy and for the power

---

<sup>10</sup> Jan Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 2006), 243.



to shape the collective memory of the Holocaust at Auschwitz. As tensions exponentially increased between the two groups, both simultaneously sought to suppress the Jewish narrative.

An authoritative national government, marginalized groups' limited access to positions of power, and infighting among nationalists and communists resulted in Auschwitz becoming a propaganda tool rather than a site commemorating all victims of the Holocaust. Although Jewish groups lobbied for a museum to be built at the Auschwitz genocide site, the museum was administered by the Polish government, meaning Jews had little control over their own narrative within the context of early communist Poland.<sup>11</sup> The multi-level power dynamic of communist Poland led to the use of Auschwitz as a vehicle for propaganda that bolstered Polish nationalism and the Soviet communist agenda, both of which eclipsed the suffering of many victims and survivors. Ultimately, whichever group controlled the political direction of post-war Poland also by default controlled the historical narrative of the Auschwitz memorial site.

Identity politics in communist Poland—and the government's control over the official historical narrative of Auschwitz—exemplified how authoritarian power structures justify their rule by shaping the narratives of sites of genocide. Obfuscating the Jewish identity in relation to the Holocaust became a convenient tactic used by both the Polish and communist forces to advance their respective political and social agendas. While the communists used Auschwitz to legitimize their political control over the Eastern Block, the Polish Nationalists used the site to reaffirm their social and cultural dominion by casting the Holocaust as an event which persecuted victims for their national identity rather than religious

---

<sup>11</sup> Sommer, "Auschwitz Today," 87–94.

or ethnic affiliations. Despite representing different interests, the communist and Polish Nationalist narratives aligned to promote an overarching anti-Western and anti-fifth column narrative with which Jews were often associated. Both narratives were able to coexist in relative lockstep because they ultimately permitted both the Polish Nationalists and communists to pursue their respective interests by suppressing the political and cultural influence of minority groups within post-war Poland.

In contrast, in post-genocide Bosnia, a relatively weak and disjointed national government passively made room for grassroots movements to assert their own respective historical narratives. The political landscape of post-war Bosnia possessed a myriad of often overlapping divisions and subdivisions drawn along ethnic lines. The geopolitically divided nature of Bosnia translated into a similarly fragmented collective perception of the past, because sites of genocide against Bosnian Muslims were often within Bosnian/Serbian non-Muslim lands.

Srebrenica, the most infamous site of genocide in Bosnia, lies within the ethnically Serbian administered “Republic of Srepska,” meaning commemorative measures must take geopolitical, historical, and cultural sensitivities into consideration to avoid reigniting latent ethnic tensions. For example, the sprawling white pillar grave sites for the thousands of Bosnian male victims visually alludes to a typical military-style grave site set aside for fallen heroes of war.<sup>12</sup> While attempting to create a somber memorial to the slaughtered Bosnian men, the military-style graves subtly give credence to the Serbian narrative that the conflict was a civil war (rather than a genocide), in which both sides fought on

---

<sup>12</sup> Lara Nettlefield, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43.

equal footing and those who perished died so in the “glory” of the battlefield—instead of defenseless in a mass slaughter.

Women and men suffered different fates in Srebrenica, with women facing sexual violence while men were summarily executed. Despite both groups’ experiences, only men were visibly commemorated. Bosnian culture, however, “associates the sexuality of women with the honor and dignity of the patriarchal family. Within this cultural framework, the violation of a daughter or wife is thus construed as the violation of a husband or father.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, any perceived injustice against a woman was considered as an egregious, and potentially shameful, affront against a woman’s entire family. For example, one Bosnian mother and survivor of sexual violence reported: “[W]e were raised in a patriarchal way. This [Srebrenica] is a small village. I believe they are ashamed to tell their brothers, their children.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, “because the memory of the raped body is marked by personal, familial, and national degradation, memorializing this suffering and honoring those who survived the violence are antithetical to the project of nation building and ethnic pride.”<sup>15</sup> Due to rigid gender expectations, the overarching narrative could not include Bosnian women’s experiences of sexual violence. Additionally, gender expectations limited Bosnian women’s participation in the commemorative process because they could only participate if they were doing so on behalf of the fallen men.

The social upheaval resultant from the genocide required Bosnian women to claim new social roles within their community.

---

<sup>13</sup> Janet Jacobs, “The Memorial at Srebrenica: Gender and the Social Meanings of Collective Memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Memory Studies* 10, no. 4 (2017): 423–39.

<sup>14</sup> Elissa Bemporad, *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2018), 258.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobs, “The Memorial at Srebrenica,” 423–39.

With women vastly outnumbering male survivors, women began to “physically attend the individual burials at the memorial centre...the space has also helped redefine the role of women among the post-war community of Srebrenica. Whereas before the war—before the violent rupture of the genocide—according to traditional Bosnian Muslim practice, women would not have been present in the cemetery for such events, they now take their place at the gravesite as mourners and attendants of the dead.”<sup>16</sup> The social disruption caused by the genocide enabled Bosnian women to take on cultural roles that had traditionally been exclusively reserved for male members of the community. Although still living in a patriarchal society, women were empowered, albeit tragically, to take the commemorative process into their own hands. Thus, Bosnian women survivors directly participated in constructing the historical narrative of Srebrenica, a previously inaccessible cultural opportunity.

To participate in the commemorative process, Bosnian women had to operate within a framework that was palatable to Serbia’s cultural patriarchy. Female survivors organized the Mothers of Srebrenica to commemorate the fallen male members of their families. The group protested the unjust killings of their loved ones and “also conducted an extensive poll in which a vast majority of the respondents supported the creation of a national cemetery in Srebrenica where the remains of their loved ones, once recovered, could be buried.”<sup>17</sup> Advocating on behalf of the fallen males in their community was the only means through which women could also advocate for themselves. With the patriarchal

---

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Wagner, *Tabulating Loss, Entombing Memory: The Srebrenica-Potocari Centre*. (Leiden, UK: Brill Publishing, 2010), 61–78.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs, “The Memorial at Srebrenica,” 423–39.

Bosnian nuclear family unit, an attack on the husband translated into an attack on the whole family. Therefore, women sought to “speak on behalf of the dead, as part of their claim for legitimacy in shaping the future.”<sup>18</sup> By protesting the death of their male loved ones, the Mothers of Srebrenica sought to memorialize the men as an all-encompassing symbol of the family’s suffering.

Even within pro-Bosnian commemorative advocacy efforts, women’s groups disagreed about how to properly memorialize suffering. While the Mothers of Srebrenica advocated for a site to commemorate their husbands, other groups (like the Association of Women Victims of War) wanted to specifically include mass sexual violence into the official narrative, despite potentially offending Bosnian social norms. The Association of Women Victims of War aims “to collect documents and archive materials, to analyze information and data on every aspect of female suffering during the recent war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”<sup>19</sup> By rejecting the official narrative’s omission of sexual violence, “the small organization stands as a kind of counter-memorial to Srebrenica.”<sup>20</sup> While the official narrative still perpetuates the patriarchally imbedded view of female survivors as mothers lamenting the loss of their male family members, the existence of groups promoting a counter-narrative is critical to Bosnians’ collective memory because the groups provide an alternative means through which more survivors’ experiences are validated with greater nuance and visibility.

The disjointed, decentralized, and relatively weak nature of the Bosnian national government created a power vacuum wherein

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

multiple grassroots advocacy organizations could unify and lobby for their respective interests, unlike communist Poland's more authoritarian and centralized society where strong governmental institutions hampered citizen influence. While there were challenges to the overarching narrative promoted by the influential Mothers of Srebrenica, Serbian nationalists constructed Karvica, an alternate memorial site near Srebrenica, which promotes a narrative that Bosnian Serbs, rather than Bosnian Muslims, were the true victims of the war. "Rather than building a cohesive national identity around shared experiences of loss and violence, the reclaimed landscapes and commemorative spaces explicitly tabulating loss often exacerbate communal divisions among Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs."<sup>21</sup> Instead of commemorating the war as a tragedy on the national level, each sub-group within the nation commemorated their own, and often conflicting, perception of the war.

The power vacuum created by a disjointed, leadership-sharing political system in Bosnia has translated into a similarly disjointed collective memory within the nation. While the variety of historical narratives allows for all citizens to have their respective narrative validated, by validating all narratives, no single truth prevails. For example, multiple monuments on a single memorial site might commemorate the same event. However, the historical narrative of this single event might diverge greatly depending on whether the monument was meant to capture a Bosnian or Serbian perspective. The absence of an absolute truth pertaining to the genocide has established a system where political and cultural

---

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Wagner, *Tabulating Loss, Entombing Memory: The Srebrenica-Potocari Centre* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2010), 61–78.

divisions are deeply entrenched in Bosnian society, creating generations of distrust among different identity groups.

In both post-war Poland and Bosnia, the collective memory of genocide was divided along ethnic and political lines. The strength and design of government institutions in both countries, and the group in power, determined which narrative reigned supreme, if any. By claiming ownership over the generally accepted historical narrative: Memorialization is one arena in which competing (and occasionally overlapping) actors and interest groups—from the state to civic activist groups, local communities and private individuals—stake their claims to speak on behalf of the dead, as part of their claim for legitimacy in shaping the future.<sup>22</sup>

In post-war Poland, an authoritarian government bolstered by an omnipresent Soviet influence laid the foundations for a pro-Soviet, communist narrative to dominate official discourse, while a strong and widespread undercurrent of Polish nationalism sought to usurp the official narrative of the Holocaust in favor of a narrative that validated a Polish ethno-nationalist martyrdom narrative. Because communist and nationalist forces were vying for cultural, political, and social dominance, as well as control over Auschwitz's historical narratives, victims of the Holocaust with minimal representation within the dominant governmental power structure, like Jews, had little room to advocate for their own narrative.

Conversely, in Bosnia, political infighting amongst Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and relatively disjointed bureaucratic instructions created space for grassroots organizations, like the Mothers of

---

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Jinks, "Thinking comparatively about genocide memorialization," *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 4 (2014): 423–40.

Srebrenica, to assert their own narrative of the genocide. Jewish groups were initially allowed to participate within the power structure in communist Poland, but once purged, their narrative was summarily erased and replaced by the agendas of the communists and nationalists. Women's groups in Bosnia, however, were restricted from participating in the public sphere altogether. Therefore, women's groups had to challenge the dominant societal power structure to successfully bring visibility to their cause. It is important to recognize, though, that the most influential women's group, the Mothers of Srebrenica, still conformed to the cultural and societal expectations of femininity. By casting themselves as mothers lamenting their fallen male family members, they aligned themselves with a more palatable narrative—unlike the more subversive agenda of the Association of Women Victims of War—to promote a narrative that officially recognized sexual violence. The Jewish groups in communist Poland and women's groups in Bosnia advocated for their respective interests within the political and social constraints of their society. However, the weak and disjointed power structures in Bosnia enabled grassroots organizations to supplement their own narratives, whereas the strong authoritarian institutions in communist Poland prevented minority group narratives from competing with more widely accepted ones.

In post-conflict societies, the challenge of consolidating a single historical narrative parallels the challenge of reconstructing political institutions. The power vacuums left in the wake of genocide often create space for an overarching societal reordering, and the group which rises to the top of the newly formed power structures ultimately gets to claim ownership over the official historical narrative of the past conflict. Memory politics



surrounding Auschwitz and Srebrenica, in Poland and Bosnia respectively, exemplify how the strength and organization of political institutions in post-conflict societies impact the ability of minority groups to advocate for their interests. Memory politics in post-conflict societies can take a myriad of forms, but ultimately, the structure of political institutions governing the post-conflict nation determines the level of influence underrepresented groups have in the commemorative process.

**Author Bio:**

Christopher Lindrud graduated in 2020 after triple-majoring in History, Spanish, and Political Science. His research often explores the role of identity politics in history.