

Prijedor: re-imagining the future

Damir Mitrić and Sudbin Musić

Public memorialisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina today is an act of remembering not just those who died in the conflict but also the multi-ethnic reality of earlier times. Articulation of this, however, is being obstructed in cities like Prijedor.

The political elites of post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have carefully patrolled their respective histories of 'what happened' during the war, with school curricula, public broadcasting, public events and memorial sites on all sides mostly narrating an un-nuanced story of victim and perpetrator. Imposing an embargo on memories of pre-war BiH has become an important component of this.

In the north-western town of Prijedor, a systematically executed policy of ethnic cleansing resulted in the killing of 3,173 residents at the hands of local Serb authorities, with a third executed in the three infamous concentration camps of Omarska, Karaterm and Trnopolje.

The signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995 left Prijedor within the jurisdiction of the Republika

Srpska (RS), with the immediate post-war political leadership dominated by those who had 'ethnically cleansed' the town of its non-Serb population.¹ Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement established the right of all refugees and displaced persons to return freely to their homes of origin, and was generally successfully implemented in Prijedor, in contrast to other parts of BiH; between 1998 and 2003 some 10,000 Bosniaks decided to return to the place of their birth.

However, only 20% of the original Bosniak population has permanently returned. Until 2007, reclaiming and rebuilding destroyed private property had been the primary driver of return. Thereafter returns stagnated, and many of the returnees decided to move across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line into the Bosniak-Croat Federation or to join their relatives in exile across the globe. Their

beautifully renovated houses stand empty in Prijedor for most of the year. With an ageing population and an economy that offers no opportunities for young people – who are increasingly abandoning the town – Prijedor faces the prospect of being emptied once again.

Politics of memorialisation

Equally worrying is the politically sanctioned culture of denial of the war crimes committed against the non-Serb population. Local



Sudbin Musić

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authorities regularly use their political power to interfere with or prohibit public memorialisation. Most prominently, in May 2012 Mayor Marko Pavić instructed the police to stop planned commemorations marking the twentieth anniversary of the killing of 266 women and children in Prijedor and prohibited a further planned gathering on 10th December that year. Meanwhile, survivors of the notorious Omarska concentration camp are still waiting for an official site of remembrance.

In 2004 the local government sold the industrial complex of Omarska to the world's biggest steel producer, ArcelorMittal Steel, which has then denied access to the former concentration camp premises for commemoration purposes on a number of occasions. Most controversial was the company's refusal to allow survivors access to the Omarska complex in 2012 to mark the twentieth anniversary of its creation as a concentration camp in 1992. Only after intense public pressure did the management finally allow the proceedings to go ahead.

The premises of the Omarska complex stand for more than just the killing fields of a bloody war. As the backbone of pre-

war Yugoslav Prijedor, they also embody memories of pre-conflict times. They were places where neighbours worked side by side to secure the prosperity of the municipality, a prosperity shared by all. Thus memorialising what happened in 1992 is also an act of remembrance of the earlier multi-ethnic reality – and it is that re-imagining of the past that local authorities are determined to deny.

The impossibility of reconciling unity and ethnic cleansing lies at the heart of the issue that today's BiH is facing. How could my neighbours have mutated into my killers? The question may be impossible to answer but its articulation in public spaces is a necessary foundation for a future that encompasses all the country's peoples.

Damir Mitrić d.mitric@latrobe.edu.au
Post-doctoral researcher, La Trobe University,
Melbourne. www.latrobe.edu.au

Sudbin Musić sudba8@hotmail.com
Co-founder, Bridges for the Future Association.
www.mojprijedor.com

1. Ito A (2001) 'Return to Prijedor: Politics and UNHCR', *Forced Migration Review* issue 10
www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/textOnlyContent/FMR/10/11.htm

ArcelorMittal Orbit

In a rather bizarre twist, in May 2012 – one month before the opening of the London Olympic Games – survivors of the Omarska camp accused ArcelorMittal Steel of using iron ore deposits from the Prijedor mine in the building of the 115-metre-high sculpture *ArcelorMittal Orbit* for the Olympic Park in London. Claiming that the iron ore had been dug up from the Omarska premises containing bodies of still-missing Bosniaks scattered in unmarked mass graves (a claim the company denied), survivors appropriated the sculpture as their Omarska memorial-in-exile.

For Bosniak survivors, the *Orbit* expresses the grief they are unable to share publicly in their home town, and casts a longer shadow back to a time when they could never have imagined the loss to come. Its proximity to the London Olympic flame and even its shape trigger memories of the Sarajevo Olympics in 1984 – when today's 'victims' and 'perpetrators' were neighbours in a country which proudly looked outwards to the world to showpiece its multi-ethnic society. The *Orbit* also represents the economic devastation of Prijedor experienced by today's unemployed returnees; the iron ore which once was the safety net for a prosperous town is now controlled by a multinational company.

