

**Beyond Event Only?**  
**Processes of Conflict Transformation and Memory Politics/Slow Memory after Conflict**

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**Introduction**

In this short Working Paper, we seek to lay the ground for the forthcoming discussions of Working Group 4 (Transformation of Conflicts) and its engagement with the explorations of *slow memory* as well as its implications and possible contributions to the study of conflicts and their transformation(s). Conflicts, especially as they reach the stage of fully fledged wars, are dominated by dramatic events, from battles to heroes and victims and to the inevitable peace agreements – as well reflected in the memorialization practices throughout the past few centuries. Monuments, commemorations, museums, and textbooks, to name just a few elements of cultural memory (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995), were created around specific events. While these individual events help construct the narrative mosaic which allows us to make chronological sense of the past, focusing on them may also obscure additional and at times deeper meanings and transformations that occur during conflict and in its aftermath.

**We therefore ask:** Is it possible to remember conflicts as *slower* processes without only spotlighting *fast* events? What forms of memorialization lend themselves to slow memory?

**We aim to put forward and develop the following argument:** While the concept of slow memory of conflict, as well as memory beyond events, can be applied to *what* is remembered, the *way* something is remembered is equally worth reflecting upon.

**We argue** that our inquiries as memory scholars engaging with critical conflict studies may be enriched and broadened if we go beyond events only. We can begin by tracing the processes of change towards conflict transformation (Lederach 1997) or peace formation (Richmond 2013), be it through the analysis of generational shifts, of various sites of memory, of graffiti in our cities, or of alternative commemorative events put forward by memory activists as part of their mnemonic contestations with state sponsored hegemonic remembrance. By turning our analytic lens beyond events, we can also detect the absences and lack of engagement with conflict transformation and peacebuilding platforms by the state and other official actors.

We begin first by putting forward our *working definitions* to the study of conflict transformation, grounding our arguments in critical peace and conflict studies. As such, we approach John Paul Lederach's frameworks of Conflict Transformation as the first local turn in the literature on peacebuilding (from the 1990s), followed by later local turns which engage critically with the weaknesses and shortcomings of the 'liberal peace,' and consequently with the study of everyday peace. The local turns in peace and conflict studies in fact allow us to study the complex interaction between everyday dynamics and existing institutional frameworks in societies affected by conflict (Kostovicova, et al 2020). The local turn in peacebuilding is part of a broader re-examination of

the “civic emancipatory graduation of peace,” which methodologically encompasses top-down and bottom-up practices and initiatives (Richmond 2006). Peace formation, according to Richmond (2013), therefore relates to “processes where indigenous or local agents of peacebuilding ... local political or local government settings, find ways of establishing peace processes and dynamic local forms of peace...” (Richmond 2013, 383). Scholars of critical peace and conflict studies have called for a shift in emphasis from the state, its institutions, and its elites to communities and citizens (Mac Ginty and Richmond as quoted in Kostovicova et al 2020). Memory scholars immersed in critical peace and conflict studies, similarly seek those complex meeting points of state administered memory, memory work, and memory politics from below, and the opportunities those give us to trace the slower pace of what we stated above, the *what* as well as the *how* in the processes of cultural memory framework of our inquiries.

We then seek to engage critically with Jenny Wüstenberg’s dichotomy of the conventional and unconventional ways of studying memory in the aftermath of violence, as proposed in her introductory text “Towards Slow Memory Studies” (2022). More specifically, we want to build upon her argument that “we must learn to recognize slow or uneventful processes – even when they do not take the form of slow violence – and how they are remembered in both conventional and unconventional ways.” As we will show, such processes have been studied over the years by memory scholars yet may have been framed differently. As Ann Rigney has argued at the June 2022 COST Action meeting in Portland, UK, “cultural memory studies have always been about slow memory.” Nevertheless, while scholars have studied the processes and the long *durée* of memorializing conflicts, other mnemonic actors have often been locked into remembering only events that ultimately impact how post-conflict societies deal with difficult historical periods and even more so, their legacies in the present.

Indeed, while scholars have already been exploring the slowness of these processes in their writings, **our aim in this working paper** is to propose some directions for further developing a framework of those processes (both methodologically and empirically), that can be incorporated into our conflict analysis and conflict transformation inquiries. This framework may guide us in our ability to trace the changes within these processes as being shaped over time, with the focus of our studies of post-conflict societies, and their mnemonic shifts. Slow memory scholars can thus more prominently trace the “historiographies and genealogies” of commemorative practices that reflect the changing socio-political conditions often impalpable to the individuals and groups driving the remembrance activities.

What does this inquiry (of slower processes) mean for peace and conflict scholars working in the field of memory politics? We argue that some scholarly work tracing memory from below, such as memory activism, and particularly the study of generational shifts in the analysis of commemorative rituals and practices have in fact already been tracing *slow processes* of change, in other words operating as scholars of slow memory.

Conflict transformation processes in societies infected by deep states of denial and silence, have entailed decades of very slow changes taking place as in the case of post-dictatorship Spain (Aguilar and Ramirez 2019), post-dictatorship Chile (Ros 2012) or in anti-denial civic alternative commemorations as in the case of Serbia and some of the other successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Fridman 2022). In tracing such generational shifts, slow methods are in place, and

slower data collection over a longer period of time, underline the analysis of processes of change, some of which are slow (occur slowly or are traced slowly) rather than the analysis of events only to frame the discussion. In searching for research and empirical evidence that goes beyond events only, we then also wish to enhance our discussion to go beyond the conventional/non-conventional dichotomy and propose the need for us to engage with additional empirical evidence to emerge, as related to our fields of study.

While the claim for slow memory as put forward in our COST action (<https://www.slowmemory.eu>) comes across as clearer or sharper in the study of environmental transformations, as well as labor and wellness, conflict and difficult pasts are at the heart of the field of memory studies since its inception, and while they may generate less immediate evidence of these slow memory processes, there are enough to make them significant and traceable. In what follows, we will therefore feature some empirical evidence that could be further explored comparatively by members of WG4 as related to their work and research.

### **Researching Memory and Conflict in the Post-Yugoslav Successor States**

As we enter the discussion of our empirical evidence from the post-Yugoslav space, we emphasize the need for us to incorporate into our analysis the investigation of the question '*how do conflicts end?*' Did they end with a peace process or a peace agreement allowing the formation of platforms for conflict transformation/peacebuilding processes? Or did they only generate new realities of frozen and unresolved conflicts, that generated socio-political environments that are still dominated by the same ethno-national politics that were among the root causes of the conflicts to begin with. Our research shows that in most cases, rather than its transformation, memory politics in the post-Yugoslav space represent a continuation of war, this time through mnemonic practices both formal and informal, from state-sponsored performative commemorations to the semi-legal muralization of the conflict.

In the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the post-war socio-economic realities were defined by externally imposed peacebuilding processes (or a lack thereof) and weak peace agreements such as the Dayton Agreement (see Mlinarević and Porobić 2021). Additionally, the absence of an agreement at the end of the war in Kosovo (Ejdus 2019; Visoka 2017; Fridman 2020) means that memory studies scholars are facing an additional layer studying *frozen conflicts* while tracing slower changes as they occur from below. Nuancing our understanding of the types of conflicts scrutinized requires additional attention to the question 'How conflicts end?' In that sense, this question should then be followed with the exploration as to what platforms are visible for the administration of memory (state sponsored), or for civic engagement with memory (from below). The dynamics between the two can also be traced through the lenses of slow memory, as it evolves over time.

### **Tracing Slow Memory Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Space**

#### **A) Beyond the violent break up: tracing (erased) shared pasts**

Research on commemorative practices in Croatia (Pavlaković and Pauković 2019) and Serbia (Đureinović 2020) show how the two Yugoslav states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are primarily remembered

through their violent disintegrations. As Pavlaković (2020) and others have noted in research on memory politics in Croatia, the battles of Vukovar (1991) and Operation Storm (1995) represent the powerful emotions of victimization and then victory, the twin pillars that fuel the official narratives of the Croatian War of Independence (known in Croatia as *Domovinski rat*, or the Homeland War) and political discourse. This approach of remembrance consequently shapes domestic politics, especially regarding the Serb minority in Croatia, and international relations, namely with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The two dominant events overshadow all of the other processes that occurred from the end of socialist Yugoslavia until the Dayton Peace Accords brought that phase of the Yugoslav Wars to an end and leave little space for alternate interpretations of the 1990s. The Croatian Serb community, excluded from the main commemorative events for nearly three decades, was finally integrated into the remembrance activities of Operation Storm in 2020. Most importantly, representatives of the Croatian government and even the president attended commemorations of Serb civilians killed in the aftermath of military operations in the summer of 1995, representing a major symbolic step forward in dealing with the past. Nevertheless, these performative moments were tied to specific events from the war that were ignored in subsequent years, essentially turning the clock back to the previous practices of each ethnic group remembering their own victims (and heroes).

Peace initiatives are obscured by the militarized scenes from the battlefields, the victims of the catastrophic economic transformation are hidden by images of atrocities committed by the enemy, and the everyday efforts of survival, interethnic cooperation, and rebuilding are lost in the drama of nationalist flag-waving euphoria. Some scholars have sought to challenge the exclusive ethno-nationalist conflict narrative of Yugoslavia's collapse (Cvek 2016) and more nuanced analysis of socialist Yugoslavia (Archer, Duda and Stubbs 2016), but beyond the efforts of the NGO sector the majority of the historiography is dominated by studies that do not stray far from the war narrative.

With the focus on the destruction of the common state, there is also little room to remember the slow processes of Yugoslav unification. Contemporary ruling regimes in successor states in their memory politics have largely sought to erase any sense of continuity with Yugoslavia, or with the shared lives and identities it generated. This is not to suggest that there should be efforts to recreate Yugoslavia or suggest that everything was ideal under socialism, but by including reflections on the reasons why there were desires for a common South Slavic state in memorialization practices (museums, education, sites of memory) it will be possible to foster an interpretation of the region not only as a place of conflict, but also of cooperation, exchange, and tolerance and even of commemorative solidarity (Athanasios 2017; Fridman 2022). An example of memory-making for an international audience is the fascinating documentary film series *Death of Yugoslavia* (1995, BBC), which remains a fundamental component of course syllabuses to this day. While *Death of Yugoslavia* undoubtedly provides a fascinating insight into the political chess match conducted by Yugoslavia's political class as the country slid into war, it exclusively portrays the story of opportunistic elites moving their pawns towards a seemingly inevitable military confrontation without revealing the alternative processes from below which could have minimized the violence if not prevented the dissolution entirely. The Slow Memory approach can tease out these overlooked actors and processes that are equally important to the dramatic events at the top.

For Croat-Serb relations, memory practices based on events inevitably churns up opposing lists of battles, murders, atrocities, expulsions, and other grievances blamed on ‘the Other’. For Serb Albanian relations, exclusively ethnicized deep divisions, as in a case of other frozen conflicts, obscure the efforts of actors to go beyond ethnicity only, and imagine a shared future, in spite of a very violent past, and a present stalemate.

### **B) Beyond ethnicity only and politics of victimization: tracing memory from below and commemorative solidarity**

Fridman (2022) has argued in her recent work the need to address the post-Yugoslav space as a *region of memory activism*. If we approach the region as a region of memory and more precisely as a region of memory activism, we can identify slower steps demanding change and transformations, through the production of alternative knowledge about the recent past, otherwise dominated by historical revisionism (see Škorić and Bešlin 2017; Benčić, Odak and Lucić 2018; Subotić 2019; Trajanovski et al 2021) as well as across the region by the ongoing glorification of war criminals, who are being welcomed home as celebrities after serving their sentences (Hola and Simić 2018). In the search for heroes (rather than war heroes), the shared past is being scrutinized by younger actors born during or after the wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia (the wars of the 1990s) and *memory of activism* emerges as an important and novel engagement with cultural memory and slow memory too. As the actions and works of anti-war activists were quickly erased from not only collective memories but also urban public spaces (as street names, names of schools and state/city institutions etc.), the slow emergence of those through *memory of activism* (Rigney 2018), goes well beyond events, to also remember ideas of alternate futures, the political positions of feminist, anti-militarist, and anti-nationalist struggles (Fridman 2022). Finally, the creation of, and participation in, alternative commemorative events, which insist on the deconstruction of dominant narratives of victimization and exclusive ethnic belonging, opens up spaces for commemorative solidarity in the region (Ibid).

As marginal as some of these claims and actions may have been, and still are today, they allow us to reflect on the future of conflict transformation(s) as other wars are being waged in Europe today. The post-Yugoslav experiences then begs the question: In which way, if at all, will the Russo-Ukrainian war resisters be remembered? If so, by whom? Will the memory of anti-war claims and positions in Russia since 2022, as well as those in political exile, be able to be recovered, or will they slowly fall into oblivion?

While today’s actions and claims from below do tackle the past, they should additionally engage with present inequalities and with calls for social change in the region emphasizing broader claims from below, such as environmental issues, socio-economic inequalities, and the decline of democracy/rise of populism. These claims, as well as the mnemonic demands, cannot take a stand for transformation on the local or national levels only, and therefore are well-positioned in the post-Yugoslav space as a *region of memory activism*, and of broader agendas of activists in times of uneven and accelerated change.

## Continuing the discussion/Future explorations

**While slow memory and conflict, and thinking about memory beyond events, can be applied to *what* is remembered, the *way* something is remembered is likewise worth reflecting upon.**

Statues and classical monuments try to capture a single event in stone or metal, freezing the actors into a pose that tries to convey the entirety of their past. A recent example that exposes the limits of monumental plastic is the Women's Rights Pioneers Monument in New York City. The monument depicts Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, three important pioneers of the US suffrage movement. The positioning of the figures and their actions elicited controversy and debates (Sojourner Truth was added later), which touched on issues of systemic racism and discrimination in the US (Thompson 2022, 155). The positioning of figures in a monument, even if the event itself is positive, can be negatively interpreted, which was famously the case of the Freedman's Monument showing a kneeling slave being 'liberated' by a standing Abraham Lincoln (Savage 2018).

In order to move beyond events, perhaps monuments need to be abstract and timeless, as the Yugoslav socialist modernist monuments are shown in the science fiction film *The First and the Last Men* (2020). Or, perhaps in alternate media, whether in the digital sphere or as murals, can help us remember beyond events.

These initial reflections have been based on previous experiences of research in Croatia, Serbia, and other Yugoslav successor states, but there is a need to continue the discussion and offer more comparative case studies, from Northern Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other case studies as well, to compare with other post-socialist countries and processes currently taking place in the United States.

We end with bringing forward Ann Rigney's words of caution from the June 2022 meeting in Portland which may be further discussed as our explorations of the transformation of conflicts go on. Firstly, let's not think of slow memory as a single thing, rather we can think of different paces (and there are many). And secondly, let's not always think that slowness is good (colonialism and patriarchy always go a long way). This may also help us avoid the dichotomy of the conventional and unconventional ways of studying memory in the aftermath of violence, yet deepen our discussions on the possible contribution of slow memory studies to our inquiries of peace and transformation of conflicts.

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