


REVIEW ARTICLE

Orli Fridman, *Memory Activism and Digital Practices after Conflict: Unwanted Memories*

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A pioneering book on an important novel subject, *Memory Activism and Digital Practices after Conflict* presents a thorough and detailed overview of memory activism in Serbia over the last 20 years, across two generations. First of all, the book traces the transition from anti-war and human rights activism to ‘first-generation memory activism’, by examining the trajectory of the NGO Women in Black created in the 1990s to protest against Serbian nationalism, Milošević’s war policy and Serb war crimes in the Yugoslav wars. The turn to what could be defined as memory activism grew organically out of this initial anti-nationalist and anti-war struggle, gaining traction following the deep disappointment felt by many in the Serbian alternative with the continuities in Serbia’s institutions and social structures after the fall of Milošević in 2000, the official silence and denial of war crimes, and the unfulfilled promises of transitional justice in the region.

Turning to the second generation of memory activism, the book traces the changes in the forms of public action pursued – which since the 2010s came to include not just in-person events but also digital activism, at times with a significant trans-regional component. Here, the book examines the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, along with several other organisations such as the Centre for Public History, which compiles educational materials and organises commemorative tours of war crime-related spaces. An important aspect of this activity is ‘hashtag memory activism’, the use of social media that facilitates collaboration across borders and the construction of an alternative anti-nationalist and victim-focused regional memory of the 1990s. The book highlights the Serbian side of such alternative memory, which is focused above all on countering official silence and denial and seeks to inform citizens, especially younger generations, of what happened during the 1990s.

One of the most original themes of the study is to examine both memory activism itself (especially through the creation of alternative mnemonic calendars and commemorative events) and the ‘memory of activism’ (Rigney 2018). In other words, it highlights the production of an alternative history of Serbia’s recent past by telling the story of the ‘Other’ – civic – Serbia, its resistance to the nationalist onslaught and its anti-war activism, alongside its continuing struggle for human rights and remembrance of all the victims of the 1990s regardless of ethnicity. This story has often been eclipsed in the vast literature on the disintegration of Yugoslavia, its wars, and the postwar period, and Fridman’s book illuminates this less well-known aspect of the region’s recent history.

The book is thus part of what Fridman calls a ‘positive turn’ in memory studies, which in the past did not sufficiently focus on cultural memory of non-violent struggle in what

Carol Gluck calls the ‘vernacular’ field (Gluck 2007). Peace studies scholars have often noted the importance for positive, sustainable peace of the construction of new cognitive frameworks of the past, whereby the narrative of the ‘other side’ in a conflict is incorporated into one’s own narrative – thus changing one’s perception of the ‘other’ in a way that generates empathy and re-humanises them (see e.g. Lederach 1997; Avruch 2010). There have been very few studies of the Yugoslav wars that have been focused on instances of resistance and inter-ethnic support, the ‘good people in an evil time’ (Broz 2005). Rather, the tendency in much of the media commentary and some of the literature has been to present totalising visions of ‘ethnic groups’ opposed to each other and mired in their collective nationalist narratives. Fridman’s book challenges such essentialist visions and speaks to the efforts of Serbian memory activists to act in moral ways during immoral times.

However, as the book notes, these memory activists represent a small minority and the subtitle – ‘unwanted memories’ – is especially apt. The activists described here are agents of ‘counter-memory’ who are contending with a hegemonic, officially supported, and also socially pervasive narrative of Serbian victimhood, in which the 1990s are a key mnemonic signifier. This calls attention to the fact that there is also another type of memory activism in the country competing with official narratives (and silences) in the public space – namely extreme nationalist groups like *Obraz*, ‘1389’ and others that are mentioned in the book. Would their memory activism also be defined as a form of counter-memory, in the sense that it is more extreme than both official and vernacular memory of the 1990s in Serbia? Do their calendars and public mnemonic interventions also represent a marginalised alternative, or are they better understood as a mirror or an extension of the official memory of the wars in Serbia? The broader questions here are how to situate the anti-nationalist forms of memory activism described in the book and to assess how heterogeneous the Serbian mnemonic space is. If we imagined it on a continuum, where would it be placed between a polyphonic memory space, in which different groups (including civic and extreme nationalist memory activists) are competing with each other in the public sphere, and a totalizing memory space in which the civic memory activists described in the book are a small beleaguered minority facing a homogenous and coordinated mnemonic majority, and in which official memory and extreme nationalist groups are best seen as part of a centrally controlled whole?

A related, comparative, question is whether the Serbian mnemonic space is similar to those in other post-Yugoslav states or whether it exhibits unique characteristics, arising perhaps out of Serbia’s only direct war experience of the 1990s being the NATO bombing of 1999, although it was greatly impacted by Yugoslavia’s disintegration and wars in other ways (sanctions, severe economic hardship and isolation, refugees, etc.). More generally, the question that merits to be posed is how the nature of the experience remembered shapes the nature of remembrance.

Finally, memory activism, like all activism, has at its core a normative, transformative agenda. It seeks to impact hearts and minds and, because of the ‘slow’ nature of its normative agenda (as it seeks to shape social memory, which is necessarily a long-term project) it is perhaps more concerned than other forms of activism with its impact on new generations of citizens. Yet, as studies of perceptions of the wars of the 1990s among youth in the post-Yugoslav region show, it appears that the impact on new generations of the kind of memory activism described in the book is really quite low (Kolarić 2023).

In this respect, it might be useful to view counter-memory as the only kind of memory that seeks to abolish itself. In other words, ultimately, the aim of memory activists considering their normative, transformative agenda, is for their counter-memory to become mainstream memory. But how can that happen: what underpinning social, political and structural conditions enable transformative change? What kinds of agency – including

that of the memory activists themselves – are needed for ‘unwanted memories’ to actually become ‘wanted’ in the broader public sphere? These are some of the questions that this stimulating and important book leaves us with.

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