Gendered Memory and Mass Violence: Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Holocaust

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During and after mass violence people's attention tends to focus on the male experience. Media may occasionally use the devastation encountered by women and children to highlight how extreme the violence has become, an attempt to gain empathy and viewership from an otherwise apathetic audience. However, through such coverage, women's experiences during mass violence and identities are often boiled down to victims of sexual violence, widows, or mothers who lost children. Such epithets are certainly a portion of women's identities, however, assigning women a singular label negates other issues they encounter during violence and struggles they face in its aftermath. Subsequently, once a narrative that reduces or erases women's experiences becomes solidified in conduits of collective memory such as memorials, museums, and textbooks it becomes increasingly difficult to alter. The erasure and reduction of women's unique experiences during and after mass violence can be seen in the cases of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, the Bosnian War, and the Holocaust.

Rwanda

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide began on April 6th, 1994, when then president Habyarimana's plane was shot down by an unknown party. In the coming months violence broke out across Rwanda, with Hutu extremists (Interahamwe) targeting and killing Tutsi and Hutu moderates. Estimates gage that between 800,000 to 1 million people were killed in just over 100 days. Additionally, over 2 million becoming refugees while 1.5 million people were internally displaced. After the violence stopped the country was tasked with prosecuting those who had committed crimes of genocide (an estimated 847,233-888,307 were found guilty) and restructuring the state in a manner that would prevent additional onsets of violence. Among Rwanda's solutions were the creation of new laws pertaining to genocide denial, property ownership, legislative gender quotas, and the creation of memorials and state sanctioned commemorations.

Women's experiences during the genocide were distinctive from their male counterparts. Though women participated in the violence, they did so at much lower rates, and most frequently participated in lower-level offenses such as property destruction and looting. Oppositely, many women rescued individuals from the violence, typically in ways that differed from men who rescued. Women often took on household roles that allowed their families to rescue more effectively, such as preparing food for those they were hiding, warning individuals of where killing groups were headed, and even taking in children and infants and raising them alongside their own children. Such work is often framed as 'mother-work', or labor which typically falls onto women as it is primarily comprised of domestic labor.

Women who were targeted during the violence also experienced different forms of violence than men, particularly in the form of sexual violence, including "individual rape, gang rape, rape with objects, sexual slavery or 'forced marriage,' and sexual mutilation". An estimated 250,000-500,000 women were raped during the genocide, with some reports claiming that up to 90% of all female Tutsi survivors had experienced sexual violence at least once during the genocide. Sexual violence in Rwanda was also often used to infect women with HIV, to procure women's families land and possessions, and to create more Hutu children, as ethnicity was passed down patrilineally. Though the widespread use of rape as a tool of genocide is widely discussed both academically and, in the media, the stories of survivors of such crimes often end here as they are frequently omitted in Rwanda from memorials and

commemoration events.

Subsequently, issues faced by survivors of such violence often go unaddressed by the Rwandan government as well as the international community. Women who became pregnant as a result of rape during the genocide grappled with raising unwanted children, who are referred to as "the children of bad memories" in Rwanda. Over 20,000 such children are estimated to have been born after the genocide, often causing great emotional pain for the women forced to raise them and increasing rates of infanticide. The spread of HIV remained largely unaddressed among survivors of sexual assault until the late 1990's and early 2000's, when women began to show symptoms of AIDS. A study from 2004 showed that female sexual assault survivors in certain prefectures had HIV infection rates as high as 66.7%, related to rape during the genocide. The spread was greatly exacerbated by Rwanda's lack of infrastructure and medical professionals to address the issue, as they only had one free AIDS testing center in the county in 1998.

Today the experiences of women during the genocide are remembered primarily through memorials and annual commemoration events. However, at memorials in Rwanda women's experiences often only include, or highly emphasize, their victimization during the genocide, and do not discuss the fate and struggles of survivors afterwards. Likewise, images of women are often used to provoke feelings of nationalism, while frequently excluding women's own personal accounts of violence. For example, at commemorations female survivors (as defined by the Rwandan government) and rescuers alike are less likely than their male counterparts to be permitted to share their stories of the genocide with their community, often because officials worry that their detailed accounts of assault will be too graphic for audiences. Among survivors, women are often not asked to speak at such events as they are deemed too emotional. Among rescuers, women's husbands are often asked to speak in lieu of their partners. These emerging trends are of great concern, as over time Rwandans collective memories of the genocide will rely solely on secondary sources such as memorials, and other's testimonies, things which have begun to converge on a narrative that excludes a wider array of experiences, including women's.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

The Bosnian War began in April of 1992 when the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina voted to secede from Yugoslavia. The conflict was between the three main religious-ethnic groups within the country, the Serbs (Eastern Orthodox), Croats (Catholic), and Bosniaks (Muslim). Over the course of war media coverage called attention to the highly gendered violence used to demean Bosniaks. Women and girls were frequently forced into domestic servitude and subjected to rape camps where afterwards they were detained in order to make them carry enemy children to term. Though men were likewise the victims of sexual violence, this occurred at lower rates, with men and boys often being the victims of concentration camps and mass killings. In July 1995 an estimated 8,000-10,000 Bosniak boys and men were systematically killed at Srebrenica. Shortly after, due to increased miliary pressure from NATO to prevent future mass causalities, the war ended in November 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords.

Today, Bosnia-Herzegovina remains divided both physically and ideologically. The country was partitioned into two parts, the Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose names largely overlap with their respective ethnic majorities. The two sections have remained opposed to each other's political goals, with politicians from the Republika Srpska proposing secession multiple times since the signing of Dayton. Schools in both parts of the country also remain ethnically divided under the "two-schools one roof" policy. Through this policy, children belonging to each ethnic group remain segregated from one another despite attending the same school and learn entirely separate curriculum, particularly in history and language classes. Such partitioning of groups has led to citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina having dramatically different collective memories of the war, genocide denial, and a lack of memorials commemorating those who were killed. This environment, in which genocide denial is common, as is ignoring the history of other ethnic groups, makes uncovering gendered memories of the war even more difficult.

One of the only museums documenting the war and genocide at Srebrenica is the Srebrenica Memorial and Cemetery. This took years of political persuasion and international swaying to be built, as it commemorates the deaths of Bosniaks, and is located in the Republika Sprska. A grassroots women's group, the Mothers of Srebrenica, comprised primarily of widows and mothers who lost sons in the massacre, were behind much of the necessary

political organizing required for this museum and gravesite to exist. However, the memorial has been criticized by gender scholars for omitting the experiences of women and focusing only on the deaths of men and boys. Likewise, when women's experiences are discussed in the case of the Bosnian War they typically begin and end with discussions of sexual assault. Though the targeting of men and boys and sexual violence are important to discuss, women experienced much more during the war.

During the siege of Sarajevo, the longest siege of a capital city in modern history, women were known to resist by setting up counter barricades where they served traditional Bosnian food for civilians. They likewise subverted normal wartime behaviors by maintaining the cities thriving art scene, albeit underground, putting on musicals, art shows, and satirical beauty pageants. Such stories are often omitted from broader discussions of the war and risk being lost among future generations of Bosnians. After the war ended, women became more politically active by running and winning seats in Parliament, creating grassroots organizations such as the Mothers of Srebrenica and Women in Black, and testifying at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) regarding the sexual violence they faced. However, they also faced many challenges related to the loss of male lives and men's return home. The death of male family members resulted in many Bosnian women becoming the heads of households. Likewise, there was a symbolic loss of men, many of whom were traumatized from their experiences during the war turned to substances to cope. These issues were accompanied by a food shortage and resulted in rates of poverty as high as 75% in some parts of the country in 2000.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the most widely recognized genocide globally. Over the course of World War II over six million Jews were killed by the Nazi regime, which created ghettos and later concentration camps where they systematically killed over 2/3 of all of European Jews. Today, there over 50 Holocaust museums and hundreds of memorials globally commemorating the lives lost and aiming to teach future generations about the atrocity. Holocaust education is likewise required in at least 57 countries school curriculum. However, museums, memorials, and textbooks often do not delve into gendered experiences of the Holocaust.

Many women were complicit in the crimes of genocide committed by the Nazi's, with many working at concentration camps or as secretaries and organizers higher up. However, only one woman, Gertrud Scholtz-Clink was tried at Nuremburg. Scholtz-Clink received a three-year sentence, of which she ultimately only served 18 months. This trend of women's roles in orchestrating the Holocaust being ignored also exists on a smaller level. Female members of the Nazi party were often unscathed by stigma in their day to day lives, often having little to no issue finding employment after the war.

Among victims, women's experiences during the Holocaust differed drastically from their male counterparts, though this is often omitted from history texts and museums. In 1933, many Jewish men left Germany or lost their jobs after the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service was passed. In many cases this left women either as the 'breadwinners' or to care for their children and support their families while men looked for safe places to move their families. This caused a disproportionate number of victims of the Holocaust to be women and children, as they had remained in Europe. Likewise, many women saw changes in their daily lives in Europe as a warning sign that anti-Jewish sentiment was growing, often encouraging their families to leave.

Women's experiences in ghettos were also quite different than men's, as they were able to operate in underground movements and hold positions of power with little suspicion from German soldiers. In the Warsaw Uprising, the largest military resistance movement against the Nazi's in World War II, 22% of underground combatants were women. Women's roles in this military resistance were both underscored by men at the time, who often attempted to relegate women to care based tasks instead of actual combat and are largely omitted from historical texts about the uprising today.

At Auschwitz and many other concentration camps, women with young children were immediately sent to gas chambers, unlike man and boys who were typically kept alive for manual labor. Women likewise often had to choose between accompanying their children to death camps or saving themselves, a choice not faced by men.

Within camps, women's experiences were also notably different than men's. As Jewish bloodlines are passed down matrilineally, many women were subject to forced abortions and sterilizations. There are likewise numerous accounts of Jewish women being raped, and over 34,000 were forced to work in brothels that serviced German soldiers. There were also female only concentration camps such as Ravensbrück and Lichtenberg, which have been well documented and differed greatly in the social dynamics used by women to survive. Women often 'adopted' younger girls as their children, nursed sick individuals, and created family like bonds with one another often referring to each other as sisters. Such communal structures were not seen at the same rate among men and boys in concentration camps.

However, today women's experiences during the Holocaust are often forgotten in memorials and museums, or if mentioned are done so as endnotes. In other cases, when they are portrayed, such as at the museum and memorial at Auschwitz, they are portrayed as highly sexualized victims. Though it is true that many women were victims of sexual assault during the Holocaust, such one-dimensional portrayals both denies them their humanity and misrepresents their victimization. Both their omission and their misrepresentation has likewise caused concern among scholars and activists alike, who fear that women's experiences during the Holocaust will be lost to time.

A more nuanced discussion of women's experiences during mass violence from all angles and perspectives, victim, perpetrator, rescuer, and combatants is vital to understanding mass violence. As seen in this article, historically women's experiences have been relegated to discussions of sexual violence or care work. While these are certainly components of what women experience during mass violence, these perspectives limit our ability to understand what women do when their experiences deviate from these preconceived norms. Topics such as *how* women manage care work during atrocities, *what* issues they face in the aftermath of violence, *why* and *how* they resist violence, and *why* they commit violence are all swept under the rug when we do not discuss them in textbooks, museums, and memorials. Ultimately, this leads to their experiences being forgotten and hurts our ability to prevent mass violence as well as aide a large portion of the population during and after mass violence.

About the author:

Anneliese Schenk-Day is a PhD student in Sociology at the Ohio State University. Her research surrounds mass violence, particularly the prevention, prediction, and aftermath of hate crimes on both a national and global scale. Within the context of the United States, she studies hate crimes that target racial and sexual minorities and how climate change and political rhetoric factor into the proliferation of such violence. Globally, her research interests focus on collective memory and gender dynamics after mass atrocities, particularly in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Her M.A. thesis analyzed Rwandan women's exclusion from formal genocide commemoration events, a summary of which can be found here.