



OMARSKA CAMP

Omarska, Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina

44.9440188, 16.8509222



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Executive Summary

Omarska Concentration Camp in Prijedor is notorious for being the site of the 1992 Prijedor Massacre during the Bosnian War; it featured prominently in several trials for the perpetration of international crimes undertaken by the International Criminal Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia. Since 2004, numerous attempts at commemoration for the victims of the camp have been attempted but have been met with an impasse given the tense post-conflict realities in the region. This case study explores the role of commemoration in transitional societies and how the lack of official action can result in victims groups taking on the issue of commemoration without permission from official authorities.

Introduction

Omarska Camp was nominally called an ‘assembly point’ for members of the Bosniak and Bosnian Croat population during the Prijedor Massacre — an ethnic cleansing campaign by the Bosnian Serb political and military elite during the Bosnian War. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) documented that, between May 25 and August 30, 1992, Bosnian Serb forces holding control of the Prijedor district confined more than 3,000 Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats from areas close to Omarska at the camp.¹ The Tribunal established that ‘prisoners had been murdered, raped, sexually assaulted and severely beaten there.’² At the Tribunal, prosecutors even compared Omarska to World War II concentration camps. Since 2004, different efforts have been made to commemorate the victims of the former concentration camp, but as of the writing of this case study, they have been met with little success. Mittal (now named ArcelorMittal), a major steel and mining company, offered to facilitate an initiative to overcome an impasse between the Bosniak community and Serb-dominated local government when they bought a portion of the shares of the Omarska mining complex in 2004. Under pressure from activists and families of the victims of Omarska Camp, Mittal enlisted the help of Soul of Europe, an NGO that mediates in post-conflict areas, to spearhead the memorialisation and mediate between the private company and public interest. Survivors of Omarska as well as their families and advocates argued for a memorial to remember the tragedy that occurred there and to gain recognition for non-Serb civilian victims whose memory was continually silenced by the Bosnian Serb elite.³ Nevertheless, the mediation processes of Soul of Europe quickly became suspect, often silencing voices representing victims and eventually phasing out efforts to build the memorial altogether. As of March 2021, the only sign of commemoration in Omarska are two plaques placed by former detainees and their families without official permission.⁴

Background

The Bosnian War and the Detention Camps in Prijedor

The Bosnian War was one of the ethnic conflicts that arose in the Balkans in the 1990s after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H) tends to be organised along three ethnic lines: Bosnian Serbs, Bosniaks, and Bosnian Croats. Although the Dayton Peace agreement following the Bosnian War ended a brutal war and period of unrest, the new constitution continued to exacerbate the ethnic divisions of the

¹ Ibid.

² Eldin Hadzovic, “Bosnia Marks 19 Years Of Omarska Camp Closure,” *Balkan Insight*, August 6, 2011.

³ Maria Koinova and Dženeta Karabegović, “Diasporas and transitional justice: transnational activism from local to global levels of engagement,” *Global networks* 17, no. 2 (2017): 219.

⁴ Although erected without permission, President Mirsad Duratović of the Regional Association of the Banja Luka Region War Camp Detainees Association explained that they were waiting for the relevant authorities to come forward, at which point they would apply to legalise the plaques.

country. The agreement outlined a consociational democracy with separate entities representing Bosnian Serbs, Bosniaks, and Bosnian Croats. As such, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement furthered an ‘ingrained vision of politics that capitalizes on lingering ethnic resentment to maintain power and a discriminatory status quo.’⁵ The manifestation of that ethnic resentment is overt across the country, extending as far as segregation in the school system. The three ethnic groups shaping Bosnia and Herzegovina, then, are more than just a product of historical tension and animosity as the structural divide is shaped by the country’s own political institutions.

The war started in April 1992, following an independence referendum in B-H, to which the Bosnian Serb political elite were opposed. They feared that independence would lead to their becoming a minority in an Islamic state.⁶ As a result, they retaliated through political engineering, attempting to unite all the municipalities in which they represented the majority population, called the ‘Community of municipalities of northern Dalmatia and Lika with Serb majority’ — a precursor to separation from Croatia.⁷ On April 30, 1992, Bosnian Serb forces seized control of Prijedor municipality in the country’s northeast. Soon after, the Bosnian Serb forces started an ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaign in the region.⁸

During the ensuing socialist period, Omarska terrain was part of an industrial site owned by the largest iron ore open pit in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ljubija.⁹ However, on May 25, 1992, the Omarska Detention Camp officially opened to detain Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats.¹⁰ Established at a meeting chaired by doctor Milomir Stakić, the vice-president of Prijedor Municipality, the camp operated until August.¹¹ While active, the camp held between 2,000 to 3,000 detainees, but the official numbers remain unclear.¹² Data from the Bosnian Association of Detainees, albeit incomplete, estimates that between 3,600 and 6,000 inmates may have passed through Omarska, ‘with at least 800 inmates killed and buried in mass-graves around Prijedor.’¹³ Generally, prisoners lived in a complex of different structures:¹⁴ the so-called ‘hangar’ where detainees lived as it was the largest building, visible in the Cover Image photo; the administration building, where women were kept and brutal interrogations took

⁵Dunja Mijatović, “The Dayton Accords could only do so much,” *DW*, December 14, 2020.

⁶Srdja Trifkovic, “Bosnian War,” in *Oxford Companion to International Relations*, ed. Joel Krieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷Gerald Toal and Adis Masić, “‘Serbs, You Are Allowed to be Serbs!’ Radovan Karadžić and the 1990 Election Campaign in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 3 (2014): 279.

⁸ICTY, “Final Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780”, 27 May 1994: 131.

⁹Manuela Brenner, “The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska,” *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

¹⁰ICTY, “The International Tribunal For The Former Yugoslavia Charges 21 Serbs With Atrocities Committed Inside And Outside The Omarska Death Camp,” ICTY Press Release, 13 February 1995, accessed March 21, 2021.

¹¹Eldin Hadzovic, “Bosnia Marks 19 Years Of Omarska Camp Closure,” *Balkan Insight*, August 6, 2011.

¹²ICTY, “The International Tribunal For The Former Yugoslavia Charges 21 Serbs With Atrocities Committed Inside And Outside The Omarska Death Camp,” ICTY Press Release, 13 February 1995, accessed March 21, 2021.

¹³Eldin Hadzovic, “Bosnia Marks 19 Years Of Omarska Camp Closure,” *Balkan Insight*, August 6, 2011.

¹⁴ICTY, “The International Tribunal For The Former Yugoslavia Charges 21 Serbs With Atrocities Committed Inside And Outside The Omarska Death Camp,” ICTY Press Release, 13 February 1995, accessed March 21, 2021.

place; and two smaller structures, known as the 'White House' and the 'Red House,' where prisoners were beaten and tortured.¹⁵

Omarska Camp closed on August 21, 1992, when the last group of detainees was transferred to Trnopolje detention camp.¹⁶ The visit of journalists Ed Vulliamy from *The Guardian* and Roy Gutman from *Newsday* exposed the atrocities taking place within the camp, initiating the path towards its closing.¹⁷ For some, the images evoked memories of the German concentration camps, and Omarska quickly became a symbol of the horrors of the Bosnian War.¹⁸ The stories and images published by Vulliamy and Gutman provoked the United Nations (UN) investigation of the war crimes committed during the conflict and the closure of the camps after the international uproar.

The End of the War and the Bosniaks' Return to Prijedor

The war ended with the signing of the The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio in the United States on November 21, 1995. The Dayton Accords divided B-H into Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a central government in Sarajevo.¹⁹ District Brčko, a region with greater ethnic diversity, became an additional condominium to the two entities in 1999. The District Prijedor municipality became part of the Republika Srpska. After the war, its ethnic make-up changed to a large Bosnian Serb majority,²⁰ resulting in a post-war local government dominated by Bosnian Serbs with only a token representation of Bosniaks. Despite a hostile political climate in the late 1990s, many Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats started slowly returning to the region as well. Prijedor had a remarkably high rate of return compared to other parts of Bosnia.²¹

Before 2004, there were no official attempts to commemorate the former camp. Bosnian Serb authorities were in charge of the land and refused to recognise the atrocities committed at Omarska nor to erect any memorials for the Bosniaks.²² In fact, the local authorities built several monuments for Bosnian Serb soldiers killed during the war.²³ The only commemoration of the camp was a gathering of former detainees, families of the victims and members of the Bosniak diaspora twice a year on May 25 and August 6, marking the opening

¹⁵ To know more about the functioning of the camp please see: Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

¹⁶ Emina Dizdarevic, "Bosnians Mark 25 Years Since Omarska Camp Closure," *Balkan Insight*, August 4, 2017.

¹⁷ Kelly D Askin, "Omarska Camp, Bosnia: Broken Promises of "Never Again"," *American Bar Association*, January 1, 2003.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Srdja Trifkovic, "Bosnian War."

²⁰ Julia Dowling, "Facing the past in Prijedor: a case study of local transitional justice initiatives," MA Diss. University of Sarajevo (2011).

²¹ Monika Nalepa, "Reconciliation, refugee returns, and the impact of international criminal justice: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Transitional Justice* 51, (2012): 327.

²² Sebina Sivic-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac: Agency, Reconciliation and Contested Return in Post-War Bosnia*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 80-81.

²³ Ibid.

and the closure of the camp, respectively. This commemoration started on May 24, 1999, thanks to the impulse of local women's association *Srcem do Mira*, supported by the British-based women's network Hazelwood. The organisation holds an annual ritual of tree-planting to mark the anniversary of the attack of Prijedor as well as a conference and visits to former camps Omarska and Trnopolje.²⁴

History of the Contestation

Acquisition by Mittal

In August 2004, the Indian-owned multinational steel company Mittal bought 51% of the shares in the Omarska mining complex, The remaining 49% were held by the RZR New Ljubija company owned by Republika Srpska.²⁵ Mittal's investment was crucial for the local government as the mine was one of the leading employers in Prijedor. The company originally presented a commitment to social responsibility in regards to the Omarska Camp controversy, agreeing to allow survivors free access to the site and to build a memorial to its victims.²⁶ As such, the Bosniak community was optimistic that they would be able to make progress in the commemoration following this acquisition.

The Survivors' Petitions

After Mittal's acquisition and the imminent reopening of the mine, survivors and family members of victims started to contact the new owners. Their main concerns were installing a monument to commemorate the victims and notify the company of the possibility that the mass graves could still be located in the area.²⁷ Three separate petitions were sent to Mittal for a memorial.²⁸ The Association of Camp Inmates wrote the first, the Bosniak diaspora in Birmingham sent the second, and Satko Mujagić and his Dutch-based NGO *Optimisti* sent the third. All three asked for a memorial in Omarska and expressed concern that bodies might still be buried at the mine site.²⁹

The petition from Satko Mujagić, representative and founder of the Dutch-based organisation *Optimisti 2004*, and Edin Ramulić, representative of Prijedor-based NGO IZVOR, suggested the authorities allow survivors and relatives to rent the White House area and receive permission to build a memorial there. In 2005, after a meeting with Roeland Baan, Mittal Chief Executive Officer for Europe, it was agreed that the White House would remain

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Arcelor Mittal. "Our History", ArcelorMittal Prijedor, accessed March 21, 2021 ; "Rudnici Željezne Rude Ljubija a.d. Prijedor", RZR "Lubija" Prijedor, accessed March 21, 2021, <http://rztljubija.com>.

²⁶ Daria Sito-Sucic. "Bosnia camp survivors protest for memorial at ArcelorMittal mine." *Reuters*, August 6, 2012.

²⁷ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

²⁸ Ed Vulliamy, *The War is Dead, Long Live the War*, (London: Vintage Publishing, 2013).

²⁹ Ibid.

untouched and would be turned into a memorial centre. Additionally, public access to the former camp would be granted any day – but mainly on the commemorative dates of May 25 and August 6.³⁰

Mittal was concerned about its public image but at the same time did not want to upset the local authority and their employees, who, for the most part, were Bosnian Serbs.³¹ During the visit in 2005, the survivors noted that the White House had been cleaned of the bloodstains and human hair.³² Other buildings, such as the administration building and hangar, had been completely refurbished and transitioned to workspaces. To mediate between Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosniaks, Mittal decided to engage an organisation called Soul of Europe (SoE).³³

Soul of Europe Intervention

Mittal commissioned Reverend Donald Reeves and Peter Pelz — leaders of Soul of Europe³⁴ — to create a process of mediation that would result in a 'satisfactory outcome to a potentially destabilising situation.'³⁵ Mittal paid Soul of Europe £100,000 to achieve this vision of mutual appeasement.³⁶ Their first main actions were to invite all involved parties to create a 'reference group from the international community for advice and reflection,'³⁷ formed by representatives from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Office of the High Representative (OHR), and the United Kingdom's ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, the 2005 meeting included survivors, representatives from the workers and management of Mittal, politicians and influential local regional and national leaders. Notably, however, they were divided into Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb subgroups; each worked on an individual proposal for a memorial.

The disagreement started quickly. One of the main issues was that SoE focused more on the process of mediation than on a solution and erection of the memorial, which led to varied and changing ideas about what a monument should be like. The ideas ranged from a foundation for Prijedor, which could be a living memorial,³⁸ to a visitor's centre which would describe the history of the mine from its inception, including events of the Bosnian war,³⁹ or even to an 'oasis of peace' around the White House.⁴⁰ These options did not meet the expectations

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid..

³² Ibid.

³³ Soul of Europe. "Process for the Omarska Memorial Project", Soul of Europe, accessed March 21, 2021.

³⁴ To know more about the Soul of Europe intervention please see: Sebina Sivic-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac: Agency, Reconciliation and Contested Return in Post-War Bosnia*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 80-81.

³⁵ Donald Reeves, „Moral Imagination” (Lecture, Lambeth Palace, London, May 18, 2006).

³⁶ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Peter Pelz and Donal Reeves, *The White House: From Fear to a Handshake*, (Winchester: John Hunt Publishing, 2008): 48.,

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 98.

expressed in the petitions of former detainees and victims' families who asked Mittal for a physical monument in Omarska and strived to keep the site in an unchanged state.

Another aspect of the SoE approach, which yielded criticism from the Bosniak community in the country and abroad, was the inclusion of all three ethnic groups — particularly the Bosnian Serbs — in the planning and decision-making process for a memorial.⁴¹ Most controversially, SoE was trying to bring on board the then-mayor of Prijedor, Marko Plavić.⁴² The mayor was accused though never convicted of war crimes, as he played a role in the taking over of power by Serb forces in 1992.⁴³ SoE also included Boris Danović in the mediation, who worked as a mine manager when Omarska was a detention camp. The Bosniak community expected that survivors and families of the victims would lead the process, including those living in the diaspora;⁴⁴ however, they felt that 'alleged war criminals were granted more influence than themselves.'⁴⁵

Reeves and Pelz describe their approach as creating a 'critical yeast' rather than a 'critical mass:' they aimed to form a small group of influential representatives that could influence the rest of the community instead of conducting widespread consultations.⁴⁶ Such an approach created issues with transparency of the process and its legitimacy. SoE decided on a 'media blackout' during the mediation, so there were to be no public statements about the project before the concluding conference where the outcomes of SoE's work were to be presented.⁴⁷

SoE focused on their work in Prijedor but failed to include the Bosniak diaspora, mainly in the UK and the Netherlands. Members of the diaspora were learning about the progression of SoE projects mainly from bits of information leaked by the Bosniak participants in the mediation. The discussions between diaspora members were conducted online on the 'Kozarac.ba' forum and focused on bringing in more voices.⁴⁸ Reeves and Pelz claimed they had invited Satko Mujagić, who wrote one of the petitions to Mittal, and Kemal Pervanić, an author and prominent member of the British diaspora, but both turned down the invitation because of the Serb involvement and SoE's contacts with the mayor.⁴⁹

Despite numerous efforts by Reeves and Pelz, the local government, represented by mayor Marko Pavić, did not want to engage in the mediation process on SoE's terms. Pavić maintained that the decision about the memorial was ultimately up to him and publicly

⁴¹Soul of Europe, "Process for the Omarska Memorial Project".

⁴² Pelz and Reeves, *The White House*, 48.

⁴³ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

⁴⁴ Petition, "Omarska Memorial Debate," accessed March 21, 2021

⁴⁵ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

⁴⁶ Pelz and Reeves, *The White House*, 115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁸ Sivic-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac*, 136-137.

⁴⁹ Pelz and Reeves, *The White House*, 170.

announced that SoE's conference to reveal the project of the monument had no authority to make decisions about it.⁵⁰

On December 1, 2005, Soul of Europe and participants in their project during the conference in Banja Luka presented their solution for the Omarska memorial. The plan was to turn the White House and the surrounding property into a memorial financed by ArcelorMittal, which was to be separated from the rest of the mine complex.⁵¹ The media received the conference as a success, with a headline in *Times* stating 'British priest persuades enemies to build horror camp memorial.'⁵² In practice, however, SoE had neither formally chosen a final version of a memorial project⁵³ nor held any serious discussion about the ownership and access rights to the land on which the memorial was to be built.⁵⁴ ArcelorMittal and the local government jointly owned the mine site and, as Mayor Pavić publicly stated, the local government did not agree with the solution proposed during the conference.

Failure of the project and subsequent efforts

In February 2006, Mittal decided to halt the project led by the Soul of Europe. As reported by *BBC*, the project was cancelled as 'more extreme voices on all sides have begun to oppose the plans.'⁵⁵ Mittal realised that SoE's efforts would not produce a mutually satisfactory solution.

Shortly after the Conference but before the SoE project was halted, the local NGO IZVOR, along with individuals and organisations abroad such as Satko Mujagić's Optimisti Foundation and Kemal Pervanić, launched a new online petition. They created the website headgroups.com to promote a petition asking for sign-ups from those who voted in favour of a memorial initiated by the survivors.⁵⁶ They reiterated that the construction of a monument should be led by survivors and families of the victims and be a more transparent process.⁵⁷ The petition also implored Mittal to commit to investigating the possibility of mass graves still being at the mine site.

However, since the halt of the SoE project, ArcelorMittal has maintained that the corporation only leases the mine and is not the outright owner of the land. The company therefore has no authority to allow the construction of the memorial.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁵¹ Sivac-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac*, 138.

⁵² Nick Hawton, "British priest persuades enemies to build horror camp memorial," *Times*, November 18, 2005.

⁵³ Pelz and Reeves, *The White House*, 203.

⁵⁴ Sivac-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac*, 138.

⁵⁵ Nick Hawton, "Bosnia war memorial plan halted", *BBC News*, accessed March 21, 2021..

⁵⁶ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 349-372.

⁵⁷ Petition, "Omarska Memorial Debate," accessed March 21, 2021.

⁵⁸ Maria Koinova and Dženeta Karabegović, "Diasporas and transitional justice: transnational activism from local to global levels of engagement," *Global networks* 17, no. 2 (2017): 223.

The Commemoration of May 9, 2011

On May 9, 2011, Murat Tahirović, president of the Union of Camp Prisoners of Bosnia and Herzegovina, planned a commemoration in Omarska. He aimed to organise a round table with different artists and organisations such as Women in Black from Belgrade; however, gaining access to the site posed an immediate issue. The discussions escalated after a group of German students from the Academy of Social Pedagogy in Munich visited the camp as part of a school project but were only permitted to visit the White House. Mittal justified their decision by stating that it was impossible to interrupt production. Afterwards, representatives of the company met with members of the Association of Camp Prisoners 'Prijedor 92' and were denied access to the property on May 9.⁵⁹

Even though they managed to get access, the planned commemoration was subsequently criticised by other local actors. Mayor Marko Pavić claimed that the commemoration might be perceived by Bosnian Serb citizens, who were the majority of the population, as 'a provocative endeavour.'⁶⁰ He added that it would negatively impact people of different ethnic identities. Furthermore, the chosen date of May 9, traditionally celebrated as the Day of Victory over Fascism, tapped into a larger contestation.⁶¹ Holding the memorial on this day would insinuate that the Chetniks — Serbian guerrillas who fought against the Axis Powers in WWII — were also fascist. As the local Bosnian Serbs and veterans upheld this group as anti-fascist, the implications of holding the memorial on this day would yield even greater levels of animosity from Bosnian Serbs towards Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats in the area.

The local Federation of the Veteran's Association of the People's Liberation War of Yugoslavia (SUBNOR) and the local Veterans Association sent an open letter to Mittal and the Ministry of Interior of the Republic Srpska opposing the chosen date. The commemoration finally took place on May 9 but at Kozarac Memorial instead of Omarska Camp.

London 2012, a Monument in Exile

The following year, 2012, a group of former detainees and researchers from Goldsmiths University of London were also denied access to the former Omarska camp 'for health and safety reasons.' They were told that they would need to wait until the commemorations of August 6.⁶² These issues raised the question of who has the authority to permit access the site: Mittal, local authority or both jointly.

Susan Schuppli, a research fellow at Goldsmiths, along with a community of former

⁵⁹ Manuela Brenner, "The Struggle of Memory. Practices of the (Non-)Construction of a Memorial at Omarska," *Südosteuropa* 59, 2011: 367.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Refik Hodžić, "Shadow of London "Orbit" in Bosnia: Steel, Blood, and the Suppression of Memory," ICTJ, accessed March 21, 2021.

detainees and their families, *i.a.* Satko Mujagić and Refik Hodžić, organised a petition to claim ArcelorMittal 'Orbit' – a structure made for the 2012 London Olympics, partly from the iron sourced in Omarska – as Omarska's memorial in exile.⁶³ In a 2012 press release, ArcelorMittal replied that they remained committed to 'finding a long-term solution and will remain prepared to participate in discussions' about Omarska but would not be 'taking sides in this debate.'⁶⁴

Unauthorised Plaques

In 2019, during the commemoration events of August 6, two plaques were placed at the White House.⁶⁵ The plaques were placed without formal permission by the local authorities or Mittal. The company declared itself incompetent to issue such authorisation.⁶⁶ One memorial plaque was placed on behalf of the former detainees of the Omarska camp, and the other was from Prijedor citizens of Serbian nationality who now live and work in Belgrade. Mirsad Duratović, the president of the Regional Association of Detainees of Banja Luka, said they would apply for formal permission if the competent authority reached out to them.⁶⁷

Decision-Making Processes

The SoE strived to be an independent mediator between local authorities and all ethnic groups in Prijedor, represented by their 'influential' members. However, being selective about people who were allowed to partake in the mediation process resulted in a lack of transparency and legitimacy. SoE had also failed to include in the decision-making process the Bosniak diaspora, which plays a very active role in the commemoration of Omarska, gathering there annually in August.

There was also an apparent lack of alignment in the goals of the Bosniak community and Mittal represented by SoE. The former considered erecting a monument in Omarska as a prerequisite for reconciliation with the Bosnian Serb community. Conversely, the latter was more focused on the mediation process itself leading to reconciliation, which would ultimately result in a memorial.

In an attempt to stay 'neutral' and 'impartial,' SoE did not correctly address in their approach the fact that Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats were the victims in Prijedor and Bosnian Serbs the perpetrators. The Bosniak community did not want to exclude Bosnian Serb participants

⁶³ Petition, "Give victims access to Omarska concentration camp ArcelorMittal purchased," accessed March 21, 2021.

⁶⁴ Susan Schuppli, "A memorial in exile in London's Olympics: orbits of Responsibility," OpenDemocracy, accessed March 21, 2021.

⁶⁵ Kozarac, "Postavljene dvije spomen-ploče: Obilježena 27. godišnjica raspuštanja logora Omarska", Kozarac.ba, accessed March 21, 2021.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Fena News, "Anniversary of the closing of Omarska concentration camp – Two memorial plaques erected," Fena News, accessed March 21, 2021.

altogether but at the same time did not think their voice should carry equal weight in the decision-making process.

The current memorial, consisting of two plaques erected without permission, represents a bottom-up initiative undertaken by the Bosniak community of former detainees and families of the victims. However, essential questions about the access to the mine site and preservation of buildings in the mine complex remain unresolved, and there seems to be a lack of will from both Mittal and the local government to engage with them.

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include the private sector's role in addressing contested historical legacies, the importance of taking into account transnational actors such as diasporas, and the importance of accounting for historical roles of various communities, such as the dynamics between victims and perpetrators.

Summary and Conclusions

The case of the Omarska Camp demonstrates the deeply rooted ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the underlying hostility between these groups following the Bosnian War. The memorialisation process for the camp was tumultuous, towing a thin line between the cautious support of Mittal and the opposition of local Bosnian Serb authorities. As of July 2023, Omarska does not have a permanent, officially permitted memorial. Despite initially being willing to participate in erecting a monument in Omarska, Mittal has since backed out and the only remaining option to commemorate the site is the bottom-up initiatives of the Bosniak community.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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