Martyrs, Memory, and Agency: The Social Afterlife of Muslim War Victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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DOI: 10.21104/CL.2026.1.03

Abstract

This article examines the social afterlife of *šehidi* (martyrs) in north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina, analysing how their presence endures through cemeteries, commemorations, and everyday rituals. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, it explores how sites such as *šehidska mezarja* (martyrs' cemeteries), as well as practices such as *dženaza* (funerals) and recitations of Al-Fatiha, articulate absence-presence and sustain continuing bonds between the living and the dead. Engaging with concepts of deathscapes and continuing bonds, the article shows that *šehidi* are not perceived as mere ghosts but act as agents whose remembrance reshape landscapes, politics, and identities. It considers the institutionalisation of martyrdom, the "cult of *šehid*," and the economic and symbolic privileges afforded to survivors' families. By juxtaposing local practices with artistic and transnational memorial projects, the article highlights how the dead continue to influence the living, rendering memory and mourning both intimate and deeply political.

Key Words

Bosnia-Herzegovina, šehidi (martyrs), deathscapes, memory and mourning, absence-presence, martyrdom, commemoration

Acknowledgment

Funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY, № 101095729).

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Jak citovat / How to cite

Hamer, Petra. 2026. Martyrs, Memory, and Agency: The Social Afterlife of Muslim War Victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Český lid* 113, 1: 35–58. https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2026.1.03

Introduction

Over the past two years, while conducting ethnographic research across several municipalities of north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) in the region of Krajina, I have been struck by the sight of fenced properties in which white marble monuments stand in neat rows, identical in shape and size, differing only in the engraved names. These are *šehidska mezarja* (martyrs' cemeteries, sing. *šehidsko mezarje*), the resting places of *šehidi* (Muslim martyrs, sing. *šehid*)[1], victims of the Bosnian war (1992–1995). As Élisabeth Anstett (2023: 673) observed, the establishment of these cemeteries has profoundly reshaped the visual and symbolic landscape of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. They serve not only as sites of mourning but as material inscriptions of political memory, religious identity, and collective loss.

In contrast, the cemeteries of those who died a "natural death" often appear less conspicuous and sometimes even untended. Within post-war Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) tradition, visiting such graves and maintaining them has not carried the same ritual or communal weight as caring for the resting places of *šehidi*. This distinction reflects a broader hierarchy of remembrance, in which the graves of *šehidi* are venerated, while those of the ordinary dead remain largely unattended. I noticed that this hierarchy between *šehidi* and "non-*šehidi"* reflects the post-war intertwining of Islamic renewal and national identity formation, in which religious symbolism became central to Bosniak collective memory and moral order (Bougarel 2007; Bringa 1995). The state and the Islamic Community institutionalised this hierarchy through the formal recognition of *Dan šehida* (Martyrs' Day), celebrated on the second day of *Ramazanski Bajram* (Eid al-Fitr), thereby sacralising the remembrance of martyrs and embedding it within both religious and national calendars (Bougarel 2017; Maček 2009). Additionally, almost every annual commemoration of past wartime events starts or ends with a visit to the local *šehidsko mezarje*.

The proliferation of *šehidska mezarja* and the public attention devoted to them across Bosnia-Herzegovina must be understood within the wider post-war landscape, in which death, memory, and religion have become central to processes of nation-building and moral reconstruction. Following the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, commemorative practices emerged as crucial means through which communities reasserted belonging, articulated suffering, and negotiated legitimacy in a fragmented political and moral order (Bougarel 2017; Maček 2009; Jansen 2015). Scholars have

1 The term *šehid*, derived from the Arabic word *shahīd*, which means both witness (Kovač 2006: 149) and martyr, possesses a complex and layered significance in Bosnia-Herzegovina, encompassing both religious and political dimensions.

shown that religious renewal in this period intertwined with nationalist politics, as the Islamic Community and state institutions sought to sacralise collective memory through rituals and symbols of martyrdom (Bringa 1995; Henig 2012; Mencej 2024). Such practices demonstrate how the boundaries between political remembrance and religious devotion are mutually constitutive, turning spaces of burial and prayer into arenas in which the nation, faith, and moral community are continuously redefined. This article therefore examines three distinct commemorative practices related to *šehidi*, offering a privileged lens through which to explore the entanglement of religion, death, and post-war identity in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As Pamela Colombo and Estela Schindel (2014: 1) note, past atrocities continue to haunt the present, as policies, practices, and subjectivities are shaped by the social production of space. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, cemeteries, memorials, and mass graves are deeply intertwined with processes of nation-building, religious renewal, and personal mourning. Drawing on Aleida Assmann (2008) and James A. Tyner (2014), I argue that such spaces materialise both collective memory and individual loss, while commemorative rituals sustain continuity between the living and the dead. Building on scholarship that explores the agency of the dead and the spatial dimensions of remembrance (Renshaw 2016; Colombo – Schindel 2014), this article employs the concept of the spatial agency of the dead, understood as the capacity of the deceased to shape social relations and moral meanings through their continued presence in physical and ritual spaces. It examines how the presence of *šehidi* continues to influence the social life and moral order in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina through commemorative practices and local engagements with sites of memory.

The main research question guiding this analysis is therefore: How do commemorative practices related to *šehidi* constitute a form of social and spatial agency of the dead in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina? This transformation of commemorative practices can be understood within the framework of vernacular Islam, in which everyday moral worlds intersect with official religious authority and political narratives. As noted by Mirjam Mencej (2024) and David Henig (2012), such vernacular expressions of Islam reveal how local religious practices, moral obligations, and relations with the dead are continuously reinterpreted in response to broader social and historical transformations. This framework provides the conceptual foundation for the discussion developed in the following chapters.

The first part of this article outlines the changing relations with the dead through the lens of vernacular Islam, followed by a section devoted to the theoretical approach to relations between the living and the dead. Additionally, this chapter provides some notes on the methodology and

fieldwork. The subsequent sections present ethnographic accounts of three commemorative events that illustrate the social afterlife of *šehidi*. These descriptions form the basis for the analytical discussion of how the dead participate in shaping post-war social life through ritual, material, and emotional engagements. The selected examples represent different types of commemorative practice within different municipalities on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line of Bosnia-Herzegovina[2].

Vernacular Islam and changing relations with the dead

Before the war, local understandings of death, sanctity, and martyrdom were deeply embedded in what has been termed vernacular Islam, forms of everyday religious practice grounded in local cosmologies and social relations (Bowen 2012; Mencej 2024). In many Bosnian communities, this included the veneration of *evlija* (saints) and visits to their tombs, practices that mediated between the living and the dead. As Tone Bringa (1995) documented in her ethnography *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*, such folk religious customs were central to local moral worlds and community cohesion, shaping how Muslims in rural Bosnia understood what it meant to be a good believer. She demonstrated how pre-war village Islam was characterised by an integration of normative Islamic teachings with local moral values, kinship ties, and everyday practices. The 1992–1995 war, however, disrupted these vernacular frameworks. The scale of violent death, ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, imprisonment in various camps in the Krajina region (Omarska, Trnopolje, Keraterm, Manjača, Krings) and the politicisation of religion significantly transformed traditional relations with the dead.

In Islamic theological concepts, a *šehid* is one who dies "on the path of God" and is granted immediate entry to *džennet* (paradise) without waiting for the Day of Judgment (Softić 2016: 268). The term more broadly denotes a "witness," with the notion of martyrdom developing in the Hadith and later Islamic jurisprudence. In local understandings, however, *šehidi* may also include those who die innocently or tragically, such as in childbirth, or from drowning or disease (PH091)[3]. During the war, the concept of *šehid* changed, and its meanings were reconfigured in response to the war's moral and political ruptures. As Mirjam Mencej (2024) argues, such

2 The Inter-Entity Boundary Line denotes the internal administrative boundary separating Bosnia-Herzegovina's two post-war entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (see Bose 2002; Toal – Dahlman 2011).

3 PHxxx is used as an anonymized identifier for an interlocutor.

transformations exemplify how vernacular Islam adapts to new historical circumstances while retaining its emphasis on moral reciprocity, relations with the dead, and the community's collective sense of responsibility.

The emergence of *šehidi* as a sacralised category initially referred to Muslim soldiers of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) and was later extended to include civilian victims. This gesture redefined what it meant to die a "good" or "meaningful" death (Bougarel 2007; Maček 2009). The commemoration of *šehidi* was institutionalised and officially endorsed by the state after the war with the establishment of the annual *Dan šehida* (Martyrs' Day), celebrated on the second day of *Ramazanski Bajram* (Eid al-Fitr). With this, a new public cult of martyrdom was further entrenched, and it replaced older, locally embedded forms of remembrance. The only context in which this attached label was questioned was that of the post-war strategies of survivors, when families of *šehidi* enjoyed considerable privileges compared with those without a *šehid*. This occurred soon after the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) established an association dedicated to the children and families of *šehidi*, offering various forms of financial support (Bougarel 2007: 168). Here, the social afterlife of *šehidi* played a significant role, as in many cases the financial compensation for the loss of their lives was the only source of income for the family. As one interlocutor who lost his parents recalled:

> "*At the time I was a child and did not understand many things, but as I grew older, I realised how much I didn't have. No child deserves the suffering and pain of a life without parents. The government helped me finish my education and get a job, but nothing can replace the loss I suffered.*" (PH074)

At the same time, the war and its aftermath reshaped the moral geography of death. For many families, having a *mezar* (grave), tomb, or "forever home" (Softić 2016: 25) was essential for closure and continuity:

> "*I need peace, or, better said, closure, I need to know where our loved ones are being buried. For my grandfather, I have no place where I can find peace. I pray for him every day, but there is no grave, since we never found his bones. The Bosnian Serb Army destroyed everything, but that is okay, I rebuilt my house, but what is problematic – I need roots, and those I have lost forever. I need that peace, to know where he is, to bring closure to the story.*" (PH092)

In the absence of traditional saintly figures and local shrines, the graves of *šehidi* have, in some contexts, taken on comparable spiritual and social functions. They act as focal points for prayer, moral reflection, and collective identity, a vernacular reconfiguration of sacred space in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. This aligns with Mirjam Mencej's (2024) recent argument that post-socialist transformations of religious life in the Balkans involve not the disappearance but the reinterpretation of folk religiosity and relations with the dead.

A *mezarje* is a cemetery; a public, socially prescribed place for the dead (Renshaw 2016: 195). All tombstones in a *šehidsko mezarje* are the same, symbolically unifying the nation as an imagined community (Anderson 2007). Individualism is not part of the Bosniak ethno-religious nation-building process; if family members desire otherwise, their wish is denied (see Hamer 2025). All concepts, both individually and collectively, carry great significance in private and public debates and, in the context of this article, they help clarify the vernacular terminology. Elaborating them facilitates engagement with the main research question, which examines the social afterlife of *šehidi* in post-war period in Bosnia-Herzegovina through the lens of the spatial agency of the dead. In my understanding, the spatial agency of the dead refers to how the presence of the deceased, and the spaces associated with death and remembrance, continues to influence the living and shape social and spatial realities. This concept recognises that the dead are not simply absent but can actively participate in shaping the living world through rituals, memorials, and the very organisation of space. The concept of spatial agency challenges the idea that death marks an absolute end to influence. Instead, it acknowledges that the dead can exert influence through material culture, such as (mass) graves, cemeteries, and monuments, social practices (commemorations and religious rituals), and even the stories and narratives that continue to circulate about them.

I argue that *šehidi*, despite their physical absence still shape and occupy not just physical space (cemeteries, mass graves, and monuments dedicated to them) but also play a significant role in the everyday life of my interlocutors, affecting their behaviour, social norms, and moral attitudes. Gestures and social practices, such as attending annual commemorations, praying for *šehidi*, and tending the *mezarje*, monuments and mass graves, would not exist if the *šehidi* had not existed.

Theoretical framework and research question

This article focuses on the spatial agency of the dead (Renshaw 2016; Colombo and Schindel 2014), a concept employed across disciplines such

as cultural geography, memory studies, and anthropology. It describes how the dead continue to shape, influence, and occupy space, even though they are physically absent. The notion of absence-presence (Maddrell 2013) highlights the many ways in which the dead continue to exert influence over the living, for instance, through the maintenance of *mezarja*, memorials, and mass graves. As Francisco Ferrándiz observes, "graves have never been lifeless objects but are complex spatial processes which have gradually been 'impregnated' with 'successive presents'" (2014: 65). Consequently, some sites have become sacred, contested, or politicised because of past events.

In anthropology, history, and memory studies, the dead are never simply gone but remain socially and spatially present through their absence, made visible in graveyards, memorials, photographs, dreams (Ivnik 2025), and legends (Mencej 2021). This article draws on a composite theoretical framework that combines the concepts of *deathscapes* and *absence-presence* (Derrida 1994; Maddrell – Sidaway 2010), *continuing bonds* (Klass – Steffen 2018), and the *political lives of dead bodies* (Verdery 1999).

Jacques Derrida's notion of *hauntology* helps to explain how unresolved pasts continue to shape the present. In *Spectres of Marx* (1994), Derrida writes that the dead are simultaneously absent and present, an "absent presence" that unsettles linear time. Such spectral traces blur the boundary between life and death and reveal how violence and trauma persist in the present, transforming familiar places into what Gillian Rose (2009, cited in Colombo – Schindel 2014: 8) calls "uncanny environments." While Derrida's concept emphasises this spectral presence, my interlocutors rarely spoke of ghosts or apparitions, focusing instead on cemeteries, commemorations, and religious rituals. This stands in contrast to other Bosnian contexts, such as post-war Srebrenica, where encounters with the dead have been described as ghostly (Mencej 2021). In north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, the presence of the *šehidi* is expressed primarily through material, ritual, and spatial practices rather than through supernatural experiences.

Howard Williams (2004) similarly stresses the active role of the dead, arguing that their corporeal presence influences the actions of mourners and evokes memories of the past. This perspective reframes the dead as participants in a dynamic relationship with the living, shaping identity, emotion, and political claims. To capture the spatial dimension of this relationship, I follow Avril Maddrell and James Sidaway's (2010) concept of *deathscapes*, which views death as both a biological and spatial phenomenon. Cemeteries, memorials, shrines, and mass graves are not neutral sites of memory but charged landscapes where belonging, identity, and moral meaning are negotiated. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, *mezarja* can be either *civilna* (civilian cemeteries) or *šehidska* (martyrs' cemeteries) reserved for *šehidi*—a category

that includes soldiers of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) as well as civilian war victims later exhumed from mass graves.

Avril Maddrell (2013) extends this approach through the concept of *continuing bonds* (Klass – Steffen 2018), showing how absence becomes presence in daily life through memorial artefacts and vernacular practices. Similarly, Sarah Semple and Stuart Brookes (2020) introduce the notion of *necrogeography*, which highlights how spaces of death are produced through political and historical processes, thereby reflecting broader struggles over power and memory.

Katherine Verdery's (1999) concept of the *political lives of dead bodies* provides an essential complement to these perspectives. She argues that the remains of war victims are potent political symbols and "material evidence" of past crimes that continue to influence public life. From a Bosnian perspective, this is visible in how human remains are used by political actors to legitimise authority, reframe history, and mobilise collective sentiment, especially around commemorations and elections. Katherine Verdery's framework represents a top-down view, where the dead underpin nation-building and political transformation, while *continuing bonds* offer a bottom-up perspective centred on personal and emotional relationships with the deceased. In both views, the dead occupy a central position within social and moral worlds.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a coherent framework for analysing how the dead remain active in shaping moral, political, and spatial relations. Jacques Derrida's *hauntology* highlights forms of absence-presence; Avril Maddrell and James Sidaway show how remembrance becomes spatialised through *deathscapes*; Katherine Verdery reveals the political agency of human remains; and *continuing bonds* explain the persistence of intimate relations between the living and the dead.

In this article, these concepts inform the central research question: How do the commemorative practices related to *šehid*i constitute a form of social and spatial agency of the dead in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina? By combining these approaches, the analysis explores how the presence of the *šehidi* in cemeteries, memorials, and rituals mediates between personal mourning, collective identity, and political remembrance, thereby revealing how the dead continue to shape the moral and spatial order of post-war society.

Notes on methodology and research

Over a two-year period, I conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork in the north-western Bosnian-Herzegovinian municipalities of Prijedor, Sanski Most, and Ključ, which included attending commemorations

and carrying out semi-structured interviews. I selected the municipalities of Prijedor, Sanski Most, and Ključ because of their centrality in the violence of the 1990s war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which left behind numerous mass graves and an enduring struggle over memory and justice. These sites are profoundly marked by the presence of the dead, both through physical remains and through the commemorative practices relating to them. At the same time, they are politically significant spaces where the social and collective memories of Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks coexist side by side yet seldom intertwine. This layered mnemonic landscape makes them critical for examining how the agency of the dead is understood, mobilised, and contested. I explore how religious traditions shape mourning, burial, and remembrance, while also revealing how divergent narratives of the past configure the continuing political and moral presence of the dead within these communities.

To better understand the context, it is important to note that Prijedor is a municipality in Republika Srpska, predominantly inhabited by Bosnian Serbs, while the municipalities of Sanski Most and Ključ are in the Federation and were predominantly inhabited by Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks. This division is a product of the Dayton peace agreement that officially ended the war that lasted from April 1992 to December 1995, resulting in the deaths of around 100,000 people (Baker 2015).

In all three municipalities, I interviewed 105 individuals of different national and religious affiliations, age, sex, and education. As the main questions of the Deagency project focus on the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals in contemporary societies, I asked my interlocutors about their relationships with the dead. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning I prepared a set of questions to ask all my interlocutors, allowing for a comparison of their answers and the identification of similarities and differences. Due to the "heaviness" of the topic, I encouraged people to be interviewed in quiet and peaceful places, where they felt comfortable and safe. In that regard, I was often invited into their homes, where they served me coffee and sweets, and occasionally lunch. "*First we eat, then we talk*," said one interlocutor, reflecting Bosnian hospitality (Bringa 1995). It was interesting to observe how these individuals, after the war, had rebuilt their houses, which were mostly furnished with modern furniture and biggest TV screens I have ever seen alongside religious symbols and family portraits. In many cases, photographs of men in army uniforms, taken during their compulsory service in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) were among the few remaining mementos of the deceased. Enlarged photographs from personal documents, often blurred and unclear, were sometimes the only objects the women possessed of their husbands and sons who were killed

during the war. In the more fortunate cases, the bodily remains of their loved ones had been found, exhumed, and properly buried, but other victims were never found. Their absence-presence (Maddrell 2013) lingered in the room, and with every sip of the sweet black coffee my interlocutors revealed their relationships with the dead.

Additionally, I attended various commemorations, round tables, conferences, book presentations/promotions, and *kolektivna šehidska dženaza* (mass funerals for martyrs)[4], in which I observed my interlocutors and other participants engaging in religious rituals, praying, listening to political speeches, and laying flowers for the dead. Many of my interlocutors told me that they plan their annual summer holidays around these events to ensure they are able to participate. Among the other events I attended were:

– *Dan napada na Hrustovo* – Day of the Attack on Hrustovo

– *Kolektivna šehidska dženaza Kamičani* – Mass Funeral for Martyrs in Kamičani

– Annual commemorations marking the opening and closing of the Trnopolje, Keraterm, and Omarska[5] camps

In this article, I focus on these commemorative practices. The Hrustovo commemoration is held in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which Bosniaks form the majority of the population and their memory of the war is socially and institutionally recognised. In contrast, the commemorations in Kamičani and at the sites of the former camps are held in Republika Srpska, in which Bosniaks constitute a minority community. Here, such events carry a heightened political significance, functioning not only as acts of mourning but also as assertions of memory within an entity dominated by Serb narratives of the war.

4 *Dženaza* is the Muslim funeral prayer commending the soul of the deceased to God.

5 In the spring of 1992, the Bosnian Serb authorities set up three of the most notorious and horrific camps (though there were many more) in which more than 31,000 people were imprisoned and around 1,000 were brutally murdered (Vučkovac 2021: 234). The former iron mine complex in Omarska, the former Keraterm tile factory, and the former social home and primary school Trnopolje are places where Bosniaks and Croats were tortured, beaten, denied access to food, water, and medical care; women were raped and murdered. For the Bosnian Serbs, the camps were considered interrogation centres, while for the prisoners these camps were concentration camps. Many camp survivors have written memoirs recounting their experiences there, while the book *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* by genocide scholar Hikmet Karčić (2022) is the first scholarly work to begin addressing the gap in local and international understanding of the Bosnian Serb camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Placing these commemorations in a broader regional context highlight both their similarities and their differences. The *Kolektivna šehidska dženaza*, for example, follows a protocol closely aligned with the collective funeral in Srebrenica, and the camps of Prijedor are acknowledged in political, media, and public discourse as emblematic sites of atrocity. By contrast, *Dan napada na Hrustovo* remains largely absent from media coverage, public recognition, and political narratives, an absence that, as one interlocutor emphasised, reflects the fact that there are many other villages across Bosnia-Herzegovina that suffered similar fates but are only commemorated at the micro level, within local communities. Examining these three commemorations together therefore illuminates both the shared forms of ritual practice and the divergent ways in which recognition, visibility, and political significance shape the agency of the dead.

The most significant distinction between the events lies in the spatial dimension of remembrance: while some involve the commemorating and visiting sites of death, others centre on visits to sites of final rest, namely, *šehidska mezarja*. I argue that sites of death such as Hrustovo village and the camps of Omarska, Trnopolje, and Keraterm are event-laden and trauma-marked locations. They are often ephemeral, unintentional, or liminal spaces that challenge official memory narratives, while *šehidska mezarja* are ritualised, institutionalised microcosms of society deliberately designed for remembrance. Furthermore, I argue that sites of death are more politicised as sites of final rest, even though the cemeteries of Bosniak victims are a clear sign of the materiality of the bodies, which can become potent political symbols and sources of political capital (Verdery 1999: 27–33). When left unmarked, sites of death often remain invisible within the public memory landscape and become particularly susceptible to competing political, religious, or ideological appropriations. Their symbolic instability renders them open to contestation or erasure, especially in contexts where official narratives seek to overwrite traumatic pasts. As in the cases of the Omarska, Trnopolje, and Keraterm camps, James Riding observes: "They have since been cleared away and evidence of war crimes covered up; a simultaneous politics of denial and a cultivated remembering has taken place in this regionally altered land." (Riding 2015: 379)

Both spaces of death and spaces of final rest are important to survivors, most of whom were directly implicated in acts of persecution, torture, or killing, and who therefore inhabit complex subject positions as both agents and survivors of violence.

In the following pages, I will present three events in which I conducted participant observation. In all three cases, personal stories intertwine with the theoretical approaches elaborated in the first part of the article, allowing

me to explore various aspects of the social afterlife of *šehidi*. Through these commemorations (and others, not included in the analysis), it becomes evident that people keep *šehidi* socially "present" in political discourse and community cohesion. In the cemeteries they interact with the dead through prayer, and visiting *šehidska mezarje* can be understood as a form of social interaction with *šehidi*.

Dan napada na Hrustovo (Day of the Attack on Hrustovo), 31 May 2025

This event coincides with *Dan bijelih traka,* the international White Armband Day[6]. In the small village of Hrustovo in the municipality of Sanski Most, people gather to remember the beginning of the massacres committed by Serbian paramilitary forces and the then Yugoslav People's Army in the villages of Hrustovo and Vrhpolje, in which more than 200 people were killed. This annual commemoration includes eleven ritual stops. People gathered at the memorial site *Spomen obilježje šehidima i ubijenim civilima MZ Hrustovo (Memorial to the šehidi and slain civilians of Hrustovo local community)*, which was decorated with flowers and Bosnian-Herzegovinian flags. The organisers handed out white armbands, which participants tied around their arms. With this symbolic act, they linked the past and the present, highlighting the enduring presence of unjust violence that affected the entire nation. After the national anthem, during which everyone stood in silence, the programme announcer welcomed those present and read a short historical overview, beginning with:

> "*Today we remember heroes, fighters, who gave their lives for the freedom of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We must not forget them, because they sacrificed their lives for our country and their names will be remembered forever. We commemorate them yearly and we talk about events from 33 years ago.*" (PH_n_019)[7]

6 *Dan bijelih traka* (White Armband Day), held on 31 May in Prijedor, is commemorated around the world through social media and activism, with participants marching in the streets wearing white armbands (Vučkovac 2021: 239). The practice recalls May 1992, when Bosnian Muslims and Croats were forced to mark their houses with white sheets and to wear white armbands in public as a sign of loyalty to the new order (Halilovich 2013: 68–69). As Johanna Paul notes, "this campaign started spontaneously in 2012 as a global social media campaign against genocide denial [and] has become a commemoration day marked in Prijedor, the post-Yugoslav region, across the world and in virtual spaces" (Paul 2021: 1). It represents an alternative memory discourse and remains a subject of disputes, discussions and debates both in Prijedor and internationally.

7 PH_n_019 designates records from commemorations at which I conducted participant observation.

These "flaggings" (Billig 1995) of national identity – the anthem, the flag, and the white armband – demonstrate forms of banal nationalism, showing how often unnoticed practices sustain national identity and normalise boundaries between "us" and "them". By emphasising the dead as victims, the community creates a space for coexistence, in which the absence of the dead is both materially and symbolically present. "*I come here every year, some šehidi are my distant relatives. I see it as my duty,*" one participant said quietly to me after this introduction, just before the mayor of Sanski Most delivered a political speech. According to Sarah Wagner (2008: 217), the Muslim community was thus assigned a collective, ongoing obligation to remember and honour *šehidi*, transforming their deaths into acts of religious devotion and national sacrifice. This shift, however, is not without its ideological and ethical complications. Scholars such as Ivana Maček (2009) and Mitja Velikonja (2003) have critiqued the institution of *šehid* status for functioning exclusively within a Muslim framework, effectively marginalising non-Muslim soldiers and civilians, and reinforcing ethno-religious boundaries in post-war memory. The views expressed by my interlocutors also fit into this framework, where a critical perspective is often absent. I interpret this absence of critical thinking within an ethno-social context, as most of them lived in a monoethnic environment surrounded mainly by Muslims, who were most often the victims of attacks and killings, and thus the most visible victims.

After the political speech it was time for the religious part of the commemoration, in which the local Muslim religious leader recited Al-Fatiha[8] (Kur'an 1993: 3). Once all NGOs and municipal representatives had laid flowers, people drove to the next deathscape, repeating the sequence of a brief historical account, prayer, and the laying of flowers. The convoy then proceeded to subsequent locations following the same ritual pattern. After another brief stop, we arrived at the hamlet of Begići, where in 2025 a new monument was ceremonially opened, dedicated to *šehidi*, specifically, the civilians killed in the hamlet. Many people gathered and the commemoration again followed the familiar sequence: historical account, prayer, and the laying of flowers.

The monumentalisation of past events provides visible testimony to the agency of the dead, expressing the enduring moral obligation of the living to commemorate them. The monument to the civilians killed in the hamlet of Begići materialises the relationship between the living and the dead, transforming private grief into collective remembrance. Rather than

8 Al-Fātiha (Arabic: "The Opening") is the first chapter of the Qur'an, recited by Muslims in daily prayers and often read at graves or memorials as a prayer for the deceased.

serving merely as a static representation of loss, the monument exemplifies what Avril Maddrell (2013) terms absence-presence, in which the dead remain socially and spatially active through their material traces. Such sites sustain continuing bonds (Klass – Steffen 2018), allowing the bereaved and the wider community to maintain emotional and moral connections with those who perished. As Pamela Colombo, Estela Schindel (2014), and Layla Renshaw (2016) argue, commemorative landscapes function as spaces where absence is re-inscribed as presence, and where the dead continue to exert agency by shaping the affective and spatial dimensions of social life. The monument in Begići thus operates as a focal point of memory, mourning, and identity, mediating between personal loss and collective moral responsibility while reaffirming the spatial agency of the dead within the post-war landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This ongoing engagement with the dead also resonates with the logic of vernacular Islam, where remembrance, prayer, and care for the resting places of the deceased sustain moral continuity between the living and the dead and reaffirm the community's spiritual and social cohesion.

The next stop was the bridge over the River Sana, where in May 1992 Bosnian Muslims "*were ordered to jump one by one from the bridge into the river, while the soldiers shot at them. Rajif Begić was sixth in line and the only one to survive. At least thirty-two civilians were killed that day*" (Hrustovo 2025). After reciting Al-Fatiha, participants threw flowers into the river in remembrance. The commemoration concluded at *Šehidsko mezarje* Vrhpolje, where many of the victims are buried. Visitors first stopped at family graves before gathering near the *turbe* or *šehidska česma* (martyrs' fountain). As Elizabeth Neuffer notes, "those who weren't religious envisaged having a cemetery both to visit and to serve as a memorial to the dead" (Neuffer 2002: 221). There, seven religious leaders recited *Jasin*, the Bosnian designation for the thirty-sixth chapter of the Qur'an, Sūrat Yā Sīn (Kur'an 1993: 295-9; Softić 2016). Regarded in Islamic tradition as the "heart of the Qur'an," this chapter is frequently recited for the deceased, with the intention of invoking Allah's mercy and forgiveness on their behalf. Over time, the recitation of Sūrat Yā Sīn has become a ritual element of funerary and commemorative practice across diverse Muslim communities, including in Bosnia. While its theological basis is subject to interpretation within Islamic jurisprudence, its role in communal expressions of piety and remembrance remains deeply embedded in local religious culture. The prayer lasted around thirty minutes, during which worshippers occasionally glared at some of the more secular attendees, giving them dark, disapproving glances, as they chatted among themselves. This illustrates how the re-Islamisation of Bosnian society that began during the war (Bougarel 2007) is waning, as many attend

commemorations less out of religious conviction than out of respect for and moral duty towards the victims.

At the same time, these commemorative practices exemplify living memory (Halbwachs 1980), where the experiences and recollections of direct witnesses are actively transmitted through ritualised acts, storytelling, and memorialisation. The sequence of visits, prayers, and monument openings allows the past to remain present, sustaining a social consciousness of historical violence. Through these practices, the memory of the dead is not static but continually reconstructed within the community, bridging generations and linking personal grief with collective identity. In the contested commemorative landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the presence of the monument and the enactment of rituals assert a particular narrative of suffering and resilience, actively participating in the negotiation of public memory and in the spatial and social agency of the dead.

Kolektivna šehidska dženaza (mass funeral for martyrs), 20 July 2025

This mass funeral is held annually on 20 July in Kozarac. Scholars such as Michel Serres, Edward Casey, and Martin Heidegger agree that the burial of the dead is "an essential human institution, instrumental to both the making of places and the imagining of futures" (Semple – Brookes 2020: 1). Funerals, along with monuments, memorials, and commemorations, exemplify contested processes of memory-making (Halilovich 2013: 80). According to Muslim religious tradition, the deceased should ideally be buried the day after death, wrapped in a *ćefin* (a white cotton shroud). During the first months of the war, this was often impossible, but after the fighting ended many survivors felt a strong obligation to ensure their relatives received proper burials, even when it entailed personal risk. Many human remains were found in primary, secondary, and even tertiary mass graves, and with the assistance of the ICTY and international forensic teams, most of these remains were identified and could therefore be buried under their full names (Koff 2005; Tervonen 2025). On a symbolic level, these individuals thus became part of society once again. As my interlocutors recalled, international peace forces had to guard the initial funeral ceremonies, as the Serbs sometimes threw grenades or fired shots to intimidate them. Many of the interlocutors stressed that these funerals were not only moments of mourning but also acts of resistance, where the presence of the dead asserted Bosniak claims to place, belonging, and justice. In this sense, they echo what Katherine Verdery (1999) describes as the political use of bodies: the dead become powerful symbols through which survivors negotiate identity, memory, and rights in contested landscapes.

Since the *Šejkovača* identification centre opened in 2000[9], where all the human remains are stored and identified, the mass funerals of *šehidi* follow the same protocol[10]. When I attended the commemoration, it proceeded as follows:

> "*The evening before the funeral, large trucks decorated with Bosnian flags brought the remains of four people killed in 1992. They were met by a crowd gathered near the mosque and cemetery, where the religious ceremony took place. The following day, a dženaza – a funeral with a set protocol followed every year – was held. In 2024, it rained, and people took shelter under tents. At the end of a politically charged speech, the main imam asked the crowd three times, 'hočemo im halaliti,' – asking if they forgave the victims. The crowd replied, 'da, hočemo,' three times, concluding the main prayer. The subsequent speech emphasised the importance of truth, stating that it is a moral duty to remember the victims, visit graves, and for the Serbian nation to reveal the locations of mass graves. Two tabuti (caskets) were taken to the nearby cemetery, while the others were sent to villages across the river Sana. By then, the rain had stopped. Many had already left, and those who remained said that it had stopped raining because Allah knew they must accompany the remains to their graves. At the cemetery, some participated in the ceremony while others spoke outside.*" (PH_n_006)

This commemoration has significant social and political importance; it serves as a key meeting place for families and relatives living outside Bosnia-Herzegovina and an important political platform for spreading ethno-nationalistic ideas. Or as James Riding observed: "Remembering has become a political statement, as those mourning are characterised and enfolded within a persistent ethnic and identitarian narrative." (Riding 2015: 382)

9 To handle the very high number of remains of missing persons from the mass killings around Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia in 1992–1993 and from Krajina, a mortuary called *Šejkovača* was established in the town of Sanski Most, located in the beautiful, rolling countryside between the Una and Sava rivers (Jennings 2013: 118).

10 Taina Tervonen, a freelance journalist, observed the commemoration following the 2013 exhumation of the largest mass grave in Tomašica. She noted that "the coffins are unloaded and lined up on the grass, occupying the entire length of the football field. There, the dead will be laid out today, and the memorial service will be held tomorrow" (Tervonen 2025: 103).

Every *šehidsko mezarje* in Bosnia-Herzegovina carries symbolic, political, religious, and personal meanings. As Katherine Verdery noted and as was the case with this *kolektivna šehidska đenaza*, dead bodies indeed become a "powerful political symbol and sites of political profit" (Verdery 1999: 27–33), most notably here in the speech of the imam. The dead, both individually and collectively, through the materiality of their bones affect the experience and actions of those attending the commemorations. They evoke memories of the past, their absence-presence, and the various continuing bonds the living have with them. Also, as Élisabeth Anstett (2023: 672–673), Admir Jugo and Sari Wastell (2015: 163) have observed, the white marble *nišani* (tombstones) are embedded in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian deathscapes, reinforcing a visual and spatial order rooted in religious identity. This embedment is clearly visible in the statement of one interlocutor, who said: "*We got used to living with nišani.*" (PH076). Being aware of their presence in the deathscape and viewing this as a custom says a great deal about the integration of religion and politics into the everyday practices of my interlocutors. Of course, this statement refers not only to the visible aspects, which includes visiting cemeteries and attending commemorations, but also to other symbolic and invisible norms of behaviour (see Halilovich 2019).

Annual commemorations marking the opening and closing of the Trnopolje, Keraterm, and Omarska camps

These events are organised by local associations of former detainees from Prijedor and Kozarac, together with other local non-religious NGOs and the Islamic community. Since there is uncertainty as to the exact dates when these camps opened and closed, the commemorations follow approximate schedules: Trnopolje camp is commemorated on 26 May, Keraterm camp on 24 July (the date associated with the largest massacre in Keraterm's room number 3) (Čaušević 2017: 57–58), and Omarska camp on 6 August. Visitors are primarily former detainees and their family members, alongside journalists and representatives of detainee organisations. Among my interlocutors, attitudes towards attending these events varied. Some attend every year without fail, even arranging their holidays around the dates. One participant explained:

> "*I attend every commemoration – every single one. For as long as I live, on 20 July you will find me at the šehidska đenaza here in Kozarac. It doesn't matter whether the remains of one person or a hundred are found – I will be here. And on 6 August, in Omarska, as well. Those two dates matter to me. Being there is my duty to the dead.*" (PH025)

Others avoid the ceremonies altogether. One interlocutor recounted:

> "*I went once to Omarska, where I had been imprisoned. I felt physical pain and nausea. That was the first and only time I went. I cannot and I do not want to put myself through that. It was terrible.*" (PH042)

Each commemoration begins with the national anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina, followed by speeches from detainee organisations that are often politically charged. Occasionally, camp survivors recount their personal stories, which are usually the most emotional part of the ceremony, before the event concludes with the laying of flowers and the Al-Fatiha prayer. The repetitive nature of these ceremonies makes some participants feel they are monotonous: "*Every year is the same. I already know the sequence of events. I also know exactly what each person will say.*" (PH040)

This reflects a broader tension between the politicisation of the dead and the continuing bonds that the living maintain with them. Many interlocutors emphasised that the dead deserve better recognition, and that the living also need more meaningful commemorative experiences. One explained:

> "*It is our obligation toward the dead to talk about what happened. And I will not be silenced by corrupt politicians. The souls of the dead are roaming around this place, and they are looking down on us. Because of them, we must visit these commemorations and make them happy. The souls of the dead are watching to see if their children come to the commemoration and if they commemorate them.*" (PH011)

At the Keraterm commemoration, this intertwining of personal grief and ritualised memory was particularly striking:

> "*At first the national Bosnia-Herzegovina anthem was played on the speaker, followed by the Al-Fatiha and a minute of silence. The moderator then invited one survivor from the village Rakovčani to the microphone to tell his story. He was very emotional, but firm in the idea that the survivors have an obligation towards their dead to tell the truth and seek justice. He said he had often dreamt of his fellow detainees who died; they were reaching to grab his hand. He reached for them but was not able to. He interpreted these dreams as a sign: although he could not help them then, he would do his best now – to commemorate their death, to remember them, to talk about them, to speak the truth. He had tears in his eyes. So did we.*" (PH_n_009)

The commemorations I attended all follow the same annual schedule, with a precise choreography, iconography, and rhythm that reinforces both remembrance and participation, confirming the comment of the interlocutor cited above that he knows the protocol and the content of speeches before they begin.

Additionally, I noticed that these events are not only about honouring the dead; they also serve as social gatherings for the living. Many participants plan their year around them, taking time afterwards to converse, exchange news, and greet friends and family. Even so, shortly after each ceremony, the deathscapes quickly empty, leaving behind only memories and symbolic gestures. Unlike the other local commemorative events I analysed, the camps commemorations do not conclude at the cemetery, nor do they include a visit to the cemetery. They are static and take place only at that particular deathscape. However, just like other events, they constantly invoke *šehidi*, their sacrifice, and the obligations the living have towards them. Through these continuing bonds, which are manifested in values, actions, and sensations that are expressed during commemorations (Fong – Chow 2018), the dead are woven into daily life, creating new traditions, memories, and modes of remembrance. Over time, they become part of new traditions and customs. As Avril Maddrell wrote: "Absence is not merely a 'presence' in and of itself, but rather the absent is evoked, made present, in and through enfolded blending of the visual, material, haptic, aural, olfactory, emotional-affective and spiritual planes, prompting memories and invoking a literal sense of continued 'presence', despite bodily and cognitive absence." (Maddrell 2013: 505)

The concept of continuing bonds (Klass – Steffen 2018) offers a productive framework for understanding commemorative practices at the sites of the former concentration camps: Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolje. These commemorations maintain enduring emotional, moral, and spatial connections between survivors, local communities, and the dead who perished in these camps. Rather than marking closure, the annual gatherings and prayers at these sites reaffirm relationships with the deceased through acts of remembrance, prayer, and testimony. Such practices transform spaces of past violence into active sites of relationality, where the living sustain a dialogue with the dead and reaffirm collective moral obligations towards them.

In this sense, continuing bonds extend beyond private grief to encompass a form of collective moral continuity, binding families, survivors, and communities to the memory of those lost. The ritual acts performed at Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolje, specifically, the reciting of Al-Fātiha, the naming of the victims, giving survivors the floor to tell their stories, and the laying of flowers, embody what Avril Maddrell (2013) calls absence-presence, in which

the dead remain socially active through ritual, emotion, and space. These practices do not simply commemorate the past but re-inscribe it into the moral and spatial order of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, reinforcing the ongoing agency of the dead in shaping collective identity and claims for justice.

Conclusion

This article has explored the social afterlife of *šehidi*, the Muslim victims of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by examining how they continue to shape social, political, and religious life in north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina. Through an analysis of three commemorative events, the Day of the Attack on Hrustovo, the annual mass funeral in Kamičani, and the commemorations of the Trnopolje, Keraterm, and Omarska camps, I have shown how cemeteries, memorials, and ritual practices render the dead socially present.

By combining ethnographic accounts with theoretical perspectives on deathscapes, absence-presence, continuing bonds, and the political lives of dead bodies, I have argued that *šehidi* remain active participants in the lives of the living. Their presence is not confined to physical sites of burial or memory, but extends into political discourse, moral obligations, and everyday practices. The living do not simply remember the dead; they interact with them, negotiate with their absence, and are shaped by their enduring presence.

Understanding these dynamics through the lens of spatial agency reveals that the dead are not passive markers of the past, but agents that structure the social and political landscapes of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. Monuments, *šehidska mezarja*, and commemorations are not neutral containers of memory, but spaces through which *šehidi* continue to exert influence, consolidating identities, reinforcing community bonds, and challenging or legitimising political orders.

Deathscapes, far from neutral spaces, are charged landscapes where memory, identity, and political engagement are enacted through performative acts that sustain both individual and collective remembrance. In all three of the commemorations analysed politics intertwines with religion, and with private and public spheres. Occasionally, these victims and graves are instrumentalised or even exploited by political and power elites. When that happens, the living memory transforms into popular memory, "encompassing the private and local memories of the survivors, collective narratives and all performative actions such as memorialisation, commemoration and funerals" (Halilovich 2013: 1). This can be understood as a form of resistance or as a coping mechanism.

The spatial agency of *šehidi* therefore highlights the blurred boundary between life and death in post-war societies. Far from silent, the dead intervene in the present: they shape people's movements and annual calendars, define moral responsibilities, influence narratives of belonging, and anchor contested claims to land and history. Their social afterlife demonstrates that mourning is inseparable from politics, and that death, memory, and space remain deeply entangled in the ongoing struggle for the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

November 2025

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