

From Strategic Remembrance to Politics of Tolerance: Memories of the Srebrenica Massacre among the Bosnians in Berlin¹

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Abstract:

This article highlights the complex character of memory among the Srebrenica massacre survivors interrogating conventional medical definitions of trauma as a linear category. By examining the fundamental paradox underlying the politics of humanitarianism in Germany (and Berlin in particular) towards Bosnian refugees who fled the Yugoslav wars in the early 1990s, this analysis focuses on a central contradiction of the Duldung status for refugees, which, on the one hand afforded important humanitarian relief, but on the other generated tremendous uncertainties as to whether or how protection would come to an end. The experience of the Duldung status as an ordeal rather than as protection has generated traumas related to constant fear of detention or deportation, which have often proved to be as powerful as those flowing from the earlier horrors of war.

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Introduction

This paper examines an important contradiction embedded in the politics of memory, namely the tension between actual memories of past traumatic experiences and political impositions that shape such remembrances in a contemporary context. Current complications of the legal status of the refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Berlin have generated a discourse of what I call "strategic remembrance," one that draws on the past events in a very selective, planned and calculated manner. This strategic remembrance is distinct from the question of authenticity or inauthenticity, of any individual memory of "what really happened." Rather, it concerns the legal/political context that shapes the economy of memory itself: its content, its performative aspect and the narratives surrounding the "real pain and suffering." Instead of

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evaluating the accuracy of what people remember, this paper analyzes the fractured and non-linear trajectory of memory which rests on compressed time/space axes: it draws on the past, acts upon the present, and aims at resolving legal status tensions for the future.

The research for this article is based on interviews with 30 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina who came to Germany during the war in their homeland from 1992-1995, and was conducted in Berlin between February 2005 and September 2005. . Many interviewees had been refugees earlier in Srebrenica, when in July 1995, the Serbian army and paramilitary had overrun that city and executed 8000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys on the site or in the surrounding area. That event is seen as the worst case of ethnic cleansing in European history since, WW2, and has come to symbolize all the horrors committed during the conflict.

The actual massacre took place on July 11-12 1995. The early summer of 2005 was marked with world-wide preparations of the tenth anniversary of the event.. With the actual date of the commemoration rapidly approaching, the world's attention was turning towards Srebrenica. The main ceremony was scheduled to take place on July 11 and 12 ,2005, hence many people travelled to Bosnia to prepare for the mass burial of the excavated bodies

The conflict in Bosnia had displaced more than 1,200 000 persons, 700 000 of whom have been living since in many western countries. It became obvious therefore that other than the central event in Srebrenica, the commemoration would also be organized in many places all over the world where refugees from Bosnia have been residing. Given that Berlin accepted a large number of people from Srebrenica, several cultural and ethnic associations formed by people from Bosnia and Herzegovina were involved in the preparations of the commemoration: these included the Bosnian Mosque in Kreuzberg, the association of women from Srebrenica, and the SüdOst Europa Centrum³.

For the Berlin commemoration of the event, I was involved in SüdOst Europa Centrum, a non-profit organization formed in 1991, at the very beginning of the Yugoslav wars when it became obvious that there would be a large refugee influx in Germany, to assist the refugees from Former Yugoslavia. This centre was a base of my fieldwork from February to September 2005. Founded in 1991 and funded by the Berlin Senate, this centre has played an important role in assisting the refugees. The main idea for the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of Srebrenica in the SüdOst Europa Centrum was prepared several months in advance. The commemoration at the centre was scheduled a few days earlier from the official one, and was supposed to feature memorials read and narrated by survivors who had remained in Berlin.

In May and June 2005, the Srebrenica survivors met every Friday in the SüdOst Europa Centrum to collect narratives on the events of the Srebrenica massacre for the 10th commemoration at the centre planned for July 8-9, 2005. The group was open to anyone who had been in Srebrenica or its surroundings and who survived the siege and fall of the town.

³ The European Migration Center in Berlin (EMZ) reports of six hundred Srebrenica residents living in Berlin in 2000 (EMZ 2002 report).

Although different people would visit the group in the course of two months, the most regular attendees were seven women. Others who were regularly present were one or two of the SüdOst Europa Centre workers and myself. We agreed that the best way to collect the stories was through casual remembrance: not by asking the survivors to write up their stories but rather by encouraging them to meet regularly and talk to each other. Most had known one another for a long time, as neighbours from Srebrenica, Potočari or Gradačac. My task was to record their stories and transcribe them in an appropriate format to be read during the weekend of commemoration.

During regular meetings over the two month period preceding the tenth anniversary of the massacre, I observed that the members of the group regarded the political and symbolic significance of the commemoration as being of outmost importance. They were fully immersed in their efforts to recollect and reconstruct the events from Srebrenica for the audience who would attend the commemoration: primarily Germans, ranging from high-ranking officials to medical and legal personnel.

Soon after the first few meetings in April 2005, I witnessed that the group became an informal forum comprised of several women who shared a mutual understanding of each other's experiences during the war. Their fully cognizant awareness of the main objective of the commemoration: to "target" the German audience, as well as the regular presence of an anthropologist and the rolling voice recorder, gave their stories a tone with an outward direction: a clear purpose and staged to fulfil a mission. The atmosphere changed drastically towards the end of the session, especially after I would switch off the voice recorder. The fact that most of the women in the group knew each other well in Srebrenica and continued to socialize in Berlin, revealed several different dimensions undercutting the meetings: the official remembrance of the events, and then the unofficial mingling of the women after the end of the meeting when they shared problems from their every day lives.

Strategic remembrance vs. heartfelt endurance

All the participants in the group shared pride when they described Srebrenica and its glorious past. The abundance of natural resources, such as minerals and especially silver, provided Srebrenica with enviable prestige and power since ancient times. The silver mines gave the town its past and present name: first it was named *Argentia* and then Srebrenica (*srebro* in Serbo/Croatian/Bosnian means silver). The town flourished during socialism when there was well developed industry. With little or no unemployment, relatively high earning power, and a youthful population, Srebrenica was a desirable place to be in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Wide roads connected the surrounding villages with Srebrenica, providing them also with electricity. But nowadays all this is destroyed and nothing works. One of the women described the stretch between Potocari and Vojdan of only several kilometres but with 62,000 people fleeing, toppling each other, fiercely fighting for breath and their lives.

During her story of the glorious past of Srebrenica, the eyes of one of the participants, Remzada, glowed, whereas while describing the stories of her life in the town during the Serb occupation, her voice was shaky. Many of her stories were describing forced separation of mothers and children. One of Remzada's stories, for instance, was when a young mother with a baby was travelling in the same truck with Remzada in their attempt to flee from Srebrenica. The truck had been stopped many times, and each time the Serbian soldiers who stopped them were looking for money (only German marks) and gold. After seven or eight halts, there was nothing left among the women, they had already given everything they had. On the next stop, the Serbian soldier insisted on money. One woman handed him Yugoslav diners. The soldier became angry saying that this money was worthless and should be given to Alija (meaning Alija Izetbegovic, the Bosnian president at that time). Everyone was silent while the soldier was raging because he was left empty-handed except for the baby who was loudly crying. The soldier warned the mother to silence the baby. She placed her hand over the baby's mouth. Soon after the baby turned blue because she could not inhale air. The mother removed the hand fearing that the baby would suffocate. It was as if the baby's loud screaming turned the soldier into a beast: he lifted the baby with one hand and cut open its throat, and then left. The screaming of the mother and the other of the women lasted only briefly, replaced by silence which filled the air for hours afterwards. No one could utter a word or say anything. The silence was so thick and overwhelming that Remzada was sure that no one in the truck would be able to speak again afterwards. After that event she managed to get to Tuzla and from there was eligible to come to Germany and join her son who had been living in Berlin. She arrived in Berlin in 1995 to stay with her son who had fled Bosnia in 1992.

But after the official story that was recorded for the commemoration at the centre, Remzada shared another aspect of her experience in Berlin, one that was related to her present status and her son. She explained that after she joined her son, she spent only one year with him. In mid 1996, soon after the end of the war and the Dayton agreement, the German government began intensive efforts to return to Bosnia all those who did not qualify to remain in Germany on the basis of severe traumatization. As a result, Remzada's son was sent back to Bosnia. Remzada hardly found words to describe the shock when she saw two armed police officers knocking on their door to detain and deport her son. As she was telling this part of the story, her hands started to shiver, her voice changed and she burst into tears. The conversation was interrupted by her need to take a tranquilizer and calm her self down. She revealed that her son had been sent back to Bosnia and her life after his departure could be described as *preživljavanje* – “mere survival.” Her grandchildren had been at the centre of Remzada's life, and she felt as if she had lost her ground again with their departure. She told me that return to Bosnia was not an option for her; her house had been burned down, all of her neighbours in Srebrenica have either died or left the town to other parts of the country or went abroad, and her daughter-in-law had made it clear that she could not count on any support from them because they barely survive themselves in Sarajevo. Thus Remzada's life in Berlin today is centred around a few friends and social activities at the centre where she goes regularly not only for her psychological counselling but also to prepare food on numerous occasions at the centre: for frequent book promotions, photo or art exhibitions, meetings of the donors and the

Srebrenica commemoration when she organised several other women and cooked delicious food for more than 50 people (photo 1). She has also been cooking and cleaning for a German family. These have been the main social activities since her son left in 2000.



(Photo 1. Rozita Dimova, July 9, 2005, Berlin)

Adela, another regular member of the group lost two sons and her husband in Srebrenica. She qualified to remain in Germany on the basis of severe trauma. Adela had been keeping a journal meticulously recording the events and her feelings ever since she fled Srebrenica. She rarely needed to look inside her notebooks to remind herself of what had happened. Her narratives were coherent and vivid, just as if she had been reading from her writings. For the celebration we selected several stories from the diary describing several events. One was the story of the young boy who accompanied Adela, her husband and the relatives to collect wheat and some fruits from the surrounding orchards and deserted patches of land. The siege of Srebrenica was going on for several months and people were struggling with hunger and basic subsistence. From time to time at night time, a group of people would go and search for food. That would require walking for many kilometres one way to find something. Adela, her husband and her relatives were among the ones who would do that regularly. The risks during these night escapades were grave since the whole territory was surrounded and constantly targeted by snipers. One evening, as the group was passing by a house at the end of a village near Srebrenica, a middle-aged woman asked them if the group could take her oldest son with them so he could also collect some food and bring it home. The whole family had not eaten in days and there were two small children who needed to be fed. So, Adela's group of 6-7 people was joined by the 10 year old boy. He was the youngest in the group. Adela kept an eye on him constantly and was impressed by how determined he was to bring food to his mother and siblings, and how fearlessly he ignored the bullets flying over their heads. That same night Adela fell in a covered well, at least 5-6 metres deep. She felt the cold water reaching up to her neck but with an exceptional physical effort and the assistance of her husband and the people who were with them, she managed to slowly climb out, get a hold of the rope that they

had slid down the well. She was aware of the danger that the group was facing as they tried to rescue her: the intensity of the sniper shooting became stronger and the Serbs noticed some commotion. She explained that the whole time while she was trying to get out of the well, her mind was spinning with fear that the young boy who joined the group and who might get killed in the attempt to save her from the well. When the shootings became too intense, the group had to scatter and hide before they finally succeeded in getting Adela out. That night, despite the incident at the well and despite being wet and cold, the group managed to collect a lot of food. And the boy went home safely with full bag of fruits and wheat. Adela pointed to me after the official meeting that she would so much like to visit the same family next time when she goes back to Bosnia and see what had happened to the young man nowadays. During her last visit few years ago she asked her daughter and son-in-law to take her to see the deserted well where she had felt down during the war, but there was no time to go and look for the boy.

Further, she explained that during her visit to Srebrenica in 2000, the first visit after she had arrived to Germany, Adela went to her house which was destroyed during the war. She took a shovel to clean up the dirt in the yard, and there, buried in the ground, she found the favourite sport jersey of her oldest son. She showed me photographs of her son wearing the jersey before the war when he was still enrolled in electrical engineering faculty in Sarajevo. She said that her writing and the regular prayers to Allah were the primary reasons that kept her sane and still living.

It was only after the official stories were recorded for the celebration that Adela explained to me that she managed to come to grips with the loss of her sons and husband only with Allah's help. But the thought of being separated and losing her only surviving daughter and her two grandchildren would be the end of her. As with Remzada's case, Adela broke down in tears as she was her only surviving daughter was deemed not to qualify and had to appeal in court. The case has not yet been resolved and Adela shared with me that this experience of her daughter's uncertain status in Germany becomes unbearably painful and is the main source of her nightmares.

Indira, another regular member of this group, is an example of a Srebrenica survivor whose conscious trauma of *Duldung* status only became possible to express in the context of these meetings. Indira attended almost every meeting – although she hardly ever spoke a word. I had a difficulty in determining her age: maybe early 50s or early 60s; maybe even much younger. I recognized her face prior to joining the Srebrenica group: she was also a member of another collective therapy group that I was allowed to visit a few times. I was drawn to Indira's friendly looking face: red cheeks, round chin and sad, absent-minded eyes. Her slender body made sharp contrast to her swollen feet – as I suspected, she once mentioned that she had had problems with high blood pressure and water retention and had been on hypertension medication for years.

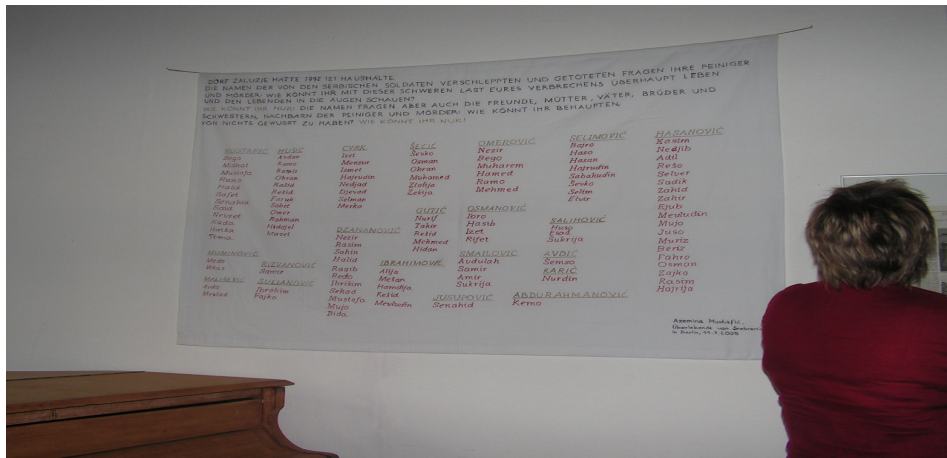
While the other members of the Srebrenica group prolifically recalled many stories from Srebrenica from the period between 1992 to 1995, Indira listened with an absent-minded expression. From time to time she would repeat the last lines of what the others would say, jerking her body left and right and swinging her head while her eyes stared at an undetermined point. I heard from other people that she had lost several close family members although she, herself, had never talked about it. But in June, 2005, after the footage of the execution of six young Bosnian men had been shown on the Serbian TV, she agitatedly revealed that one of the executed boys was the son of her husband's relative. Only then did she speak out vocally, asking us loudly whether it would not have been better to have died in Srebrenica rather than having to undergo the ordeals of living on afterwards.

Acquaintances told me that the event in Germany that had made Indira so fearful took place four years ago. After having been in Berlin for almost 7 years, Indira received an *Abschiebung*—a court order to leave Germany. In the period following the court order and while preparing to file an appeal, Indira was arrested and jailed for two weeks in a Berlin prison. The detention severely taxed her physical and mental wellbeing. Indira could not articulate the experience of the arrest with her past or with her current life. Even during regular individual therapy sessions (one of the therapists at the centre told me), Indira was silent and unable to integrate her experiences from Srebrenica and Germany into a coherent personal history. The psychologists whom I talked to at the centre pointed out that Indira was a text-book example re-traumatization. After release from prison, her case was given over to an attorney who managed to obtain an *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* or residence permit for two years on her behalf on humanitarian grounds stemming from the additional trauma Indira experienced from the imprisonment.

Unexpectedly, but in the course of the meetings for the Srebrenica commemoration, most of the Srebrenica survivors in the group identified the uncertainties of their residence status or of their family members as most traumatic and main reasons for continuation of their psychological problems. Adela pointed out that she managed to come to grips with the death of her sons. She regularly dreams of them but in a positive, reconciliatory manner where the two of them appear content and peaceful in her dreams. Nightmares are related to the fear that she might lose the daughter and the grandchildren. Similarly, Indira connected her worst nightmares with the fear of deportation, snapshots of the detention experience and the two weeks in the prison, but also with the images from the time spent in Srebrenica during its siege and fall, a period marked with starvation, physical violence and constant fear. "They all blend together, and I don't know which happened when. I feel that it has never stopped, it goes on and on and becomes more terrifying."

The stories selected for presentation were read in Bosnian but were also translated into German as most of the audience were actually Germans. The women involved in recalling their memories for the commemoration also prepared decorations for the walls in the centre: one woman made a quilt of handkerchiefs with embroidered names of the people -- relatives

or acquaintances --who died in Srebrenica. Another piece of textile also listed the names of the killed in Srebrenica (photos 2 and 3).



(Photo 2, Rozita Dimova, July 9, 2005, Berlin).



(Photo 3, Rozita Dimova, July 9, 2005, Berlin)

Among those present were several important political figures who have been long-standing friends of the centre. There were donors, along with the medical team of therapists, psychologists, and doctors. The audience reacted to the stories with evident emotion: tears, and respect for the survivors, but also anger at the UNPROFOR and the international community for their responsibilities for the survivors' situation. Yet the stories related to the contemporary fears and uncertainties of the legal status remained untold during the ceremony. I felt that they were nonetheless the subtext of the ceremony and informed the efforts to persuade the German audience—politicians and government officials, primarily—that a return is not an option.

Adela through her stories managed to communicate the pain of her experience in Srebrenica and the loss of her two sons. I noticed that most of the Germans lifted their eyes from the

translated text, captivated by Adela's facial expressions, bodily gestures and primarily, her immensely powerful voice, shattered with emotion. She indeed managed to express her pain by enacting her stories in a theatrical manner. She was one of the few though who as a gifted writer and a deeply religious person, managed to combine her love for Allah and the written word in a narrative form that has helped her to survive and accept the dimension of death.

Deconstructing trauma

My research in Berlin calls attention to multiple layers of traumas in the lives of the Bosnians who fled the war, reflected in the testimonies prepared for the Srebrenica commemoration. First, there was the massacre itself. The testimonies survivors were urged to prepare for the commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre carried the message to Germans that Srebrenica was no long a place for survivors to go back to. Yet the evocation of the suffering during Srebrenica, albeit genuine, purposefully targeted the need to persuade the authorities that remaining in Germany is the only option. Women's testimonies were often silent about their equally fraught experiences of the "tolerated" *Duldung* status in Germany, even though these experiences had real and immediate impact on their contemporary lives. Finally, many of those testifying found it burdensome and humiliating to have to justify their on-going presence in Germany by emphasising the endured trauma. Adela conveyed such fury as she lamented that loss of two sons and a husband was apparently not a good enough reason to want to escape the place where it had happened.

In our after-meeting casual conversation most of the women-participants in the Sreberenica group acknowledged and expressed gratitude for the many individuals, organizations or churches in Germany that have been genuinely involved in helping the Bosnians to remain in Germany. The Methodist church in Kreuzberg, for example, sheltered an elderly Bosnian couple in their 70s on church premises after they received an *Abschiebung* (deportation) order. The couple occupied quarters fixed up in the basement as an apartment for many months while the church undertook exceptional efforts to protect them. Church members provided their daily food. Concerned that the authorities would arrest the couple and deport them, the priest even went to Bosnia to look for a decent nursing home where they might be placed.

High ranking officials objected too: Hans Koshnick (former EU administrator for Mostar and later the Federal Commissioner for Bosnian Refugees) criticized the two group deportations of 74 refugees from Berlin on July 1998 as grossly inhumane (EMZ 2002 report). The groups were deported in the middle of the night although they were awaiting status determinations for a third country resettlement.

Another way Germans helped refugees was by generously sponsoring their children for university study. Many of refugee children, who did not have the right to attend a university due to the *Duldung* status, managed to matriculate thanks to such sponsorship (such sponsorship is needed for all foreign students who do not have financial resources). To do so, they would return to Bosnia voluntarily, receive formal sponsorship from a German person to

enter college, and come back to Germany join their parents while studying. The son of a Bosnian family, who did precisely this, is now in his final year at the Technical University in Berlin. Because he has been such an outstanding student, he received a job offer from Bosch and will move to Stuttgart in a few months when his studies are completed to begin his new job. His parents speak of him with pride and with gratitude for the German family that agreed to sponsor his university study.

The well-intentioned German civil society assistance to refugees was not without its problems. The experiences of the refugees differ vastly along class, gender, ethnic and age lines.⁴ Nonetheless, the contemporary *Duldung* trauma added a performative dimension to the previous suffering, in that civil society could turn it into a commodity to be objectified so that it could be used to redress the residence problems.⁵ Such a commodification of trauma inevitably has led to different forms of competition among the refugees: mutual accusations on the “amounts of suffering” endured during the war; pointing fingers at each other that s/he did not actually suffer, was not raped, was not imprisoned, etc.

What remains clear however is that the German system as well as the European asylum policy have become a major source of traumatization of the people who have already been subjected to war distress. Those who left Germany, who went to the United States for instance, have also struggled with the displacement in a new environment different from the one either in Bosnia or Berlin. But arrival in the U.S. dispelled fears surrounding their legal residence—the U.S. government immediately issued them green cards and residence permits granting them rights on a par with other citizens. Those who have stayed in Germany however have been subjected to constant renewed fear of *Abschiebung*. Even after obtaining an *Aufenthaltserlaubnis befristet* (permit to stay), (which may be granted for different time-periods, from six months up to three years), uncertainties remain.

The new Hartz IV law introduced at the beginning of 2005 could be viewed as a step further: it abolishes the *Duldung* status and places refugees on an equal footing with German citizens with respect to employment benefits. Yet renewal of the *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* on the basis of the Hartz IV law depends on securing a job, which in turn requires mastery of German language, previous work experience, and being competitive in the labour market. Upon their earlier arrival in Germany, however, refugees were not allowed to obtain work permits or to get a better education. Work permits were issued only if no German or EU citizen was able to do the advertised job. Berlin had especially restrictive work permit policy when compared to other cities and *Laender* (German states) (EMZ report, 2002). After spending many years out of the job market, Bosnians I talked to acknowledged that they were not at all competitive in

⁴ Elsewhere I discuss the situation of the cosmopolitan class of younger people, mainly artists and young professionals who managed to establish personal bonds with Germans and marry them formally for obtaining resident permits or for real (Dimova 2007).

⁵ There have been a number of cases of children being imprisoned along with their parents or by themselves while waiting for the *Abschiebung*. The most noteworthy example was the case of the eleven years' old Tatjana whose story was turned into a theater play entitled *Hier Geblieben* and performed by Grips Theater in Berlin.

the German work force and that it was virtually impossible for them to find work other than construction for men or cleaning for women.

When asked whether they are better or worse off compared to those who *are* repatriated to Bosnia, refugees in Berlin learn of the dilemmas of return. Jasna, a Croat lady who voluntarily returned to Bosnia in 1999 because she feared forced *Abschiebung*, later returned to Berlin to visit her son for two months after he managed to enroll at the Free University, thanks to sponsorship provided by German friends. Jasna revealed that she returned to the same town where she had lived prior to her flight from Bosnia only to find that those in power were not interested in reintegrating the returnees, professionally or otherwise. On the contrary, they viewed those who left Bosnia as traitors. After 27 years of experience as a psychologist and social worker, Jasna was jobless for six years, living off miserable social support of about 80 Euros per month. She described her situation to me as hopeless: the people who were in power now were not interested in anything that she had to offer to the society. Her despair regarding the situation in Bosnia was shared by a large number of people who repatriated to Bosnia who later returned to Berlin to visit friends and relatives.

Conclusion

This text should be read as both a critique of and a contribution to the vast interdisciplinary body of literature on refugees. My ethnographic intervention highlights the distinction between the refugee whom the media represent spectacularly in the moment of suffering, and the disappearance from popular and political view of the same refugees as soon as the receiving nation-states confront the problem of integration and support. This larger project on Bosnian refugees in Berlin aims to reveal how refugees are caught between such poles of representation that shape their own experience of refugee status, both past and future. And I have suggested that we must understand representations and refugee experiences in historical and political context.

Peck (1995) has successfully argued that in the attempt to link the Nazi past to present-day xenophobia, the political and legal discourse in Germany, struggles to develop a politically correct attitude towards refugees and asylum-seekers. My research in Berlin support Peck's argument that even though Germany's liberal asylum policy was based on the inequities and horrors of its past, it has been unable to cope with the influx of refugees. Moreover, the German state has dealt inadequately with the need to develop laws that would accommodate the complex reality of contemporary Germany by recognizing the different experiences of being a foreigner, refugee, asylum seeker, guest worker, or immigrant (Peck, 1995: 105).

In this sense, I have tried to go beyond one facet of the literature on refugees and introduce the emotional, less formalised aspect of the refugee experiences (Daniel, & Knudsen, 1995; Malkki, 1995). In analysing the perception of refugees, categories such as trust and fear should be central since "the refugee mistrusts and is mistrusted" (Daniel, & Knudsen, 1995: 1).

The literature that has analysed the Yugoslav wars as a symptom of the post-cold war period, inextricably linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism, emphasises the political importance and the power shift caused with the regime change in Eastern Europe and the new meanings attached to being a Muslim (Goldsworthy, 1998; Hayden, 2000; Zizek, 2002). Indeed, as the Bosnians in Berlin struggle to adapt to their new status of a refugee, they must also redefine the meaning of their ethnic identity as Muslims, which after the Bosnian war, has obtained a stronger religious significance.

The emotional narratives of the Bosnians in Berlin surrounding the 10th commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre reveal a striking tension—between the genuine pain stemming from the siege and fall of Srebrenica and the equally traumatic experience of refugee's uncertain residence status in Germany. I have attempted to underline the complex situation of these people created by the German legal system and the civil society sector. I identified an unprecedented paradox: despite the generous welcome during the war years (1992-1995) when Germany accepted approximately 320,000 people (more than any other Western country), the German government has never granted them refugee status. It only offered temporary protection and *Duldung*, which required an unconditional departure from Germany when the war in Bosnia ended. The *Duldung* ordeal has become a major source of refugee trauma over the past thirteen years, both adding to pre-existing war traumas and reconfiguring their perception. The safest way of obtaining a residence permit in Germany proved to be by demonstrating severe traumatization. Hence, these people have been torn between required (and often exaggerated) remembering of their past war experiences, and the contemporary, real, but unrecognised trauma of feared detainment and deportation. This more contemporary trauma has become a dominant structuring force of their current lives.

Vocal critics of the German system could well argue that while Germany admitted the largest total numbers of refugees, the proportion relative to population was small. Germany accepted only 4 refugees per 1000 inhabitants, as compared to Denmark (5 per 1000), Austria (10 per 1000) or Sweden (14 per 1000). Only in Germany were Bosnians not granted permanent residence, a situation that has continued for thirteen years (EMZ 2002 report). Moreover, in Germany, refugees in general—and Bosnians in particular—have confronted the complex situation in which Germans and the German government try to come to grips with racism, xenophobia, and the question of their own identity (Peck, 1995: 105).

The years of armed conflict in former Yugoslavia indeed marked an important policy transition regarding migrants and refugees. Although *Duldung* status had existed in Germany before 1990, it had been applied primarily to immigrants from African countries. Only now was it begun to be applied on a massive scale to refugees fleeing conflict on the European continent. I do not suggest that it was primarily Germany that endorsed an exceptionally cruel treatment of Bosnian refugees. The decision to introduce a tolerated status and treat the refugees who fled Yugoslavia not as conventional refugees but as “tolerated” persons without long-term state commitments was introduced on an EU level. The justification for such a

decision lay in the fact that the 1951 Geneva Convention did not take into account the possibility of such a large influx of refugees and therefore was not appropriate for the impending flood of displaced people fleeing Former Yugoslavia.

This broader European treatment of refugees from Former Yugoslavia therefore reveals a crucial shift in the field of international humanitarianism. The determination of the EU countries not to apply international law in a humanitarian crisis and to interpret, enact and modify the Geneva Convention on refugees individually, introduces a new dimension in the domain of humanitarianism, which questions the efficacy and the power of international law. And yet, while the refusal to treat the Bosnian refugees as conventional refugees was an approach adopted by the EU countries, I argue that the case of Germany is exceptionally interesting because of two aspects:

- The unparalleled large numbers of people accepted;⁶
- The unprecedented length of the uncertainty regarding their residence permits.⁷

The experience of *Duldung* status as an ordeal rather than as protection deserves an in-depth analysis as it reveals a fundamental paradox underlying the *modus operandi* of humanitarianism in Germany.⁸ The *de facto* but not *de jure* refugee treatment of those from former Yugoslavia have suffered grave consequences: traumas related to constant fear of detention or deportation. These new ordeals often proved as powerful as those flowing from the earlier horrors of war, with which they began to blend in everyday living experiences., confounding conventional medical definitions of trauma, healing, mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The uncertainties of the current status has also been the main force shaping how the past traumatic events are remembered.

Moreover, as trauma has emerged as an effective legal basis for refugee advocates to contest deportation threats, the *Duldung* trauma has become a symptom of the legal and medical deadlock of the German political system: the process of the legalisation of trauma resolves the legal status of the displaced person on humanitarian grounds. We have at hand two complementary processes - of medicalization of law, and of legalisation of medical discourse – which articulation has added an important dimension on the contemporary political landscape of Germany’s treatment of immigrants, refugees, and newcomers.

The testimonies of the women involved in the commemoration of Srebrenica were often silent about their equally fraught experiences of “tolerated” *Duldung* status, even though these experiences had real and more immediate impact on their contemporary lives. Finally, many of those testifying found it burdensome and humiliating to have to justify their on-going presence in Germany by emphasising the endured trauma. I end with the words of one refugee

⁶ Only Berlin accepted 30,000 refugees, a number as high as Italy, France and Great Britain together.

⁷ Most of the other EU countries who assigned temporary tolerated status to the refugees from Former Yugoslavia in the initial resettlement phase, resolved their status within the next two or three years after their arrival. Many of the refugees who arrived in Austria, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Denmark, or Switzerland and who were allowed to remain in the country by now have passports and are citizens of these EU countries. Germany has never

⁸ For more on *Duldung* trauma see Dimova 2006a, Dimova 2006b.

as to how she reconciles the loss of her sons with her struggle for the legal status of her daughter.

“No therapy or verbalization could have helped me with coming to grips with the loss of my sons. Accepting and plunging into their death has been the only road for me, long and painful. It still is an everyday struggle, a constant presence that lurks behind my dreams and stabs me with a sharp force as soon as I open my eyes. It is not as if there is a way to diminish or forget the pain. But there is a way to embrace and accept it, to learn to live with it every second of my life. It is part of me and I now nurture it. I would hate to let go of it because the pain is my link to my dead children. They remain with me. I managed to get that feeling not by any assistance of the counselors or therapists, but by developing my own relationship to God. The struggle for my daughter is a different thing. She is alive and her place is here with me. This struggle I have to win verbally, by shouting, crying and screaming as loud as I can to explain to the officials that the right thing is for her to stay here. I talked on TV about what I went through in Srebrenica, I participate in every event related to refugees and I remind everyone that I lost two sons and a husband. I agreed to be central in this celebration too because this time I fight for the living.”

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