

Navigating the Labyrinth of Memory

A narrative study of alternative memorializations of the 1990's
Yugoslav Wars in contemporary Serbia



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Abstract

This thesis aims to discuss how histories of violent conflict can be addressed in a manner that enables societies to move on from legacies of war, a process herein referred to as reconciliation. By analyzing a historical museum exhibition situated in Serbia that takes on the decade of the 1990's in (post-)Yugoslavia, the question of how memory agents construct narrations of the past for the purpose of fostering reconciliation is analyzed and discussed. Some 25 years after the last armed conflict of the Yugoslav wars took place, the legacy of the wars still prevail across the region of the Western Balkans. Historical narratives depicting the wars are marked by ethnocentrism and nationalism, and many argue that contemporary political elites benefit from sustaining these narratives, contributing to political deadlocks and perpetuating hostile relations. Thus, this case illustrates a practice that deviates from and challenges master narratives reproduced by political elites. The study takes on a multimethod approach by combining a narrative analysis of the exhibition material, consisting of texts, images and videos, and semi-structured interviews, as well as secondary interview material. The case is examined using a two-dimensional theoretical framework merged from a theory about reconciliation processes and a theory about three different modes of narrating violent conflicts; antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic modes of remembering.

Key words: historical narratives, reconciliation, Yugoslavia, Western Balkan, agonistic memory

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1. Introduction

Shared memories of violent, disruptive events can constitute a powerful force when utilized purposefully. They can function as a reminder of that which can never happen again, a so-called moral remembrance of past abusements of human rights (David, 2020). Moreover, deliberately leaving out parts of the story - the act of forgetting - can have equally strong effects, albeit different ones. Some 25 years after the ending of the last armed conflicts of the Yugoslav wars, the now seven countries that made up Yugoslavia have witnessed various attempts of dealing with the legacy of the wars, some that have given result, but overall, the impact of these efforts have been limited (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011). The memory of widespread violence is embodied and kept alive in everything from public monuments and history school books, to oral histories told at family gatherings. This text departs from the idea that historical accounts are informed by particular ways of explaining and understanding the past, so called narratives (Barthes, 1967), (White, 1973). Scholars of peace and conflict studies have argued that the way in which collective accounts of war are narrated in post-conflict societies has implications for the prospect of peace and reconciliation in these societies (MacDowell & Braniff, 2014: 1).

1. 1. Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how histories of violent conflict can be constructed into new historical narratives that enable societies to move on from hostile relations grounded in the experience of war, a process herein named reconciliation. It does so by applying theory about reconciliation and narrative construction of memory, using a case of an alternative historical narrative museum exhibition in Belgrade, Serbia. The thesis aims to analyze and answer the following research question:

How can historical narratives be reconstructed for the purpose of fostering reconciliation in post-conflict societies?

The significance of the research questions lies in the notion that the (in)ability to address painful violent pasts on a societal level has implications for people's everyday life, and further shapes political developments in post-conflict regions in destructive ways (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 87).

1. 2 Thesis structure

The thesis is organized as follows; First, a brief introduction to the historical and contemporary political context in which the case is situated will be given. Thereafter follows a chapter on previous research on historical narratives and reconciliation, along with an outline of the theoretical framework used for analyzing the research question, including definitions of the key theoretical concepts and operational indicators. The fourth section presents the research design and methodology of the study. Lastly, the empirical data is analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework, followed by a discussion on the findings and a conclusion.

2. Background

2. 1. Situating the case in the post-Yugoslav region

The Yugoslav wars of the 1990's resulted in the deaths of approximately 140 000 people, a scale of human suffering unseen in Europe since the Second World War (ICTJ, 2009). The wars were preceded by years of rising nationalism and political conflict over power sharing in the republics of Yugoslavia, both in the political and civil sphere. In this process, political elites began to invoke ethnonationalist narratives, which had been suppressed under the rule of Tito in order to promote the Yugoslav device of "brotherhood and unity" between Slavic people in the socialist state (Vladislavjević, 2011: 145-157). Today, the narratives surrounding the wars of the 90's, embodied in everything from speeches from political and religious leaders to history school books, are still characterized by historical revisionism and ethnocentrism (Dyrstad, 2012), (Obradović, 2016). The public discourse surrounding the legacy of the wars in Serbia has been characterized as a "narrative of denial" (Obradović-Wochnik, 2013) and young generations that grew up after the wars are generally poorly informed about the events. Half of Serbians between the ages of 18 and 30 state that they know very little about the wars in the 90's, and almost a fifth say they do not know anything at all about it (Youth Initiative for Human Rights, 2023). Scholars and intellectuals argue that elites today benefit from sustaining the nationalist sentiments catalyzed in the 1990's, and consequently, elite incentives to engage in dealing with the past is low across the region (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011: 201).

2. 1. 1 Yugoslavia as a test site for peacebuilding paradigms emerging in the 1990's

Former Yugoslavia became somewhat of a test site for new peace building paradigms that emerged in the 1990's (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011: 193). These emerging paradigms entailed a shift both in academic research and international peacebuilding practices. For example, this decade saw the UN advancing their efforts at delivering justice to victims of war crimes. The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) was the first ad hoc court of its kind established since 1945 (Barrier & Roper, 2005: 349). Alongside judicial mechanisms, several so-called Truth and Reconciliation Commissions were initiated, grounded in the idea that peace also

must be anchored on a grassroots level. These commissions involved civil society-led projects dealing with past atrocities, and reconciliation between adversary parties was seen as an end goal of such activities. Some 30 years later, these measures, seeking to deliver justice, redress and reconciliation, have not delivered results in the way intended (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011: 201). International agents still have a high presence in the region today, pursuing an agenda of improved regional cooperation and transitional justice among other things. The EU is particularly present since Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia hold candidate status to the Union. Actors like the EU have however been criticized for refraining from putting pressure on Western Balkan leaders in their strive for promoting regional stability, thus cementing the power of regimes that are moving some of these countries in a more autocratic direction (Mujanović, 2018: 132).

2. 1. 2 Resisting nationalism

The ethnocentric narratives upheld by state actors have continuously been opposed by various actors in the post-Yugoslav region. Widespread civil protests took place throughout the 1990's, calling for democratic rule, ending of warfare and the resignation of Slobodan Milošević's government (Bieber, 2011: 165-168). In the contemporary setting, civil society actors and intellectuals continue to develop alternative ways of remembering the wars to those of the ethnonationalist commemorations pursued by state actors. These efforts are often constructed as conscious efforts at providing a more nuanced historiography, demanding accountability from politicians and providing redress to victims of war crimes (Fridman, 2010). It is one of these efforts that constitutes the subject of this thesis.

2. 1. 3 Introducing the case: Labyrinth of the Nineties

The museum exhibition Labyrinth of the Nineties takes on the time period of the 1990's in Yugoslavia, and is centered around the wars that unfolded in the region. The project is a response to a widespread unwillingness to address the events of the 90's that permeates the post-Yugoslav societies, despite its prevailing negative effects on the social, economic and political life across the region (Vrbica, 2023). Using multiple media; texts, images, items, videos, sound and a

VR-installation, the exhibition addresses 1990's Yugoslavia thematically. Its creators consist of prominent individuals from academia and the culture sphere in the post-Yugoslav region. Labyrinth of the Nineties was exhibited in Belgrade throughout summer 2023, and it is set to travel to other capitals in former Yugoslavia in the upcoming years. The pilot exhibition was funded by international NGOs and development cooperation actors; the European Fund for the Balkans, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Embassies of Sweden and Switzerland in Belgrade, and the EU-delegation to Serbia (Museum of the Nineties, 2023). The exhibition belongs to a larger initiative named the Museum of the 90's, and their long term objective is to establish a permanent regional hub for reconciliation and education (Broomfield, 2023).

3. Theory

3. 1. Previous research on reconciliation

The question of how to consolidate long lasting peace in post-conflict societies is a key concern for peace research. To paint a general picture, different peace paradigms have argued in favor of different approaches; proponents of cosmopolitan peacebuilding have argued that promotion of liberal democratic values and institutions in peace processes led by international organizations, provides the best basis for long lasting peace (Paris, 2002), while adherents of the “local turn” in peace research have argued that liberal peacebuilding risks enforcing Western values in an unanchored way, and that peace processes must be adopted to local post-conflict context and led by local agents (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The concept of reconciliation emerged in peace and conflict literature as part of these discussions, but while the aforementioned discussions put much emphasis on processes on the political and institutional level, the reconciliation literature drew upon social-psychology, and shed light on the role of perceptions and emotions among ordinary citizens in post-conflict settings (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004: 4). Reconciliation is a contested concept (Kriesberg, 2007: 2), but in general terms, it refers to the process of transforming relations between adversaries in a conflict, by (re)establishing trust and good relations between the parties. Reconciliation theorists have argued that by fostering reconciliation, post-conflict societies build resilience to conflict escalation and lay the ground for sustainable peace (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004: 4), (see for example Ackermann (1994), Bar-Tal (2000), Kriesberg (2007), Lederach (1997), and Rothstein (1999)). By mapping and analyzing the academic writings of the 70 most cited researchers on reconciliation, Strupinskienė (2017) has identified three dimensions in which reconciliation literature is situated; the first concerns the unit of analysis, focusing on reconciliation between individuals, communities or nations. The second dimension concerns the character or degree of reconciliation, expressed in thick or thin reconciliation. Third, research on reconciliation focuses on different forms of relations; social, political or economic relations between two or more entities. This illustrates how broadly the concept is used. In practice, reconciliation is widely used, for example in contemporary peacebuilding practices, implemented by states and international organizations like the UN (UN, 2023) and the EU (European Commission, 2018).

3. 1. 1 Critique of the reconciliation term

Despite its broad use, the term has been subject to much critique. The lack of a common definition of reconciliation has raised questions about the term's theoretical usability. A second critique pertains that reconciliation is hard to measure scientifically (Hermann, 2004: 41-42). Third, the term is often deployed for reconciling on a societal level between groups, but this process risks reducing individuals to their group belongings, assuming that people in a delineated group share the same views and experiences. Especially when this process is enforced upon people, for example by international peacebuilding agents, it risks enhancing conflict dynamics rather than bringing people together (David, 2020: 7), (Little, 2012: 85). Despite the many layers of critique, there seems to be a widespread perception that some level of reconciliation is desirable to achieve in a post-conflict setting (Strupinskiene, 2017: 452).

3. 2. Theorizing historical narratives

The second key theoretical concept for this study is *historical narratives*. The term refers to ways of producing particular perspectives on historical events. Historical narratives influence people's way of relating to their contemporary world, and also their way of relating to other people, for example contributing to strengthening group identification (Freel & Bilali, 2021). There are, however, a plethora of terms that seek to describe the process of remembering the past in a collective manner (Carretero & van Alphen, 2017). Terms such as collective narrative (Bruner, 1990: 76), collective memory (Bar-Tal, 2014) and memory discourses (Huysen, 2000) could have been utilized in this thesis as well. I decided on using the term historical narrative because I perceive it offered the highest level of theoretical precision. I want to emphasize the constructivist nature of collective remembrance, and I believe the 'narrative' component captures this. Further, I am interested in remembrance on a collective, societal level, and I believe 'historical narratives' specify the attention to the past more clearly than 'collective narratives'.

Narrative theory emerged in the humanities and social sciences in the 1960's. Influential works like "The Discourse of History" (Barthes, 1967) and "Metahistory" (White, 1973) claimed that historians are narrators who make conscious choices in their framing of the past, but by veiling their agency as narrators, their historical account are presented as all-encompassing truths. These notions

sparked decades of academic debates over the nature of historical research (Lorenz, Berger & Brauch, 2021: 2). As already touched upon, historical narrative tangents the study of collective memory, which pertains to the discipline of memory studies; the academic study of the social, cultural and political role of memories (Radstone, 2008). From a peace and conflict perspective, the relationship between on the one hand historical narratives and collective memory, and on the other, the origin of conflicts and post-conflict processes has been subject to substantial research (MacDowell & Braniff, 2014). Often, these studies focus on how narratives affect collective identification within national and ethnic groups during or after conflict (Bar-Tal, 2014), (Cairns & Roe, 2003). Historical narratives materialize in different ways. The (re)construction of historical narratives and their implications for collective identities in Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav context, have for example been studied analyzing narratives in history school books (Bartulovic, 2006), (Torsti, 2007), (Troch, 2012), speeches from political and religious leaders (Majstorovic, 1997), in foreign policies (Hornet & Renner, 2008), mass media (Pušnik, 2019) and museums (Damjanovic & Mason, 2023), (Širok, 2019).

3. 2. 1 Reconstructing historical narratives to foster reconciliation and peace

The topic of this thesis, the relationship between narrative construction and reconciliation processes in post-conflict contexts is well studied. Scholars have identified various ways in which historical accounts are constructed to enable conciliatory projects in post-conflict settings; narratives about inter-group relations prior to the outbreak of conflict have been altered to enable reconciliation and construct common historical enemies, for example seen after the Rwandan genocide (Buckley-Zistel, 2009), (Staub, 2014); conflict-sustaining narratives can be dismantled, for example seen in how nationalistic narratives are removed from history school books in the divided Cyprus (Papadakis, 2008); so-called ‘moral remembrance’-discourse can guide the memorialization departing from human rights norms, seen in how Germany dealt with the legacy of WW2 (David, 2020: 1-3); attention to victimhood in historical narratives can function as a unifying factor, emphasizing the shared experience of suffering during conflict, expressed in e.g. ‘inclusive victimhood’ (Demirel, 2023) or ‘cosmopolitan modes of remembering’ (Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen, 2016). In recent years, the concept of ‘memory activism’ has emerged (Fridman, 2022: 17), meaning “the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels” (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023: 5). Gutman (2022: 249)

describes memory activism as a “global paradigm of reconciliation” that has emerged in the civil society sphere since the 1980’s.

3. 3 Conceptual definitions

The key theoretical concepts in this study are *reconciliation* and *historical narratives*. To conceptualize reconciliation, I have drawn upon Bloomfield (2003: 12) who defines reconciliation as “a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future”. This conceptualization is broad, and to specify the term further, I try to respond to Hermann's assertion of the need to elaborate contextual definitions of the reconciliation term in order to increase its theoretical usefulness (Hermann, 2004: 58). I will do so by drawing upon the background section. The region of former Yugoslavia is today divided into seven nationstates, so in this case, the moving on to a “shared future” does refer to improving regional, cross-national relations. However, to do so, a broad inclusion of social and political units are needed; everything from individuals, communities and nations (Bloomfield, 2003: 13). The core thing is finding common ground in approaching and dealing with the violent past. Thus, in this specific context, reconciliation will be understood as acknowledging and dealing with the past, also understood as a process of ‘reconciling with the past’.

Second, to define historical narratives, I have drawn upon a definition from Freel & Bilali (2021: 205):

Historical narratives are social representations of the past (Liu & László, 2007) that serve key social functions: they provide a sense of temporal continuity (Sibley et al., 2008); they constitute part of group identity content, such as stories about the group’s origin (Malinowski, 1926); they act as a symbolic resource that can be mobilized in the service of political aims (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Sibley et al., 2008); and they serve as interpretive frames for understanding the present.

By utilizing this definition, I want to highlight that I understand historical narratives to be vivid concepts, existing not only in printed texts but also in people’s ideological beliefs, thus impacting the social and political world.

Further, the term *master narrative* will be used to refer to historical narratives that hold a hegemonic position in a nation (Carretero & van Alphen, 2017: 283), in this case ethnocentric and nationalist narratives pursued by political elites. The term *alternative narratives* is also used, and refers to narrations of historical events that actively deviate from the master narratives. Lastly, this text is built upon a constructivist ontology. Consequently, concepts such as ethnicity and national groups will herein be understood as social constructions and not set concepts prescribed with set, essential traits (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

3. 4. Towards a theoretical framework

I have utilized two theoretical frameworks to elaborate a combined framework for analysis; Auerbach's reconciliation framework, which puts emphasis on the role of narratives in reconciliation processes, which suits the aim of this study, since the link between narrative construction and reconciliation forms the basis of my research question. Second, the Modes of remembering-theory by Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen provides a framework to discuss different kinds of historical narratives, and their implications. These will further be elaborated in the following sections.

3. 4. 1. The Reconciliation Pyramid

The 'Reconciliation Pyramid', developed by Auerbach (2009) describes how antagonists to an identity conflict can reach reconciliation through a process of narrative reconstruction. Auerbach outlines seven stages in this process that build sequentially on each other; 1) Acquaintance: becoming familiar with other group(s) narratives, 2) Acknowledgement: recognizing that other narratives are perceived as legitimate for other groups 3) Empathy: expressing empathy for victim's suffering regardless of group affiliation, 4) Responsibility: agents express (partial) responsibility for causing harm to other groups, 5) Restitution: expressing readiness to making reparations to victims of the other group, 6) Apology: expressing a public apology to the other group and lastly 7) Narrative incorporation: dismantle contesting narratives and build a shared intergroup narrative in which parts of both group narratives are included. (Auerbach, 2009: 302-303). Auerbach describes the Reconciliation Pyramid as an "ideal type model" and emphasizes its exploratory nature. The theory "is aimed at generating further - theoretical as well as empirical - research" (Auerbach, 2009: 293), thus making it suitable for theory testing and development.



Table 1: The Reconciliation Pyramid (Auerbach, 2009: 303)

3. 4. 2. Modes of remembering

The modes of remembering characterizes three overarching ways of memorializing violent conflict; Antagonistic, Cosmopolitan, and Agonistic memory narratives (Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen, 2016). Antagonistic narratives carry the signs of many of the dominant narratives in post-Yugoslav region; a tendency to essentialize group identities, lacking critical reflection of the historical agency of the own group, and categorizations of historical actors in dichotomies of good and evil. The cosmopolitan narrative on the other hand puts focus on the tragedy of the human traumas and suffering, but excludes stories of perpetrators. This memory discourse has been criticized for trying to impose a eurocentric, universalist way of thinking that is simplifying, and it has also proved low resilience towards the rise of nationalism and populism (Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen, 2016: 392). The agonistic narrative is suggested to be the most constructive memory discourse. Building on Mouffe's idea of agonism, the agonistic narrative provides room for contesting narratives, and contributes to a deeper and more sustainable process of dealing with violent pasts, compared to the other two narratives. Further, Cento Bull et al (2019: 613-614) have applied the theory to war museums, exploring narratives present in commemorations of war in museums and analyzing their implications for the shaping of historical narratives.

Table 2: Modes of remembering (Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen, 2016: 400)

	Antagonistic Mode	Cosmopolitan Mode	Agonistic Mode
Nature of conflict	Good vs evil Good and evil as moral categories Us = good Them = evil	Good vs evil Good and evil as abstract categories Democracy/HR = good Totalitarianism = evil	Nature of conflict and violence depend on social circumstances, context and agency
Perpetrator/victim perspectives	Perpetrator perspective presented as victim Us = victims Them = perpetrators	Emphasis on victims' perspective on all sides	Learning from the memories/perspectives of victims, perpetrators and third party witnesses
Historical context	Manipulated, historical events turned into myths	Transcended, universalized	Remembering historical context and socio-political struggles
Reflexivity and dialogue	Self-consciously unreflexive, monologic	Reflexive, dialogic Exposing the constructed nature of memory Consensually dialogic (Habermas)	Reflexive, dialogic, multi-perspectivist Exposing the constructed nature of memory Open-endedly dialogic (Bakhtin)
Empathy and emotions	Empathy with <i>our</i> past sufferings, passion of belonging, demonizing the evil Other(s)	Compassion for human suffering	Passions oriented towards collective solidarity, preparing emotions for democratic institutions

I have compiled a new theoretical tool by merging the aforementioned frameworks and excluding elements that are not relevant for my study. The restitution and apology step in Auerbach's framework and the antagonistic memory narratives in Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen's framework have been excluded because these components do not reflect at all in my chosen data, thus redundant for the analysis. This results in a framework with two analytical dimensions; first, the extent to which the data reflects components of a social reconciliation process, thus contributing to fostering reconciliation in the chosen context, and second, the extent to which the data reflects historical narratives of a cosmopolitan and/or agonistic modes will be examined (see next page).

3. 4. 3 The Narrative analysis framework

Table 3: The narrative analysis framework	The reconciliation pyramid	Cosmopolitan narrative	Agonistic narrative
1. Narrative acquaintance	Antagonists become acquainted with the master narrative of the opponent	Telling the victim's perspective rather than dominant narratives Focusing on universal experiences rather than context-bound background narratives	Inclusion of testimonies from various sides when remembering the past; perpetrators, victims, witnesses Contextualizing the socio-political setting in which violent events took place
2. Narrative acknowledgement	Acknowledging the legitimacy of the master narrative for the antagonist	Emphasizing the narrative construction of memory through consensus oriented dialogic approach	Emphasizing the narrative construction of memory through an open-ended dialogic approach
3. Expressing empathy	Expressing empathy with the suffering of the antagonist	Highlighting the collective suffering of all civilians	Evoking empathy for victims as a first step in facilitating a critical way of remembering the past Addressing the role of emotions in the individual/civic/ political sphere during violent events
4. Assumption of responsibility	Agents express (partial) responsibility for past atrocities committed against the opponent/other groups	Absence of a distinct perpetrator in the narrative, consequently not addressing the topic of responsibility Perpetrator is the "ideology of authoritarian totalitarianism" rather than individuals/groups	Absence of dichotomies of good versus evil, contextualization of the human capacity for evil in the certain historical contexts and contexts of socio-political struggles Perpetrators testimonies can serve to explain how individuals/groups turn into perpetrators
5. Narrative integration	Creation of a joint narrative, based on the mutual acknowledgment of past miseries and a joint vision of the future → Reconciliatory narrative	Creation of a common victim-focused narrative based on experiences of collective human suffering → Cosmopolitan narrative	Reconstructions of the historical context, socio-political struggles and individual and master narratives which led to mass crimes being committed → Agonistic narrative

4. Method

The following chapter describes the methodology used to explore and answer the research question.

4. 1 Research design

This thesis deals with a research question of a descriptive kind, since I seek to illustrate a phenomenon using a specific case (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 96-98). I have drawn upon several qualitative research methods to answer my research question; narrative analysis of texts and visual material and two semi-structured interviews with the exhibition producers. These are some of the most commonly utilized research methods in the contemporary study of museums (Tucker, 2020: 520-531). Scholars of Museum Studies have argued that museums have emerged as important sites for dealing with complex and contesting narratives (Silke, 2013), (Borg & Mayo, 2010). Following this notion, Sitzia (2023: 154-158) argues that the emergence of the complex role of museums motivates a broader range of research methods for the study of museum exhibition, and that a multimethod approach can serve to integrate and complement different methodologies. Building on this argument, inspired by Sitzia, I have chosen to take on a mixed methods approach in the study of this case. By triangulating my methods I strengthen the reliability of my analytical findings (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 308), which is of extra importance to this study since some of the chosen methods are of an interpretive character. The interviews particularly serve to complement my narrative analysis of the exhibition material, by providing data on the intentions behind the content of the exhibition.

4. 2 Case study of alternative historical narratives

This thesis examines a case of an alternative memorialization of wartime, aimed at consciously dealing with past experiences of violent conflict in a post-conflict setting. The usage of a single case enables an in-depth analysis of a broader phenomena (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 214). Another strength with case studies lies in their capability of providing high conceptual validity, meaning they give room for precise theoretical conceptualizations of real world events, which enables a rich analytical discussion. It further enables exploration of relations between concepts in detail, in this case the relationship between narratives and reconciliation. However, a deep analysis of a single

case produces knowledge on the specificness of the case, which in turn entails limited possibilities to generalize my findings, which can be considered a limit with the chosen method (George & Bennett, 2005: 28-33).

4. 3 Case selection

Several aspects motivate the use of this case for the intended research purpose. First, it is an unusual case in the political context in which it is situated, both because it commemorates experiences of the Yugoslav wars among all major ethnic groups in the region in an integrated space, and also because it has a component of regional cooperation, since it is moving around in three different countries. As mentioned in the background, master narratives (both in and outside the museum sphere) about the Yugoslav wars often portray the perspective of one group, and museums portraying contesting or several narratives at once are rare. The way in which museums become platforms for pursuing conciliatory agendas through narrative reconstruction has been subject to prior research (Cento Bull et al, 2019), (Sitiza, 2023), (Stylianou-Lambert & Bounia, 2016), and there are examples of museums that has functioned as spaces for reconciliation in this specific region, for example the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo (Bakic, 2021). However, most in-depth studies of such museum initiatives are placed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is reasonable given that it is arguably the country most deeply marked by the wars (ibid.). This case is situated in Serbia, where I have yet not found any academic studies analyzing similar museum initiatives. Second, Labyrinth of the Nineties has not been subject to academic research yet. Lastly, this study is also motivated by a normative commitment to contribute to knowledge on reconciliation, and in the longer perspective, how peace can be facilitated in places that have complex and contested histories of violent conflict. My first impression when stumbling upon the exhibition that constitutes my case is that this too was the aim of the exhibition.

4. 4 Narrative analysis

A narrative analysis is a method used to analyze how storytelling produces meaning and affects the way in which humans relate to the social and political world surrounding them (Federman, 2016: 155). The method originates from linguistics, and became a common method through the “linguistic turn” in IR research in the 1980’s (Sadriu, 2021: 3). When utilized as a research concept within IR

or PCS, a narrative can be defined as a “concept that focuses on how memories are constructed in the form of stories about past events such as wars or political struggles” (Lamont, 2015: 171). Taking on this approach, researchers acknowledge that narratives have implications on human behavior and the unfoldment of political and historical events (Sadriu, 2021: 1). A narrative analysis is interpretive in nature. It can be particularly useful when examining cases of contested events and concepts within international relations, such as competing historiographies about war time events (Lamont, 2015: 43). Two notions put forward by Sadriu (2021: 2) informed my methodological choice; First, a narrative approach is useful when analyzing stories told through a variety of media, both verbal and nonverbal ones. Second, narratives can be used to both reinforce and to challenge hegemonic perceptions and structures. These notions correspond with the research ambitions of this thesis, since my case involves several different means, ranging from text and images to sound and physical objects, and the exhibition that constitutes my case is framed by its producers as an alternative way of engaging with the memory of the 1990’s in (post)-Yugoslavia to that of the master narratives. Furthermore, I am interested in analyzing the relationship between how the means of storytelling together form meaning for the viewer. By utilizing this method, I seek to unpack meaning making.

The empirical material obtained for the narrative analysis consists of texts and images used in the physical exhibition, collected through mobile photography during a visit to the exhibition in August 2023 and texts published on the website of the exhibition. The material was coded in different categories. Categories were formulated with help of the theoretical framework, the Reconciliation Pyramid, and the etho-political modes of remembering in museum spaces. The findings were collected into groups, and from reading them together, I discerned several narratives.

4. 4. 1 Text material

The textual material consists of 61 texts; 58 texts are from the exhibition and 3 texts describe the exhibition, and functions to situate the exhibition for the viewer.

4. 4. 2 Visual material

The visual material consists of 70 images, one video and a VR-simulation.

The rationale for studying visual material is substantiated by the “visual turn” in international relations in the 1990s, which emerged with the massive increase in production of visual material made possible by accessible digital photography technology (Bleiker, 2018:4-5). The widespread use of social media among social movements since the 2010’s and onwards has sparked further research on visual content of conflict (Doerr et al. 2013: xi). Visual Peace Research engages with questions of how images of violent conflict inform knowledge on peace and conflict issues (Möller, 2013: 19). The idea behind studying visuals is that visual sources produce other types of knowledge than those produced through text (Bellmer & Möller, 2023: 12-14). For example, scholars have suggested that images and videos have an inherent capacity to evoke emotions (Bleiker, 2018: 8-9), and therefore constitute useful data for the study of emotions in peace and conflict (Bramsen & Austin, 2022). Furthermore, images are often attributed with authenticity. This can be seen in the way that photojournalism is often prescribed the role of “bearing witness”. This implies that images are read as more of a credible depiction of reality than for example text, which has been narrated by the author. However, photographs are also narrations, chosen and depicted by the photographer with the camera as a mean (Bleiker, 2018: 12). The notion that visual material is also narrated is a ground assumption for my work. However, it is not the sole images or video in itself that should interest the peace researcher, but rather the broader context in which images were produced, how they relate to the context in which they continue to be read in, how they are ascribed certain meanings and influence people’s understanding of conflict related events that is of interest (Möller, 2013:20-21). Möller (2018) argues that this entails that researchers must take on a discursive approach to image data. I follow this notion, but I make use of the concept narrative instead of discourse, to tie my visual data to processes of meaning making. Furthermore, I am interested in the relationship between image and text (Möller, 2018: 84). All the images in the exhibition material had smaller text written to them, including names of photographer, year, place of origin, and in some cases additional text providing background information. My interpretation is that the curator/authors intended the images to be read together with the text, and I will treat them as co-constituting, examining how they speak to each other.

4. 5 Semi-structured interviews

I have also collected primary interview material from interviews with two members of the executive team; Igor Štiks, researcher and novelist and one of three authors of the exhibition, and Ana

Radakovic, PhD-student in History working as a contributor to the exhibition. Ana has also held guided tours of the exhibition with high school students. I drew upon semi-structured interviews by preparing an interview guide consisting of a set of base questions (see appendix 8. 1), while simultaneously providing space for the interviewees to elaborate freely on their answers and ask spontaneous follow-up questions to the things they told me (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 289-291). The interviewees are easily identified, thus, I asked if I could publish their names in the research, to which they consented. The interviews, together with analysis of secondary interview material with the third author Dubravka Stojanović and an additional interview with Igor Štiks from a secondary source, serve to provide data on the producer's intention with the exhibition. I also conducted an interview with the Public Diplomacy Officer at the Swedish Embassy in Belgrade, to account for and the role of donors in the exhibition.

4. 6. Operationalization

For this study, the operational definitions translate to how elements of historical narratives and reconciliation will be discerned in the exhibition material and additional data (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 135). The elaborated theory framework guided the identification of operational indicators: the five reconciliation categories; 1) acquaintance, 2) acknowledgement, 3) empathy and emotions, 4) responsibility and 5) narrative reconstruction and the two modes of remembering. They were categorized using the following measurements and to what extent they can be discerned in the data:

- *Acquaintance*: Inclusion of several perspectives on the same events, including testimonies from both victims/perpetrators/civil citizens/third party actors
- *Acknowledgment*: Acknowledging that other master narrative are legitimate for other groups, describing how master narratives received legitimacy
- *Empathy*: accounting for the perspective of victims of war crimes and other forms of violence
- *Emotions*: contextualizing the role of emotions in politics/, revoking emotions such as unease and compassion for the viewer
- *Responsibility*: Actors express assumption of responsibility for atrocities committed towards other groups in the past

- *Cosmopolitan narrative*: emphasizing the suffering of victims all groups, little attention focus on perpetrators
- *Agonistic narrative*: story is deconstructed by providing context to the historical, political and socio-economic settings in which violence took place, including multiple perspectives, dichotomies of good vs evil not present in storytelling
- *Narrative incorporation*: a single narrative constructed through joining parts of previously contesting master narratives together with joint visions of the future

4. 7 Limitations

There are limitations to what conclusions I can draw from analyzing my chosen data. Whether my chosen case actually has fostered broader reconciliation is not possible to state. Acknowledging that reconciliation is a tricky thing to research, the contribution of this study is rather to explore in what ways my given case lay the ground for, or function as a tool for further reconciliation. Further, I do not speak any of the native languages in the post-Yugoslav countries. However, since the whole exhibition was shown both in Serbian and English, I do not perceive that this has limited my data collection. One picture used for the analysis contained text in the native languages, and for this, I transcribed the text and translated it using Google translate.

4. 8 Positionality

I encountered the exhibition that constitutes my case when I lived in Serbia and conducted a five month internship at the Swedish Embassy in Belgrade during autumn 2023. This I mention for the sake of transparency, since the Embassy is one of the co-financiers of the project. However, I entered the exhibition prior to the start of my internship, and I did not work with the exhibition during my time at the Embassy. To increase transparency on the donor role of the Swedish Embassy in the project, I have interviewed Slavica Markovic-Sandic, who was Officer of Public Diplomacy at the time when the project was financed by the Embassy. The entry point for this thesis is the great interest that I have developed for this region, and I believe and hope that my time living there and developing connections with local residents has deepened my understanding of the political and historical context which I will be analyzing.

5. Analysis

The following section presents an analysis of the case through the lens of the theoretical framework. The five steps of the reconciliation pyramid are utilized to guide the analysis.

5. 1. Narrative acquaintance

The first step in the reconciliation framework concerns the level of acquaintance, meaning description of narratives of different (opposing) sides. The reconciliation model highlights the need to become acquainted with the master narrative of one's antagonist, the cosmopolitan narrative highlights acquaintance with the narratives of all victims, while the agonistic narrative highlights inclusion of contextualized testimonies from all sides.

The exhibition material enables the viewer to become acquainted with different dimensions of the past, without describing the events from the perspective of master narratives of ethnonationalism. Rather, the exhibition explains the context in which such narratives emerged, and what key agents spread and sustained nationalist sentiments and divisions. The room 'Deception' puts focus on explaining this. For example, a text labeled "Library" states the following:

Intellectuals, academics, authors, and politicians were all active in spreading nationalist narratives and myths in Yugoslavia before and during the wars. These individuals participated actively in public forums and political events, wrote for the state media, produced books on their own nation's political "destiny," and "revealed" the "hidden and silenced truths." There was also a surge of popular unscientific literature that focused on the ancient origins of one's own nation, usually attributing non- Slavic origin. (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 49)

Beside the text stands a table with autobiographies from political leaders of the republics in Yugoslavia. The objects and the text provide a sense of how nationalist narratives materialized and were spread by political elites through popular culture.



(Exhibition catalog, 2023: 48)

The choice of excluding the contents of the nationalist narratives in the exhibition makes sense when taking the framing of the exhibition into consideration. The introduction of the exhibition and interviews with the producers shows a conscious intent to move beyond nationalist, ethnocentric narratives. From the theoretical perspective of the reconciliation pyramid, acquaintance with the dominant narratives (in this case nationalist narratives) is important to enable reconstruction of historical narratives and thereby foster reconciliation. This could for example prescribe that Serbs entering the Belgrade exhibition should become acquainted with nationalist narratives used by Croat leaders in the 90's, to understand how Croat militaries legitimized Operation Storm. However, stories of such kind are not presented in the material. By applying the theoretical framework, I conclude that the notion of narrative acquaintance as prescribed by Auerbach (2009) does not reflect in the empirics. When read through the theoretical framework, it is clear that the presentation of historical events in the exhibition material carry characteristics of an agonistic narration, since much emphasis is put on unpacking the historical context in which the socio-economic and socio-political struggles played out, rather than presenting nationalist narratives.

Interviews with the project contributors further illustrate a shortcoming of the theoretical notion that people belonging to national or ethnic groups must become acquainted with each other's nationalist narratives to embark on conciliatory projects. This notion assumes that parties to an identity conflict share a coherent view of the group's experience of war time in the form of a master narrative. However, the context in which this case is situated shows that this assumption is faulty. One of the interviews highlighted that the executive team had identified a generational divide in how the exhibition was read and received by visitors (Interview 2, Ana Radaković). Between 400-500 high school students from Belgrade visited the exhibition, and Ana (Interview 2) guided several tours for these groups and therefore interacted with young visitors directly. She highlighted how the high school students had some prior knowledge of parts of the historical events displayed in the exhibition because they have been exposed to what she referred to as personal "this is my story of what happened"-narratives from relatives, but they were generally emotionally detached to the events of the 90's, as they belong to a generation of people with few or no first hand experiences of the decade. Their experience of walking the exhibition differed much from visitors of age 40 and upwards, who related to the text in a direct way (Interview 2, 2024).

In that way, the material illustrates a problem with theories that make assumptions about collective prior knowledge. Most of the people visiting the exhibitions were Serbs, but they entered with different prior knowledge, and one of the factors that played into this was the factor of age. The problem of assuming that groups share a coherent narrative pertains to a broader critique of the reconciliation term, namely that it tends to reduce individuals' identities and experiences to the entities that are supposed to reconcile - often an ethnic or national group. Because of that, reconciliation processes have also been criticized for reinforcing collective identification, aggravating the dynamics of identity conflict (Little, 2012: 85). I interpret that by rejecting presentations of predefined narratives of national myths or personal stories, instead taking a more factual, contextualizing approach, the exhibition encourages visitors to reflect independently rather than having to encounter all-encompassing narratives that they must either buy into or reject completely.

5. 2. Narrative acknowledgment

The second component of the pyramid is narrative acknowledgment, meaning a process where two parties with contesting narratives acknowledge that the adversary considers their own narrative to be legitimate. From the perspective of cosmopolitan and agonistic narratives, the important component of this step concerns acknowledging that memory is constructed in nature, through reflexive dialogue. While the cosmopolitan narrative preferably wants dialogue to result in reaching consensus, the agonistic narrative acknowledges the importance of open-ended dialogues.

The reconciliation model prescribes that the narratives that sustain conflict have agency in this process. Following the previous section, the exhibition's lack of presentation of dominant nationalistic narratives makes the element of acknowledgement a bit more complex to apply to the exhibition data. However, the exhibition material provides elements of acknowledgement by unpacking the context in which certain ethnonationalist narratives received legitimacy from the broader masses. Various dimensions of contextualizing themes can be discerned. First, the socio-political context is addressed in the material. As already mentioned, the way in which people were deceived by powerholders through propaganda spread in various channels is central in the narration. This can be seen for example in how the role of mass media is addressed:

Since the late 1980s, nationalist propaganda has flooded the Yugoslav press. The media disseminated propaganda narratives to influence public opinion and support the political objectives of various conflicting parties. Regime-controlled media contributed to the further polarization of society and fostered interethnic mistrust through biased reporting, factual distortion, hate speech, and outright falsification of events. However, even in such difficult circumstances, there were many journalists and media outlets that reported objectively and impartially about the events. (“Newspaper covers”, Exhibition catalog, 2023: 45)



(Exhibition catalog, 2023: 44)

The text cited above is attached to a display of front pages of three magazines in Yugoslavia reporting on four decisive events during the Yugoslav wars, with the top row showing Sarajevo-based *Oslobodenja*, middle-row showing Zagreb-based *Vjesnik*, and bottom row showing Belgrade-based *Vecernje novosti*, letting the viewer become acquainted with how the same happenings were framed in fundamentally different ways.

Second, the socio-economic factors also serve to contextualize the environment in which nationalistic narratives received legitimacy. In the room ‘Deception’, the economical crisis in Serbia and Montenegro of the 90’s is explained, addressing the extreme hyperinflation and how pyramid schemes were introduced as a means to finance the Yugoslav army (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 50-53). Also, the room ‘Home’ depicts some economic aspects, since it talks about the rise and fall

of the Yugoslav industry by displaying objects produced in this industry. However, interviews showed that the exhibition producers perceived that the focus on socio-economic factors in the Belgrade exhibition was inadequate, and consequently decided to elaborate this topic in the Sarajevo exhibition, opening in May 2024 (Interview 1, 2024). The rationale for including more about socio-economic factors was clarified through interviews:

The consequences were enormous, and resulted in enormous exile and immigration and poverty, and people had grievances because some people got rich overnight by pretty much stealing social property. What was built during socialism during 50 years and belonged to no one or belonged to workers now belonged basically to people who were quite well connected with the political power, with the mafia and organized crime. You cannot understand dynamics in this society if you don't also understand the logic of the enormous transformation that hit this society after 1989. When speaking about the labyrinth of the 90s, this was really important. (Interview 1, Igor Stiks)

Thus, attention to economic changes contributes to painting the broader picture of what setting the wars took place in, by acknowledging that economic transitions had a disruptive and pervasive societal impact. Again, the exhibition tries to explain the mechanisms at play by unpacking the socio-economic and socio-political context, thus aligning much with the agonistic narrative framework. It further constitutes an agonistic practice since it does not provide the viewer with a clear solution, a consensus, as stipulated in the cosmopolitan narrative, rather, the reader is left with a rather open end with room for interpretation. Further, as previously mentioned, dialogue has taken place for example through talks with high school students, in which they were encouraged to discuss the content with the exhibition organizers.

To sum up, the theoretical stages of narrative acquaintance and narrative acknowledgement become almost equivalent concepts when applied as theoretical terms in this data, since the exhibition focuses much on answering the question of “Under what circumstances can violence inciting, nationalist narratives receive legitimacy in a society?”, rather than communicating the content of these narratives and thereby encouraging people to acknowledge the legitimacy of them.

5. 3 Empathy and emotions

The reconciliation framework prescribes that capacity to feel empathy with victims is key in finding a common ground to build shared, future-oriented narratives. Similarly, evoking empathy is the first step in critically addressing the past in the agonistic narrative, while empathy for victims and human suffering constitutes the core element of the cosmopolitan narrative.

The visual material in particular functions to evoke strong emotions for the exhibition spectator. However, the text is needed to provide context, and thereby deepen the emotional experience of looking at the images. This can be illustrated through the process of me reading an image and text in the room labeled “Violence”:

I start by looking at the image. It shows a black and white picture of a rectangular object floating in a lake. At first glance, I do not feel anything but slightly confused by the image, unsure of what it depicts. Next to the picture, there is a text describing the war related fatalities against civilians in the Yugoslav wars. The text ends with a description of the image’s content; the rectangular object is a refrigerator car containing the remains of Albanian civilians killed in the Kosovo war. This information evokes a feeling of unease in me. I once again turn to look at the image, and as I do that, my unease deepens strongly.

My interpretation of the image is dependent on the text, but the image serves to realize, embody and concretize the information provided by the text, reducing the distance between me as a spectator and the victims in the car in the lake.



(Exhibition catalog, 2023: 124).

Another example of a visual element that strongly speaks to empathy is the VR-experience “the Tunnel of Salvation”, which is a VR simulation of walking through the underground tunnel that constituted the only exit from the besieged Sarajevo. Below follows a field note depicting my experience of walking through the tunnel in the VR:

I walk through the tunnel by moving my hands back and forth. It’s a tense experience, especially since the museum guide prepares me by saying that I can expect a shocking thing happening in the end. While walking, I can hear shootings above ground. When finally reaching the end of the tunnel, a bomb detonates right before my eyes.

The visuals in the VR were evidently animated, thus the level of authenticity was lower than that of a photographic image. However, the VR-simulation enabled me as a the viewer to embody the experience of a victim of besiegement. The VR-experience produces knowledge on what it might have felt like to escape war through the tunnel. Through the VR-experience, the viewer gets a sense

of the cramped spatial area of the underground tunnel, and the agony of not knowing what awaits at the end.

The exhibition further covers the topic of emotions beyond feelings of empathy for victims. Several emotion-narratives can be distinguished. One is the narrative of nostalgia and sorrow following the breakup of Yugoslavia. This, I perceive, is captured in the exhibition's first room 'Home'. The room includes objects produced in Yugoslav industries, commonly occurring in Yugoslav homes; a wardrobe, radio, television, tape recorder, telephone, typewriter and video recorder. A video is projected on the wall, showing short clips. Initially, it shows a music video of the song "Jugoslovenska", performed by the famous Yugoslav singer Lepa Brena, followed by a clip from a basketball match with the Yugoslav national team. Then, the video continues with speeches from leaders of the different republics, which later on became different countries. Watching a video depicting the political dissolution of Yugoslavia unfolding, surrounded by artifacts that constitutes symbols of Yugoslav production and cultural references to a shared Yugoslav past, in a setting resembling a home environment from the 1990's, evoked feelings of nostalgia and sorrow over the events that followed for me as a viewer.

Another emotion-narrative present in the exhibition material pertains to more positive emotions. The room 'Happiness' is devoted to experiences of joy in the midst of the chaotic decade. Also, the room 'Dissent', depicts different forms of collective actions of opposing nationalist politics and violence. It nuances the idea of deeply cemented ethnonationalist sentiments often attributed to the Yugoslav wars (Todorova, 1997), and shows that many people opposed the nationalist politics of the 90's, evoking a sense of hope for the viewer. To conclude, the attention to emotions in the exhibition data is multifaceted: the material is inviting the visitor to empathize with victims of war crimes, which is also prescribed in all the three theoretical approaches applied to the empirics. While doing that, the exhibition simultaneously invites the viewer to explore other emotions that are not directly linked to violence and victimhood, such as nostalgia and happiness. In that way, it moves beyond the cosmopolitan narratives sole focus on evoking empathy for victims, and aligns more with the agonistic narrative of remembrance, where the role of emotions is addressed in a broader sense.

5. 4. Assuming responsibility

The fourth step in the reconciliation pyramid involves a process of assuming (partial) responsibility for the past. Again, agents carrying the dominant narratives are not present in the exhibition. Thus, it does not provide a forum for these actors to assume responsibility. However, the exhibition in its entirety can be understood as an act of assuming responsibility. Not in the sense that it is acknowledging that ‘we (Serbs, for example) as a group have done damage to your group (Bosniaks, for example)’, as referred to in the reconciliation pyramid, but rather by assuming a general responsibility of reconciling with the past in the post-Yugoslav region.

In contrast to a cosmopolitan narrative, perpetrators are present in the material. Throughout the exhibition, political leaders, governments and military entities are portrayed as the agents responsible for the war atrocities committed. However, as noted both in interviews (Broomfield, 2023), (Vrbica, 2023), (Interview 1 & 2, 2024) and literature (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011: 201), many of the leading military and political actors were convicted in the ICTY, but these judicial mechanisms, along with numerous reconciliation projects, have not brought deeper societal reconciliation. From interview material with producers and the framing of the exhibition, it is clear that the authors perceive that the dynamics prevail today because rulers have refrained - and still do - from assuming responsibility, and this obstructs the process of moving on from the societal legacy of the Yugoslav wars.

All Serbian governments worked to keep that decade (the 90's) alive, and no government, even after the 2000s, did work on stating what happened, who is to blame for what, so that we can move on. The authorities are interested in keeping us in that decade.

Exhibition producer Dubravka Stojanovic, quoted in Euractiv (Vrbica, 2023).

In a context where institutional responsibility for the past remains largely absent, the producers of *Labyrinth of the Nineties* are aiming to influence their present and future political and social context by undertaking the commitment of reconciling with the past in a non-state forum. Thus, I believe this case can be placed in the broader practice of memory activism, since it arguably is a “strategic commemoration of a contested past (*aiming*) to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels” (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023: 5).

The topic of responsibility carries traits of an agonistic narrative since it does not portray one actor as good and others as evil. Rather, it includes statements on how all groups fell victim to different war crimes, and how the different military groups perpetrated the crimes. For example, the text labeled ‘Killings’ presents the number of civilian and military casualties from each ethnic/national group beside each other in a rather factual tone. Testimonies from perpetrators are not presented so that the viewer becomes familiarized with their perspective, as prescribed in the theory of agonistic modes of remembering. However, since the producers express that they understand the perpetrators' perspective prevails in present day politics, and they want to offer a “fresh look” at the 90’s (Museum of the 90’s, 2024), the absence of deeper insight into the perspective of convicted war criminals is reasonable.

5. 5. Narrative integration

The final step of the narrative reconciliation framework concerns the creation of a new, common narrative, based on the mutual acknowledgment of past miseries and a joint vision of the future. This is where the deepest process of reconciliation takes place according to the model. Using the two additional perspectives, I will analyze to what extent the exhibition narrative constitutes a cosmopolitan or agonistic way of remembering. In that way, this part of the analysis involves zooming out on the exhibition material, and analyzing what it tells us in its entirety.

First, turning shortly to the cosmopolitan narrative, I conclude that the exhibition material does not reflect the characteristics of a cosmopolitan mode of remembering. It includes context-specific descriptions, focusing not only on the suffering of victims, but also the broader context in which violence took place and who perpetrated it. In this way, the exhibition reserves itself for the shortcomings of the cosmopolitan narratives: a universalistic perspective with low resilience against nationalist narratives (Cento Bull & Lauge Hansen, 2016).

Second, turning to whether the exhibition constructs a new joint narrative, as prescribed in the reconciliation pyramid-framework. The nine thematic rooms together do create a narrative, albeit a fragmented one. The incorporation of contesting master narratives do not materialize in the data. The fragmented narrative, I conclude, reflects an agonistic way of narrating the past, and the

intention to not present all-encompassing stories is clearly demonstrated, for example in the description of the exhibition:

This pilot exhibition is conceived as a cluster of fragments without a predetermined plan or instructions. We encourage visitors to complement this exhibition in their minds with what they believe is missing, what should be displayed, and what we must yet come to terms with. Only by collectively reflecting on the recent past can we gain a deeper understanding of our present and envision a different future. (Museum of the Nineties, 2023).

As previously outlined in the analysis, the empirical data provides many layers of context to the conflicts, thus accounting for an agonistic form of framing the history. The role of propaganda and socio-economic factors has already been discussed more in depth. Throughout the analysis, additional dimensions of contextualizing the wars were discerned:

a) The broader historical context of the 1990's. Special attention is given to the socio-economic transitions taking place in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism after 1989, and the socio-political changes taking place with the expansion of the EU and strengthened globalization. This functions to frame the 1990's as a decade of critical transitions, also beyond the post-Yugoslav region.

b) Memorializing acts of resistance against war and totalitarianism. Memorializing peace activism, for example the work of the feminist activist group Women in Black (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 74-75) and other peaceful acts of resistance, e.g. the "Theatre under Siege" in Sarajevo (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 62-63) and soldiers who disobeyed orders and sought non-violent alternatives in the Yugoslav wars (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 76-77). Together, this gives a voice to the people who resisted resorting to violence. This serves to nuance the idea of widespread ethnic hatred, and show that people united to protest nationalist policies in the past. It also shows the width of the resistance; for example the picture below depicts an anti-war concert by the joint band Rimtutituki in Belgrade in 1992. The picture shows a myriad of people attending the concert, and the text next to the picture states that the biggest concerts of the band were attended by tens of thousands.



“Rimtutituki” (Exhibition catalog, 2023: 70-71)

c) Multiple perspectives told through multiple media. Last, but most importantly, the narration enables different entry points to the stories being told. The Labyrinth form used in the exhibition challenges traditional, sequential story-telling. It functions as a metaphor for the chaotic political, economic and social state of mind that characterized the post-Yugoslav societies in the 1990’s, and the struggle of finding a way out of that state (Broomfield, 2023). Further, using multiple media, it engages all senses and also provides room for interpretation. Overall, the tone is educational and factual. Thus, it speaks to different audiences and invites participants to enter from different angles, relate to and absorb different parts of the material (Interview 1, 2024). This form of story construction might carry certain implications, for example that it might be confusing to visitors with no or limited prior knowledge of the Yugoslav wars.

5. 6 Summary

This case has illustrated that historical narratives about violent pasts can be reconstructed using an agonistic mode of narration. The exhibition does so by deconstructing history thematically, providing background context to the events through accounts of the political context, the socio-economic transitions taking place, the broader historical European context, but also by giving voice to often suppressed images of the resistance that did take place, as well as glimpses of happiness in the midst of everything. Thus, the narrative discerned in the data is not a sequential one but rather fragmented. The fragmentary way of narrating also serves as a metaphor for the disruptive experience of war, and how the legacy of those experiences still prevail in the post-Yugoslav societies today. By disobeying the form of master narratives, the exhibition encourages independent reflection about the Yugoslav wars, and this could be understood as a crucial step in moving past divisions, and towards a shared future for the region. Thus I found that this case poses a contribution to the broader process of fostering reconciliation. The exhibition has particularly engaged young people and provided a platform for them to learn about the violent past and discuss it with the exhibition tour guides.

5. 7 Broader implications of the findings

Lastly, the general implications of the findings will be discussed. The analysis has illustrated some shortcomings with the reconciliation term, in particular the issue of *who* is to reconcile, in this case embodied in the generational divide in relations to the wars of the 90's that now exists in the post-Yugoslav region. However, since the term is still used by influential peacebuilding actors, this points to the need for continued critical examination of the term. Another term, specified more towards the critical use of history, might be more appropriate than the reconciliation term, which rather brings intergroup processes between people who experienced the wars to mind.

The findings of the analysis could inform other cases too, but to do so, some attention must be paid to the specificity of this case. The post-Yugoslav region is indeed a unique case for several reasons. By mapping some of the characteristics of the political, historical and social post-conflict context, I suggest the following conditions under which agonistic narration of history might be a fruitful tool for fostering reconciliation:

- a) **Conflict transformation;** the conflict has transformed from violent to non-violent conflict, meaning there are no longer any armed fights, and the conflict is now expressed for example in hostile political relations between states.
- b) **The passing of time;** A significant amount of time has passed since the armed phase of conflict. One such indicator could be that there is now a generation with few or no personal experiences of wartime.
- c) **A history of equal relations;** The parties share a history of living with high levels of equality and unity between them prior to conflict.

However, these conditions are of a hypothetical nature and I encourage a wider empirical lens and application of the theory to cases that do not carry all of these characteristics.

Furthermore, I encourage the continued study of this case and its effects in a longer perspective. I believe its most valuable potential lies in its capability to equip young people with knowledge about the wars, and encourage critical historical discussions. This contribution of the exhibition could for example be studied further through interview studies with youths who visited the exhibition, or through ethnographic field studies conducted in the museum site, to examine in-depth how visitors interact with the exhibition.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how historical narratives can be reconstructed to enable processes of reconciling with violent pasts. By applying a theoretical framework of narrative analysis composed of a theory on reconciliation processes and two theories on narration of collective memories to the exhibition material of the Labyrinth of the Nineties exhibition in Belgrade, the research question has been analyzed. The analysis showed that the historical narratives presented in the exhibition reflect an agonistic mode of remembering. The study has also illustrated issues with the reconciliation term, more specifically that it tends to produce a simplistic view of individuals belonging to identity groups that constitute the intended subjects of reconciliation processes. Interviews with the producers showed that a generational divide is clearly present in Serbia, where this case was situated. Whether these age dynamics become as prominent in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, where the exhibition will also be shown, remains to be seen. However, the generational factor is important to consider, especially for actors promoting reconciliation in the Western Balkans, such as the EU, UN agencies and state actors in development cooperation.

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7.2 List of interviews

Interview 1: Štiks, Igor (2024-05-07), *Researcher and novelist, Igor is one of the authors and initiators of the exhibition.* Online video call. Duration: 59 minutes.

Interview 2: Radaković, Ana (2024-05-09), *PhD-student in history at University of Belgrade. Ana is a contributor to the project and has among other things held guided tours in the Belgrade exhibition.* Online video call. Duration: 52 minutes.

Interview 3: Markovic-Sandić, Slavica (2024-05-20), *Coordinator for Public Diplomacy, Private Sector and Sweden Promotion. Slavica coordinated the Swedish financial contributions to the Labyrinth exhibition in Belgrade in 2023.* Online video call. Duration: 15 minutes.

7.3 Primary sources

Exhibition catalog of the pilot exhibition “Labyrinth of the Nineties”, (2023) *Museum of the Nineties* Acquired as a 138 page digital file through the Museum.

Mobile photographs and notes that I collected during my visit to the exhibition in August 2023 were also used as primary sources.

8. Appendix

8.1 Interview guide

1. I begin by introducing myself, my research and the purpose of the interview
2. I ask for consent on recording and spelling out the name of the interviewee in the research
3. I proceed to ask the interview questions:

Questions for the interviewee:

- Introduce yourself, state your name and profession
- Describe the entry point for your engagement with this project
- What target audience did you have in mind when making the exhibition? Do you perceive they were reached by the pilot project?
- Have you met any resistance throughout the project? E.g. political resistance, smear campaigns etc.
- Any specific lessons learned that you took with you when elaborating the Sarajevo exhibition? Any considerations or changes that were made?
- How do you envision the long term goal of establishing a reconciliation center? Who will be the target group of the center's work?