

NARRATING LIFE STORIES IN THE
AFTERMATH OF ATROCITY

MEMORIES
OF MASS
REPRESSION

NANCI ADLER
SELMA LEYDESDORFF
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Acknowledgments

This volume is comprised of a number of outstanding contributions that emerged from various professional gatherings. We are grateful to the authors for the high quality of their work, and for their forbearance during a rather long editorial process. We would like also to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to four institutions for organizing the forums that inspired this collection. In November of 2005, Sabancı University in Istanbul organized a workshop on “Memory, Narrative and Human Rights” that generated discussion on fundamental issues related to remembering mass repression. The idea of a collective volume on this theme came about during this time. The subject was further explored in March of 2006 when the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and the University of Amsterdam) hosted a symposium entitled “Memory and Narrating Mass Violence.” There, a number of young scholars shared the results of their field work, and many cross-cultural similarities were observed. We also reflected on the critical differences in the way in which mass violence is remembered and related, and this discussion is set forth in the present volume. Also in March of 2006, the Oral History and Life Stories Network of the European Social Science History Conference organized two panels in Amsterdam on “repressed memories and memories of repression.” A number of the panelists addressed increasingly topical issues relating to memory and recalling mass repression. We were eager to become acquainted with their work, and to be able to include it in this volume. Lastly, in November of 2007 the University of Salzburg provided a forum, “The Meaning of Narrative,” which gave the opportunity to reflect upon the volume’s conclusions. Finally, and in fact in the first place, we are deeply grateful to the subjects for their willingness to be interviewed. In the pages that follow, readers will better understand the extent of their feat, not only in their experience of repression itself, but in the very act of talking about it.



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Introduction

*Nanci Adler, Selma Leydesdorff, Mary Chamberlain,
and Leyla Neyzi*

After years of extensive academic debate, there is consensus among most researchers that the accounts of survivors form an important basis for the study of genocide and mass violence. For a long time, some historians had argued that not only what former victims said, but also what they remembered was biased, and thus belonged to the realm of emotions.¹ Memories were only accepted for purposes other than the writing of history, because testimony so many years after the event was not considered a viable, reliable source. The history writing on mass atrocities also avoided so-called subjective information. In later years, when historians accepted new sources they restricted themselves to the traditional grid of subjectivity such as letters, memoirs, and autobiography. Oral testimonies were relegated to other venues that dealt with the past like the courts, movies, or televised documentaries. It was in these forums that it became apparent how volatile and changing memories could be. Especially in the courts, where the criminal character of the perpetrators of mass violence was already judged at an early stage on the basis of testimonies, psychologists and other specialists on memory were increasingly called upon to argue that little credibility should be given to that which was remembered. Even so, memories were still needed to reconstruct what had happened, but the chronicling of those memories followed different rules than would historians basing themselves on written sources.²

In the last decade, the landscape has changed and massive efforts have been undertaken to integrate memories of mass violence into the writing of its history,³ not just out of respect for the survivors (as its detractors argue), but because any history writing that would exclude the voices of

those who suffered would be incomplete.⁴ This is not limited to the use of oral sources.⁵ There are also events for which oral testimonies and written personal memories are our only source for investigation.⁶ The Armenian genocide and more recent genocides such as that which took place in Rwanda are clear instances in which written records (if they even exist) are not sufficient for reconstructing what happened. It follows that in the writing of the history of genocide, “emotional” memory and “objective” historical research are interwoven and inseparable. It is as much the historian’s task to decipher witness accounts, including their inherent charged emotional language, as it is to interpret whatever “traditional” written sources may be available.⁷ These sometimes antagonistic narratives of memory, fashioned and mobilized within public and private arenas, together with the ensuing conflicts, paradoxes, and contradictions that they unleash, are all part and parcel of efforts to “come to terms” with what happened. Mining memory is the only way in which we can hope to arrive at a truer, and less biased, historical account of certain events. Undoubtedly, the rise of interdisciplinary research on memory has had its own influence on the ways historians now view remembered data.⁸

Memories of Mass Repression: Narrating Life Stories in the Aftermath of Atrocity presents some of the results of researchers working with the voices of witnesses. We do not view either the volatility of the voices nor the subjective experiences as negative attributes, but rather consider the vast field of subjectivity problematized in this research to be open to exploration.⁹ The chapters presented here not only include the voices of the witnesses, victims and survivors; they also reflect the subjective experience of the study of such narratives. In that sense, the series *Memory and Narrative* follows—and contributes to—the development of the field of oral history, where the creation of the narrative is considered an act of interaction between the text of the narrator and the listener, whereby the text of the narrator itself constitutes only part of what is studied. We are particularly interested in the ways in which memory is created, and sometimes molded, and in the interaction with different—and even conflicting—memories of other individuals and society as a whole. On each side of the victim/perpetrator divide, we often find a different recollection of the same event. A relevant question is: How is the experience articulated, and how do its complexities shape the many meanings of the narratives told to the historian in communicative tropes that try to convince the audience?

It is also here that we place the volume within the field, which is as broad as anthropology, journalism, genocide studies, and other disciplines that pursue the study of mass repression.¹⁰ The present collection, and hopefully future investigations with similar methodology, claims a niche in the historiographical writing where the interaction between the narrator of history and the listener to histories is central. This type of writing is widely interdisciplinary, as illustrated by the variety of geographic and academic backgrounds of our authors. *Memories of Mass Repression* can also be placed within the field of micro history, somewhere between anthropology and history—traditions that enable us to place seemingly unimportant or unrelated incidents within a wider context. These accounts include daily life, and the ordinary and seemingly insignificant. This approach enables us to better grasp the meaning subjects impart to what happened, and the ways people survive.

The taking of oral testimony and the giving of oral history are emotional experiences, whereby the historian listens, processes the information, and transmits it to an imagined audience/reader. There are also other forces at work between the told story and the recorded history. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli has addressed this issue as follows: “The historian must work on both the factual and the narrative planes, the referent and the signifier, the past and the present, and, most of all, on the space between all of them.”¹¹ In order to do so, the historian needs to make use of what we know about memory, about listening to trauma, and compassion, but most of all, the historian has to find ways to work with the kind of data that usually do not figure in historical discourse. Such an approach renders less and less important the fact that these voices narrating a past that has not been mastered are not neutral. That does not make them less true, they simply belong to another truth.

Such narratives sometimes leave the historian empty-handed, since we are still in the process of exploring how to deal with the complex layers and shifts in emotion. Academic descriptions fall short because they do not seem to be able to sufficiently convey the magnitude of the horror; they lack forms, models, and even words. This situation, and our need to transmit our empathy, forces us to look for new styles of communicating what we hear.

We still do not know exactly where the contours of traumatized memory lie. In the field of oral history and life stories we search for them, and once found, often deal with them within the framework of the varied findings of psychotherapy.¹² Those who listen to these stories are fully exposed to the victims’ pain, chaos, grief, and mourning.¹³ But it is

not only the listener that is confronted with facts and realities that challenge their emotional capacity to cope. Remembering and recounting also forces the survivors to once again confront the cruelty, humiliation, pain, and death that they had previously encountered. When victims tell their story to a receptive audience, whether that is a therapist or an oral historian, the experience becomes co-processed, which sometimes results in the narrator feeling a little better, and the listener feeling a little worse.¹⁴ We know that certain events seldom become integrated into the life story, even though they play a formative role in that story. In most cases, the victims prefer to forget these memories, or to compartmentalize them into memories that stay unchanged and depersonalized.¹⁵ Some survivors have adapted to speaking about what happened to them without even touching these emotions, they have found—created—genres in which to talk. This sometimes even goes so far that witnesses tell a story about their own suffering without the feeling that they actually took part in it, as if it were someone else they were talking about. Alternatively, sometimes they tell their own story as others have described them, merging their individual memories with the collective conception of how events ensued. Many such cases could be observed in the flood of memoirs and memories of Stalinism that was unleashed during Gorbachev's campaign of glasnost.¹⁶

Narrator and listener can be trapped together in an interaction of emotions. The historian/listener is confronted with stories so disturbing that they are sometimes unbearable even to listen to. Listening to trauma, after all, had hitherto belonged to the realm and task of psychotherapists. Historians are still learning how to deal with these types of painful, sometimes fragmented stories which constitute a very particular, and unique historical source. We argue and illustrate in this volume how even seemingly incoherent stories and memories can facilitate a reconstruction of historical events in which human suffering also has a place.

Dominique LaCapra has argued that being able to relate a past through the critical reflection of memory is fundamental to maintaining the values of a democratic culture. This requires incorporating memories that are not pleasant, are not ours, and do not belong to the image a nation or individual would perhaps like to maintain. When political systems or individuals cannot allow for this because they lack either a sufficient degree of democracy, or have something to hide, the result is official censure or self-censure. All memory is at some level selective, even that which we try to accurately recount. It follows that memory is also about forgetting. Looking back, we can become ambivalent or ashamed about

who we were and what we did, or what we believed in. Most believers in political movements that turned out to be the opposite of what they promised confront such emotions. When given a proper forum, stories that are in opposition to dominant memories, or in conflict with our own memories, can effectively battle collective forgetting, and the way in which we think about and commemorate events.

The problem of individual memory versus collective memory is acute in the case of mass atrocity. The histories we present in this volume are based on narrated experiences, which happened a relatively short time ago. Most of the stories had not been previously accessed, since so little time had elapsed between what happened and the interviews. They are narratives of people who are more or less able to tell their stories, albeit in emotional and broken language. This group has found ways to talk about what happened amongst themselves, and to others. For some, the telling itself has kept them sane or has connected them to someone in the world again.¹⁷ As noted above, telling a story, and finding someone to bear witness, can also help survivors to connect again to the world. It can ensure a place for them in history, too. When stories are not—or no longer—possible, they can be replaced by sites of memory, which bring the past into the public realm.¹⁸ Such sites can provide a way of compartmentalizing memory so that it is not as confrontational.

The question arises as to whether one can ever forget atrocities, or forgive abusers. Religious discourse, and truth commissions as well, suggest that there will be a final reconciliation for the wronged and the wrongdoers alike. But postponing accountability to the afterlife is insufficient for many victims. At minimum, they want recognition, an accurate and public record of what happened, and they want to be remembered. Today, we live in an age in which it is generally accepted that past wrongs—genocide, terrorist attacks, political mass violence, and brazen personal injustices—should be constantly remembered. The question remains open as to whether letting go of such memories—after a certain point, and under certain conditions—may actually be more appropriate.

Oral historians struggle more with what is *not* said than with what is said. The stories contain ruptures that can sometimes be explained by a trauma, but it is a particular challenge to discern the interaction between memory and forgetting, and to understand what determines the selection process. The discussion on the similarity between remembering and forgetting, introduced in several of the *Memory and Narrative* volumes throughout the years, thus continues.¹⁹

Part I, Truth-Seeking and Memory Failure in Stories of Chaos and Misery, begins with a contribution by Norman Naimark (author of *Fires of Hatred*, a comparative study of ethnic cleansing²⁰) entitled “Srebrenica in the History of Genocide.” It opens with a harrowing account of the killings in Srebrenica, the largest mass killing in Europe since the Second World War. But the meaning of Srebrenica was more than this: it revealed the easy elision between ethnic cleansing and genocide, and the failure of the international community’s duty to protect. As a result, new norms for international intervention in the interests of protection are emerging which could over-ride the sovereignty of a nation state—an argument used in Iraq, but not, for instance, applied in Darfur. Naimark makes a powerful argument for the need to remember in order for the past to be explored to pave the way for long-term accommodation. The problem, however, is that there is a real risk that the genocide at Srebrenica will become the defining *motif* of Bosnian identity. If so, Naimark argues, “then it is hard to imagine a multi-national state can succeed in the future.”

In the next chapter, Selma Leydesdorff argues on the basis of interviews with survivors that while the events in Srebrenica are officially memorialized, scant attention is given to the stories of the women who survived the massacre. She maintains that their traumatized memories are silenced not only by the forces of politics and the outside world, but also by the silence within the survivors themselves. Looking at the events on the level of micro-history, she shows how memory for the women she interviewed has become impossible, because they were betrayed by those whom they trusted and befriended most; their neighbors and classmates had become hunters and perpetrators.

In “Localizing the Rwandan Genocide: The Story of Runda,” Jacob Boersema explores the ways in which massive mobilization for killing in Rwanda was organized locally, and he places these events in the larger context of the violence. Using a small community as a starting point, the author tries to understand the widespread adherence to the call for violence by looking at the micro level. According to Boersema, what happened locally was closely tied to what happened on a national scale, so exploring local experience may facilitate a better understanding of the Rwandan genocide. Central is the community and the way in which the narrators relate not only the events, but also the way in which local life was organized, and how social relations were part of how the genocide was enacted.

Ulla-Maija Peltonen²¹ also takes up the relationship between the micro-story and the macro story in her essay on the Ingrian man Tauno (born

in 1922), who lived on the Finnish-Russian border. This is a little known story of people living on a piece of land who had to shift nationality as result of a decision made by those who were controlling history. Peltonen has focused her research on the offense, shock, fear, and terrorization that had previously only received wide attention through the writings of ex-prisoners like Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn.²² The man Peltonen interviewed lived on the fine line between life and death, which may have been his incentive to reflect on memory, and to revisit memories and argue against them. As she writes: "Tauno was silent for almost forty years, until he decided to tell his story, to bear witness to what had happened." The narrator has become the one who bears witness, as is the case with the women of Srebrenica. Sometimes such narratives can develop a testimonial quality that hinders the free speech so common and so necessary to the field of oral history and storytelling.

Part II, *Aftermath: Trauma and Emotions*, commences with a chapter by Christoph Thonfeld on how the return home was often the beginning of a new trauma. Forced laborers who returned home at the end of the Second World War were often not welcome. The interviews incorporated into this piece are part of the International Forced Labourers Documentation Project that collected stories from former slave laborers in over twenty countries. Thonfeld focuses on those forced laborers that were considered second-class victims after they came back to Slovenia and former Yugoslavia. The arbitrariness of the violence was not accepted, and it became hard to make new social connections in a world that had a hierarchy of suffering. The essay shows a history that is partly known as collective memory, but it is also a silenced memory. It shows how the narrators, despite the absence of recordable speech, nevertheless told their story. But they did so in very particular ways, such as by pretending to stick to the "facts and by talking in a way that demonstrated lack of emotional involvement."

Jan K. Coetzee²³ and Geoffrey T. Wood describe the mass movement against apartheid in the 1980s in Grahamstown in their chapter, "Resisting Oppression: Stories of the 1980s' Mass Insurrection by Political Activists in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa." The focus once again is on the relationship between changes on a micro scale and what was happening in the larger world. The regime was in its waning years, but people did not know that at the time. While much has been written on the macro level, these authors look at what happened in the lives of the grassroots activists. By shedding light on the individual lives of twelve activists they aim to get a better understanding of this violent and severely

repressed movement. There had been “reforms” and varied reactions to them, which created huge division within the community. Repression, however, was sometimes so severe that those divisions disappeared. This essay shows how individuals living under the worst conditions became involved. Some reacted with fear to the extreme violence, others used their time in jail as a moment for learning. They had initially organized themselves spontaneously, sometimes individually. Later, they started to understand more about what was happening. Though these activists paid an enormous psychological price, they ended the period as different people.

Hessel Nieuwelink also based his chapter, “Struggling with a Horrendous Past: Rwandans Talk about the Aftermath of the Genocide,” on a small sample of interviews. He talked with survivors or surviving family members of the Rwandan genocide, and visited the traditional “gacaca” lawn court sessions. His subjects were generally ready to speak about the various waves of violence they had survived. The focus here is not so much on what has happened, as is the case in other life stories in this volume, but that those responsible admit their crimes. Some victims consider a verdict and sentence, whether it be monetary, or in kind, to be some form of compensation for the pain they have suffered. In that sense these local courts help to piece together fragments of lives and function at the same time as truth commissions. While Jean Hatzfeld has profoundly documented why killers became perpetrators, and how they talked about it afterward, in his impressive book on the tales of survivors and perpetrators,²⁴ this essay by Nieuwelink moves one step beyond the narrative of the atrocities by looking at the way people tried to adapt in the post-genocide period, and what the process of transitional justice meant for them personally. He also touches on the way in which the gacaca sessions facilitate in the creation of a shared collective memory.

Collective forgetting is the theme of Jim House’s chapter, “Leaving Silence Behind: Algerians and the Memories of Repression by French Security Forces in Paris in 1961.” This essay examines the French inability to deal with its colonial past. In riots in 1961 in the streets of Paris, dozens of protesting Algerians were clubbed to death. The French government wanted the events to be forgotten as much as did the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. There was no place for the transmission of the memories, which created what House terms a strategic silence. This history is now emerging, as the time seems ripe for more revelations on France’s violent past in the wars of independence, where more and more groups from all non-French sides speak

up.²⁵ Silence had been a way to move on with life, but that silence was accompanied by shame and fear. There is shame over the fact that people were forced into nudity, and about the sexual abuse they went through. There is also a fear about what happens when the survivors speak out. They initially assume that no one will listen to them. House listens to the personal motivations for people to have been silent for decades, and he describes the multi-vocal counter narrative that has emerged now that they are speaking out. The possibility to speak about proscribed subjects is still hindered by the post-colonial condition of the Algerian migration to France. Since Algerians, even as French citizens, are still treated as outsiders, there is as yet little room for a full history that would integrate the formerly colonized.

In Part III, *The Transmission and Distortion of Memory*, we start with a piece from Hungary, where after World War II reconciliation failed and distortions in memory were institutionalized in silence and forgetting. In “‘Privatized Memory’? The Story of Erecting the First Holocaust Memorial in Budapest,” Andrea Pető describes the killing of Jews at a place that unconsciously became a site of mourning in Budapest. The scene was an apartment building that was looted in 1944; its tenants were massacred. The legal procedures in the post-war period were heavily influenced by the Communist Party’s struggle for power. Consequently, a very particular memory was constructed around the female war criminal Piroska Dely who made the victims into heroic anti-fascist resisters. The case became so convoluted that the contradictions in the story diminished the memory of the victims, which was even further aggravated by the silence of the survivors. Only in private memories was it recalled that Jews were actually the victims of this massacre. In the post-Communist period memory became the center of a heated debate about how the Holocaust should be remembered. Pető argues that it is time to create “sites of remembering,” so that the Hungarian holocaust can be given its appropriate place.

In his essay on the Xerzan region in eastern Turkey largely populated by Kurds, “Recalling the Appalling: Mass Violence in Eastern Turkey in the Twentieth Century,” Uğur Üngör shows how silence, like memory, is transmitted over generations. The violence there is closely linked to the building of the Turkish nation-state, which brought about several waves of violence against religious and cultural minorities. In Xerzan this involved the assimilation of several tribes and their leadership. But more importantly, Xerzan became one of the theaters of the Armenian genocide. The mass killing of the Armenian middle class brought social rupture, and in

that region Kurdish families proceeded to occupy the houses of murdered Armenians. However, since Kurdish nationalism—which originated in the very same Turkish state formation where other languages were forbidden and assimilation was obligatory—was considered a threat, the state reinforced its military presence. The clashes that ensued from 1926 live on in Kurdish oral culture. After 1932 the tribes were “subdued” in an atrocious way. The region became a forbidden zone and the former inhabitants could no longer live there. It spurred local identification with the tribe, and accompanying defiance of the Turkish state. It gave rise to new violence continuing a history of war and a chain of interwoven memories of violence.

Our last contribution, “Multiple Framings: Survivor and Non-Survivor Interviewers in Holocaust Video Testimony,” addresses the heritage of the Holocaust as reflected in the form of the tremendous archive of audio and video material, and the literature surrounding it. The desire to interview survivors about the Holocaust has coincided with the great availability of new technologies. The best-known collections are the Fortunoff Video Archive²⁶ and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual Foundation. Here we present an essay by Michele Langfield and Pam Maclean that centers on the far less known archive of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Center in Melbourne. Assuming that testimony is always mediated by the culture and society in which the interviewers and interviewees live, the authors investigate the role of the interviewer, and show how much insider-outsider positions influence the interview. They argue that it is urgent to establish the basis of the narrative’s authority, and they show how the interviewer is in control of the testimony that is created. Since video testimonies and the scholarly articles analyzing them understandably focus on the narrator²⁷ as the natural center of every story, we thought it fitting to revisit the old adage that oral testimonies are made by two parties. Focusing on both parties and their interactions with one another offers researchers opportunities to explore the co-creation of the narrative.

To what extent video testimonies may replace one of the original tasks of the writing of oral history remains an open question. Telling, illustrating, and publishing about atrocities were among the original goals of oral historians. It is clear that stories can be better transmitted when we look at them, or when we listen to them, than when we read them. We hear hesitation and sadness; we see tears. Listening and looking were the first step. But secondary, comparative analysis, and analysis of the silences have always been crucial. Those are the tasks of scholars,

and our work confronts us again and again with new questions and new areas of focus.

Already early on, oral historians tried to go one step beyond just listening, to searching for new ways to present findings.²⁸ We are aware that the historical consciousness of crimes committed during mass repression is a construction that is remade over time.²⁹ Consequently, the stories presented here as representations of events that make us emotional will change over time. Until now, the model for these representations and perceptions has been the oral history of the Holocaust.³⁰ But it is apparent that the oral histories of other genocides and mass atrocities have to eventually look beyond known models in order to examine the uniqueness of the cultural setting of their genocide. We might find out that the whole valorization of silence as a symptom of trauma is not suited for societies where people talk. We might recognize displays of trauma that are unexpected, represented by artifacts that we struggle to understand, and we might find different ways of expressing the story in songs and prayers,³¹ in movement such as dance or physical rituals, or the ripping of clothes, the weaving of tapestry, or the writing of poems. Depending on the culture, all of these mediums represent what has happened as much as telling a story does. It is crucial that we not only expand the boundaries of our knowledge, but that we also stretch the limits of our approach to that knowledge. What we know about how to study the trauma of the Holocaust can help and guide us in the study of other genocides, but it can also become a hindrance because that story often remains a frame of reference from which we cannot escape. Since “never again” has happened time and again, we must listen to the voices of survivors of new episodes of mass violence, discern and convey what is similar and what is different, and learn.

February 2008

Notes

1. Martin Broszat, Saul Friedländer, “A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism,” in: *Yad Vashem Studies*, 19 (1988): 1–47. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945, The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). Saul Friedländer, “History, Memory and the Historian: Dilemmas and Responsibilities,” in: *New German Critique*, 80, 2000.
2. Richard A. Wilson, “The Historical Record of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” in: *Human Rights Quarterly*, 27, 3 (2005): 908–942; Dominique LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 91; Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, eds. *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. See Richard Crownshaw, Selma Leydesdorff, "On Silence and Revision: The Language and the Words of the Victims," in: *Memory of Totalitarianism*, ed. Luisa Passerini, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2005); Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor, Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004); Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
4. Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory, Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 1999).
5. An excellent example is Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity, Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).
6. For instance Gideon Greif's impressive account of the Sonderkommandos: Gideon Greif, *We Wept without Tears, Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
7. A good example is Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past: Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
8. Henry Roudiger, James Wertsch "Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies," in: *Memory Studies* 1(1): 9-22, 2008.
9. See also Susannah Radstone and Kate Hodgkin, "Regimes of Memory: An Introduction," in *Memory Cultures, Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Kate Hodgkin (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), pp. 1-23.
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Part I

Truth-Seeking and Memory Failure in Stories of Chaos and Misery



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Srebrenica in the History of Genocide: A Prologue

Norman M. Naimark

On July 2, 1995, the commander of the Drina Corps of the Bosnian Serbian army gave the orders for what became known as Operation Krivaja-95. This operation outlined a plan to attack the U.N. designated “Safe Area” of Srebrenica and eliminate the Bosnian Muslim enclave.¹ Accompanied by police and paramilitary units from both sides of the Drina, as well as Greek and Russian volunteers, the Bosnian Serb army attacked various points on the southern periphery of the enclave on July 6. The safe area was under the protection of “Dutchbat,” a contingent of 570 lightly armed Dutch soldiers under the flag of UNPROFOR, the United Nations protection force. The Srebrenica Muslims had been formally disarmed already in 1993, as part of the agreement for the establishment of safe zones. The best-armed and professionally led units of the Bosnian Muslim army withdrew from the enclave. The remaining several thousand scattered soldiers of the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina could offer little or no resistance to the Serbs.

Heavy shelling from the Serb units forced the Dutch to abandon a series of observation posts in the south of the Srebrenica area. Some Bosnian Muslim soldiers desperately tried to block the Dutch withdrawal, by taking Dutch hostages, and, in one tragic case, killing a Dutch soldier when a grenade was thrown at his retreating APC.² Meanwhile, the Muslim population fled northward towards the town of Srebrenica, already overcrowded with frightened and hungry refugees. The officers of “Dutchbat,” a “barely operational unit” in the words of the Dutch defense minister Joris Voorhoeve, determined that they could offer no resistance to the Serbian advance.³ Their repeated requests for air strikes over the next week were shuffled between U.N., NATO, and Dutch-government circles, without any serious consequences. The prejudiced attitudes of