
Bosnia through the Prism of Holocaust Memory: Holocaust Analogies During and After the Bosnian Civil War of 1992-1995

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With a tagline of “Never Again,” the systematic mass murder of six million Jews and five million disabled individuals, Romani, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other European civilians in the Holocaust has served as an example of the daunting need to prevent future genocides. Though the Holocaust is a widely known historical event, the citizens and governments across the globe have not realized its lessons fully; religious intolerance, organized killing, and even ethnic cleansing have transgressed with alarming frequency since 1945. The civil war waged among Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 is one such example of the abhorrent violence that persists in our world.

After nationalist and ethnic tensions led Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia to declare independence from Yugoslavia between June of 1991 and April of 1992, Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces and Yugoslavian army units initiated a campaign against Muslim Bosnians, or Bosniaks, in the hopes of eradicating the ethnic group and claiming more territory for the Serbs. In the first couple years of the conflict, the United States avoided intervention. The United Nations restricted its involvement to providing displaced people with humanitarian aid as administered by the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees. The warfare in Bosnia escalated in March of 1995 when Serbs attacked four UN-protected “safe areas,” to which the United Nations responded with airstrikes in May. When Serbs took 400 allied country peacekeepers hostage as a consequence, the American and European forces resumed their passive stance.¹

The horrific event within the broader conflict that qualifies as a genocide, as determined in 2001 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), was the murder of 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica in July of 1995: the largest massacre in Europe since the Holocaust. The severity of the attack led NATO to launch a bombing campaign at the end of August, thus initiating peace talks. On November 21, 1995, the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia signed the Dayton Accords. Following the formal end of the war, the ICTY, which was the first tribunal of its kind since the Nuremberg Trials, continued prosecuting military, political, and police leaders for genocide, murder, rape, and various crimes conducted in concentration camps. In 2007, the UN’s International Court of Justice determined that Serbia violated the 1948 Genocide Convention in its failings at Srebrenica.²

As the war in Bosnia unfolded, civilians, reporters, and politicians discussed the crisis in terms of international relations, United States foreign policy, and humanitarianism. The mass murders of Bosniaks also sparked countless Holocaust analogies, grounded in the fact that both events transpired in Europe; were caused by ethnic prejudice; consisted of extreme violence, rape, and brutality in concentration camps; and occurred within fifty years of each other. Though there are many Jews, historians, and scholars who dislike any comparison of the Holocaust to other genocides, as they believe it “trivializes” the former,³ Jewish and non-Jewish voices evoked the memory of Europe in the early 1940s when referencing the violence in the Balkans. These included Jewish individuals, local synagogues, and national organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish

Congress; the United States National Holocaust Memorial Museum; secular national newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*; and Bill Clinton's presidential administration. By examining the specific rhetoric of these stakeholders, I will demonstrate how and why Holocaust memory was evoked in discourses about the ethnic cleansing of Bosniak Muslims.

The Bosnian Crisis as a Jewish Issue

As news of Serbs targeting Bosniaks spread in the United States, Jewish communities at the local and national level advocated for both humanitarian aid to refugees and United States military intervention. Jewish engagement with Bosnia was expansive. Synagogues hosted panels with university professors and Jewish professionals, branches of prominent Jewish national organizations such as the American Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League organized rallies, rabbis used their pulpits to encourage collective action, and Jewish newspapers wrote story after story discussing not only what was happening on the ground but also the Jewish reaction to the violence. These Jewish journalists played a large role in promulgating the idea that the events in Bosnia were a Jewish issue: using phrases associated with the Holocaust and procuring intertwined images of the concentration camps of Poland and Germany with decimated towns across the Balkans. In doing so, reporters cultivated a sense of urgency for American Jews to hold their representatives accountable and to contribute to humanitarian relief efforts, as well as for the United Nations and the United States to take deliberate steps to stop Serbian violence.

In the coverage of a 1994 rally held outside the White House by the American Jewish Congress and fifteen other organizations, journalist Laurie Goodstein elevated the narrative that the Jews had a moral obligation to advocate for Bosnians. The Jews who gathered in Lafayette Square passionately criticized President Clinton for his inaction and called for the United States to commence an air strike and to lift the arms embargo

so Bosniaks could defend themselves. One of the speakers, Rabbi Jack Luxemburg, lamented: "We Jews are all too familiar with the experience of being driven from towns and villages in which we lived for centuries... We are too familiar with neighbors becoming callous executioners. We Jews know too well that silence costs lives."⁴ The President of the American Jewish Congress' D.C. branch said, "We know . . . what ethnic cleansing is about, for we were nearly cleansed."⁵ The language these leaders employed evoked particular power because it grouped American Jews in the 1990s with European Jews from the 1940s. By using "we" when recounting Jews' suffering in the Holocaust, the rabbis and Jewish activists blurred the lines between the people who were actually persecuted and the people who learned about concentration camps and ghettos from the news, their parents, Hebrew school, and books. While this was effective in crafting an emotional appeal for action on behalf of Bosniaks, American Jews conflated their experience with that of Holocaust victims, suggesting that the trauma was theirs by cultural heritage.

The narrative crafted about Bosnia by Jewish publications was one of shared experience. Jews positioned themselves not only as allies of Bosnian Muslims but as their peers and somewhat as their equals. Interviewees and authors alike established a level ground on which Jews and Bosniaks both earned the right to stand given their persecutions. The rhetoric in articles such as this one implied that Jews had the authority to speak on Bosnia and that Bosniaks were worthy of Jewish support.

The most frequently sounded argument made by Jews in the United States during the Bosnian crisis was that the Holocaust should serve as a historical model; global leaders should heed its lessons, one of which was that intervening sooner rather than later was best. In allowing the Serbs to terrorize Bosniaks, the United States and the international community were failing to heed the lessons of the Holocaust. As early as August 1992, just months after Bosnia declared independence from Yugoslavia, Jewish figures used the Holocaust to justify intervention in Bosnia. Anti-Defamation League

chairwoman Faith Cookler drew on the image of concentration camps in Europe to advocate for an investigation of prison camps in Serbia, saying “We must say...we did everything we could to keep the names of [Serbian prison camps] Omarska and Breko from serving the same gruesome and grotesque function of Auschwitz.”⁶ This example illustrated how the Holocaust became a rhetorical tool to warn of what could happen in Bosnia without proper intervention.

A Jewish teacher in California also pointed to the Holocaust as a model for how to respond to Bosnia, arguing in 1995 that NATO should bomb Serbian territories so as not to mirror the Allies’ “failing to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz.”⁷ Thus, the world was neglecting the Holocaust’s lesson that it had a moral obligation to intervene when people were suffering. An article in *The American Israelite* also used the Holocaust as a historical model, likening the refusal of the United States to act in Bosnia because of “national interests” to the U.S.’s failure to bomb railroad tracks to the concentration camps and take in more Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. The authors warned that the United States risked going down a similar path as when the country was “recorded in history as shamelessly paralyzed as is that [generation] of [the] 1940s.”⁸ The theme in Jewish discourse that the Holocaust should serve as historical example for Bosnia illustrated how ethos and logos were used to justify the need for leaders to respond to the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. While many American Jews felt an emotional pull to the plight of Bosniaks, they also viewed the situation from a political and humanitarian angle, noting and critiquing similarities between the United States’ foreign policy stance in the 1940s and in the 1990s.

In making the Bosnian crisis a Jewish problem, whether that sense of responsibility was because of World War II or because of Jewish values or both, American Jews initiated a separate dialogue about whether or not it was actually acceptable to be discussing Bosnia in terms of the Holocaust. Each reference to concentration camps, mass shootings, rape, ghettos, and starved corpses in the

media during the 1990s procured a strand that connected the Bosnian massacre to the Holocaust. The cultivation of an analogous relationship between the two genocides greatly frustrated many Jewish Americans. At a panel of four Jewish intellectuals in Berkeley, California in October 1995, Professor Ernst Haas expressed that “If the word Holocaust is used indiscriminately...the word loses meaning, including moral meaning.”⁹ In order to preserve the sacredness of the Holocaust and to motivate sympathies for other victims of prejudice, the word “Holocaust” must only be applied to the murder of 6 million Jews. However, in defending the “proper” usage of the word “Holocaust,” Haas somewhat discredited the genocide in Bosnia. He stated, “In order to qualify as a holocaust, we’ve got to have more than just massive brutality on a grand scale.”¹⁰ Referring to the attack on Bosniaks with such a tone kept the Holocaust’s image as a distinct, somewhat superior travesty.

The regional director of the San Francisco branch of the Anti-Defamation League also shared the sentiment that comparisons to the Holocaust were disrespectful. She said: “Is the situation analogous? Certainly not.” The ADL regional director followed her statement with an “urge to action,” calling for people to contact their representatives as well as to contribute time and money to relief efforts.¹¹ Her comment at the Berkeley panel highlights an important theme in Holocaust discourse; opponents of Holocaust analogies commonly qualified their responses, noting the uniqueness of the Holocaust while still recognizing the need to respond to the crisis in Bosnia. Some people on the panel took more of a middle ground, recognizing Bosnia as a genocide but attempting to contain the conversation within that realm. With respect to using the word “genocide,” Professor David Baile expressed that “to limit ourselves too much ends up trivializing the suffering of others.”¹² Baile argued that the word “genocide,” though it differed greatly in nature from “Holocaust,” had inherent weight and value in it. Applying that label to Bosnia elevated the seriousness of the situation.¹³

One of the most prominent advocates for maintaining a boundary

between the Holocaust and other genocides was Elie Wiesel. After visiting Bosnia in the late fall of 1992, Wiesel would not compare the situation to the Holocaust, insisting that each was distinct. However, Wiesel used his authority as the leading voice for Holocaust survivors to advocate for intervention on behalf of Bosniaks. Utilizing the Holocaust as a model for what to do in the face of ethnic cleansing, Wiesel called for the Jewish community to provide humanitarian aid so that they could not be accused of apathy like the world was during the Holocaust. Wiesel took his engagement with Bosnia one step further, assuming the role of spokesperson for the persecuted Muslims. After his visit, Wiesel reported that Bosnians in Sarajevo were consumed by a “feeling of futility and meaninglessness.”¹⁴ Wiesel endowed the situation in Bosnia with more credibility by associating himself with the conflict in the first place. Moreover, as a survivor speaking on behalf of the Muslim Bosnians, Wiesel drew Bosniaks closer to Holocaust victims while also inflating the responsibility he had as a Jewish European survivor.

Wiesel used Holocaust rhetoric to call for action in Bosnia even though he remained committed to the uniqueness of the horrors inflicted on European Jews by the Nazis. At the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Wiesel spent most of his speech building a foundation for his claim that the Holocaust taught “that we are all responsible, and indifference is a sin and a punishment. And we have learned that when people suffer we cannot remain indifferent.”¹⁵ Within the framework of the horrors of the Holocaust, Wiesel commented on the many infractions that we now know to avoid. For example, he noted that government officials all over the world knew of Treblinka, Ponar, Birkenau, and other camps, yet Jews like his mother were “not even warned of the impending doom...they were all entering the shadow of flames.”¹⁶ This line implied that we should have learned that when governments know of infractions against civilians, they should act on the information. In rounding out his speech, Wiesel turned to President Clinton, insisting that he had to tell him something: something had to be

done to “stop the bloodshed” in Bosnia. Even though Wiesel never called Bosnia a genocide in that speech, nor did he directly compare Bosnia with the Holocaust, Wiesel utilized Holocaust memory to argue for intervention in Bosnia. Navigating a fine line between using the Holocaust as an example and insisting on its distinctiveness, Jewish Americans who disapproved of Holocaust analogies still voiced unequivocal concern for Bosnians and advocated for American intervention.

Other Jewish Americans disagreed with those who refused to draw analogies between Bosnia and the Holocaust, viewing it as a harsh, Jewish-centric minimization of others’ suffering. They felt it was not only fair to connect the two travesties through rhetoric, but also that such analogies had the power to heighten awareness of the tragedy unfolding in Bosnia. Director of Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley David Biale criticized the lack of compassion among those who fixated on the Holocaust’s uniqueness, noting that they “seem to have lost moral sensitivity to ‘lesser’ genocides.”¹⁷ Abe Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League from 1987-2015, invoked the phrase “Never Again” when speaking to *The Los Angeles Times*, insisting that the term should be applied beyond the Jewish community to all those being persecuted. Jews had a “special responsibility and a special obligation” because of the Holocaust, but they by no means had a monopoly over genocides.¹⁸ In *The Jewish Advocate*, journalist James Besser asserted that using the Holocaust to fight the threat of genocide empowered Holocaust memory. He wrote: “by using our remembrance as a tool to help prevent future holocausts, we are giving that memory a new and vital meaning for the generations to come.”¹⁹ Here Besser used the Holocaust not in reference to one distinct event in Europe in the 1940s but as a word that could be applied to any qualifying mass genocide. By being more expansive with Holocaust analogies, Besser argued, we were ensuring its legacy with future generations; it was not Bosnia that needed the comparison to thrive, but the Holocaust itself. Regardless of whether or not

Jews approved of Holocaust analogies, most American Jews inevitably viewed the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia in relation to the Nazi's Final Solution. Holocaust survivors played an intriguing role in this dialogue, as there was no clear consensus among them as to how the Holocaust should or should not have been referenced in conversations about other genocides. Though Americans agreed on the importance of survivors' voices in providing testimony about the dangers of ethnic cleansing and genocide, survivors themselves often discussed Bosnia in starkly different terms.²⁰ Labor camp survivor Miles Lerman dictated a moral obligation that survivors had to "be the first ones to speak out and condemn such atrocities"²¹ like Bosnia. While Rene Firestone, an Auschwitz survivor, felt the United Nations needed to force a negotiation in Bosnia, she was adamant that "to compare the situation in Yugoslavia to the Holocaust is almost ridiculous."²² Even though survivors took different stances on the validity of Holocaust analogies, the majority of them did call for the United States and the United Nations to prevent the Serbs from continuing their campaign against Muslims.²³

Jewish American citizens, authors, rabbis, scholars, organizational leaders, and Holocaust survivors evoked Holocaust memory to advocate for intervention in Bosnia, whether that was in the form of increased humanitarian aid, military action, or diplomatic negotiations. By employing such rhetoric, many American Jews made the Bosnian crisis a Jewish issue and, in doing so, highlighted a few important themes. First, most Jewish Americans felt some form of a connection to the Jews of Holocaust Europe. They did not experience life in the ghettos or face the gas chambers or crematoriums, but many American Jews tied themselves to the Holocaust and made its legacy their responsibility. Next, many American Jews established themselves as allies of Muslim Bosnians based on this shared persecution. This is a kinship evident in many Jews' activism to raise funds and pressure politicians, but it is also evident in the collaboration between Jewish and

Muslim organizations within the United States to impact policy on Bosnia.²⁴

Finally, in drawing on Jewish experience in the Holocaust, Jewish Americans carved a space for themselves in the conversation about ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Some may argue that there was no inherent necessity for Jews to take up this cause, but many American Jews acted on their sense of responsibility, and even their sense of ownership over the Holocaust, to advocate for Bosniaks.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Bosnia

Even before it opened its doors to the public, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) established itself as an ally of Bosniaks and of genocide victims in general. In the year before the museum's opening, project director Michael Berenbaum spoke with the Baltimore Jewish Times on the Holocaust as an analogy to Bosnia, insisting that the Holocaust taught the public "that you need to respond swiftly to events such as those in Bosnia."²⁵ He approved of the Holocaust being evoked to "add to the pressure that is necessary to get the international community to take action,"²⁶ though he disapproved of direct comparisons.²⁷ Berenbaum saw the Holocaust as a tool to encourage political action, mirroring arguments made by other Jewish Americans mobilizing at the grassroots level. With this stance, Berenbaum established that the USHMM would take a vested interest in applying the lessons of the Holocaust to prevent future genocides.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened on April 22, 1993, with the mission "to advance and disseminate knowledge about [the Holocaust]; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy."²⁸ The inclusion of the last clause established the basis for the museum's greater activism against genocide. With this mission, the Museum founded The Committee on Conscience in 1995 to "to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide

action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity.”²⁹ The committee grew into the Center for the Prevention of Genocide in 2013, which was renamed the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide in 2015. A large part of the USHMM, The Simon-Skjodt Center conducts and publishes research about mass atrocities, writes reports about genocides, and seeks to inform policymakers on crimes against humanity. Though this activism gained momentum at the turn of the century, the USHMM played an important role in educating the world about Bosnia during the 1990s.

With funding from Time magazine, Life magazine, and Time Inc, the USHMM opened a temporary exhibit on September 22, 1994 titled “Faces of Sorrow: Agony in the Former Yugoslavia,” which consisted of sixty-five photographs of victims in the Balkans – crying children, women holding their cheeks, a boy with a bloody bandage wrapped around his head. The curators of the exhibition and museum officials wanted to document the suffering of victims of ethnic cleansing: a goal that aligned with their understanding that, as preservers of Holocaust memory, they had responsibilities to other targeted groups. Miles Lerman, head of the museum’s Board of Directors, responded to Serbian Americans’ complaints that the exhibit painted a one-sided picture of a “three-way civil war” by saying: “We do feel morally compelled to speak out against the atrocities being committed. You cannot chastise the world for remaining passive during the annihilation of the Jews, and be comfortable being passive when other people are being annihilated and brutalized.”³⁰ Lerman again emphasized the museum’s responsibility to honor lessons from the Holocaust by teaching about other genocides in his remarks at the opening of the exhibit. He insisted that Bosnia was “our own personal dilemma and we cannot and should not turn our heads away.”³¹ The duty Lerman felt to advocate for Bosniaks was characteristic of many American Jews at the time.

The museum director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, shared the intrinsic sense

of responsibility to speak out about Bosnia. In conversation with *The Washington Post*, Weinberg said, “What’s happening in Bosnia is a terrible thing – mass murders, genocide...I don’t know if it has been recognized {officially as genocide} by the U.N. or not, but I don’t really care...We can’t stop it, but we can add our voices to all those who cry out in protest.”³² His ambivalence about the terms applied to Bosnia differed from that of many American Jews. Weinberg did not need a term to know that what was happening in Bosnia was inhumane and demanded a response. On the other hand, many other Jewish Americans focused as much on usage of terms, including “Holocaust” and “genocide,” as on coming to the aid of Bosniaks. Very early in its lifetime, the USHMM established that it would take advantage of its platform to shed light on genocides other than the Holocaust. Given its focus on the Holocaust, anything the museum did that was not immediately related to the Nazis’ execution of 6 million Jews necessarily suggested a connection to the Holocaust, even if just in essence or implicit intention.

Outside the Realm of American Jewry: Secular Utilizations of Holocaust Memory

The dialogue about Bosnia outside the Jewish community reflected some of the same themes as that within the Jewish community. American citizens felt a sense of moral and political obligation to intervene and called for military, diplomatic, and humanitarian action from the United States and the United Nations. There was also still very much a Jewish dimension to the conversation about the Bosnian genocide: people were hesitant to place Bosnia on the same level of severity as the Holocaust; intertwined Holocaust phrases such as “Never Again” and images of concentration camps with notions of Serbian violence; and contemplated how lessons from Holocaust had or had not been heeded in the case of Bosnia.

Many journalists for non-Jewish national newspapers chimed in, adding their perspective to arguments as to why analogies between the Bosnian civil

war and the Holocaust were misplaced. Generally, mainstream newspapers spoke of Bosnia and the Holocaust as belonging to two different categories of genocide based on their scale and severity. One author in *The New York Times* defined “genocide with a small ‘g’ (in which we might lump Bosnia with East Timor, Liberia, Guatemala, Sudan and Chechnya, among a score of others)” and “Genocide with a big ‘G’ (the Holocaust -- and, perhaps, Cambodia or Rwanda).”³³ Within this distinction, the author employed analogies of genocides to assert that the Serbs’ brutal treatment of Bosniaks was not as extreme as people thought; the death count was exaggerated. He wrote, “Bosnia isn't the Holocaust or Rwanda; it's Lebanon.”³⁴ By putting various genocides in dialogue and blatantly disagreeing with the comparison of Bosnia to the Holocaust, the author sought to establish that Bosnia did not need “early” humanitarian intervention. To him, the legacy of the Holocaust was being called on too drastically.

Articles in non-Jewish, mainstream newspapers also tended to be written more through the lens of foreign policy than with a focus on humanitarian responsibility. For example, a 1997 article in *The Wall Street Journal* titled “Idealism Won't Stop Mass Murder” pointed out that United States intervention in foreign affairs without a concrete national interest in play was incredibly unlikely. Referencing both the Holocaust and Bosnia, the author wrote, “Hitler's war against the Jews did not get America into World War II – the attack on Pearl Harbor did...Bosnian war crimes did not, by themselves, lead to NATO intervention: It was also the larger Balkan war and the fear of it spreading south, and the threat posed by all of these factors to NATO's credibility, that finally forced President Clinton's hand.”³⁵ Though this author spoke of the Holocaust and Bosnia in similar terms, it was to make a point about America's consistent delaying of foreign intervention, not to comment on the similarity or differences in nature of the genocides.

A. M. Rosenthal, a prominent author for the *New York Times*, wrote with a foreign policy framework in arguing that Bosnia and the Holocaust

were fundamentally different, and, therefore, incomparable. The author grounded his analysis in the fact that “however unforgivably brutal, the war in Bosnia [was] for control of government and territory...need it really be said? The Holocaust was not a war of any kind. It was a Holocaust, you see.”³⁶ Here the author differentiated between the Holocaust and World War II while conflating the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia with the Bosnian Civil War; there was no formal genocide to conflate, as it was written a year before Srebrenica, but the violence in Bosnia was still overwhelming by this time. The author thought and wrote in political terms, defining the primary intentions of the perpetrators and ignoring other factors to draw a line between Bosnia and the Holocaust. Although national newspapers did share opinion pieces and articles written by Jewish authors that were more obviously informed by Holocaust analogies, the publications also promoted a policy-driven narrative of Bosnia that evoked Holocaust memory in a different way than exclusively Jewish newspapers.

The Clinton administration took a vested interest in Bosnia as well, looking to the past for guidance on how to handle the humanitarian crisis amid a web of international relations concerns. The majority of statements and speeches from the Clinton administration discuss the crisis in Bosnia from a political perspective, which is unsurprising given its position, but the President did reference the Holocaust in conversations about Bosnia. After the Holocaust Memorial Museum opening, Elie Wiesel reported that President Clinton said, “I agree that something must be done. And something will be done.”³⁷ Wiesel supposedly made an impact on Clinton with his speech connecting Bosnia and his experience in the Holocaust; Clinton reportedly initiated discussions about the possibility of air strikes.³⁸ However, Clinton’s actions did not reflect the sense of urgency he revealed to Wiesel as evidenced by the length of time it took for the United States to do more than support UN humanitarian efforts and enact a limited air lifting program in blockaded areas. Though Clinton saw Bosnia as a civil war and hesitated to get involved,

he brought the United States to the aid of Bosniaks in 1995 with the NATO bombing campaign. Soon after, the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia signed the Dayton Peace Accords, which split Bosnia into two autonomous regions with a joint central government. President Clinton then addressed the nation, in part to explain his rationale for deploying American troops to ensure the peace was held. This speech presented a contrast to his other media statements; while Clinton focused on the ramifications for international relations if the United States were to take more decisive action in Bosnia in previous press releases and interviews, he adopted more of a moral framing of the Bosnian civil war in his speech on November 27, 1995. As part of this rhetorical tactic, Clinton directly referenced the Holocaust and drew parallels between the two genocides.

While calling for America to be a leader in advancing peace, Clinton referred to the bloodshed on the ground, the need for Bosnians to be resilient, and the history of American intervention in Europe. In the twenty-one-minute speech, Clinton never specifically used the words “Holocaust,” “Nazi,” “Hitler,” “Auschwitz,” or even “genocide.” He did, however, reference the events of the Holocaust to provide listeners with a sense of the gravity of the situation to garner support for American intervention in Bosnia. He relayed: “Horrors we prayed had been banished from Europe forever have been seared into our minds again: skeletal prisoners caged behind barbed-wire fences; women and girls raped as a tool of war; defenseless men and boys shot down into mass graves, evoking visions of World War II concentration camps; and endless lines of refugees marching toward a future of despair.”⁴⁰ Clinton fused violence in Bosnia and in the Holocaust with his words to evoke an emotional response from listeners. While genocide-related rhetoric was limited to this part of the speech, Clinton did adopt a moral lens throughout his address to achieve his goal of generating favorable public opinion. President Clinton and his speech-writing team relied on Holocaust memory in suggesting images of the violence to which Bosnians were subjected.

Contemporary Conversations: Genocide Denial in the 21st Century

The genocide in Srebrenica and the mass murder of 100,000 Bosnians between the years 1992-1995 has not entirely faded from public consciousness, nor have the Holocaust analogies subsided; rather, they have appeared within the context of genocide denial. Recently, the Serbian government has countered the notion that Serbian violence during the Bosnian Civil War constituted genocide.⁴¹ Serbian politicians also tried to portray the war as equally damaging for Serbs and Croats. Officials established two “truth commissions” in 2019 to research the plight of Serbs from Sarajevo and the events in Srebrenica with a focus on all three ethnic groups,⁴² although 80% of those murdered in the war were Bosniaks.⁴³ In July of 2021, one of the commissions published a report titled *Sufferings of All People in the Srebrenica Region Between 1992-1995*. The report, funded by the Serb Republic, effectively mirrored sentiments of Republika Srpska President Zeljka Cvijanovic, former Republika Srpska president Milorad Dodik, and other Bosnian-Serb leaders. It denied the validity of the international tribunal ruling that Srebrenica was a genocide and attempted to portray Serbs in a more favorable light by claiming that many of those people killed were not innocent civilians.

Many academics, politicians, Muslims, Jews, and other parties responded vehemently to the Serbian government’s attempt to minimize the atrocities in Bosnia. Their outrage was best captured by Menachem Rosensaft, the son of two Holocaust survivors who was born in the Bergen-Belson displaced persons camp in 1948. A professor of genocide law, Rosensaft dedicated his life to preserving the memory of the Holocaust as a member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, as the founding chairman of International Network of Children of Jewish Survivors; and as a member of the World Jewish Congress. A few months after the publication of the Serbian report, Rosensaft accused Cvijanovic and Dodik of denying the genocide, celebrating

war criminals, and “following the playbook of the most egregious Holocaust deniers.”⁴⁴ Rosensaft insisted, “It is the equivalent of denying that Jews were systematically murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka, and turning Adolf Eichmann into a folk hero.”⁴⁵ Turning to Holocaust metaphors, Rosensaft equated events in Bosnia to the Holocaust, establishing equality among genocides and emphasizing the gravity of minimizing the Bosniaks’ suffering. He also tied the fate of the Holocaust to the fate of Bosnia; if the genocide in Srebrenica could be denied and discredited, so, too, could the Holocaust.

Menachem Rosensaft vocally opposed genocide denial for years before the Serbian report was published. He insisted that “Like Holocaust denial, denial of the Srebrenica genocide must not be allowed as a legitimate intellectual position.”⁴⁶ Exposure, public condemnation, and excommunication were satisfactory consequences for denial. Rosensaft mentioned the Holocaust and drew on his position as the child of survivors in most, if not all, of his statements on Bosnia. However, he did not make the conversation about the Holocaust by discussing the merits of Holocaust analogies or qualifying his support for Bosnian intervention. Rather, Rosensaft lent the model of the Holocaust to Bosnia, focusing his efforts on the consequences of denying the genocide in the Balkans rather than the consequences of drawing comparisons to the Holocaust. As a child of survivors and a well-known genocide lawyer, Rosensaft was a credible advocate for the need to recognize Bosnia as a large-scale genocide.

Concluding Thoughts: Implications of Holocaust Analogies

Groups across various sectors of society have applied Holocaust memory to discuss the mass-murder of 80,000 Bosnian Muslims during the 1992-1995 civil war. Many American Jews analogized the Holocaust and Bosnia to advocate for military and humanitarian intervention based on a moral imperative. The Jewish community in America also spurred a dialogue

about the validity of Holocaust analogies; when commenting on Bosnia, Jews who felt the Holocaust was a distinct, incomparable event typically qualified their responses about the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks. National publications looked at the Holocaust as more of a model for how the United States could and should approach engagement in the region, whether that was through an arms embargo, air strikes, sending in troops, or placing pressure on other countries. Other national parties approached Bosnia through the prism of Holocaust memory, though to drastically different extents: the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum actively drew on the legacy of the Holocaust to spread information about Bosnia, while the Clinton administration infrequently mentioned the parallels between the United States' role in Bosnia and in World War II. When he did address Bosnia from a humanitarian, moral angle, President Clinton referenced the Holocaust as an example of the type of violence that demanded intervention. Overall, parties utilized Holocaust analogies to advance their goals of raising public alarm about ethnic cleansing, generating pressure for military intervention or greater humanitarian relief, or garnering support for other actions.

These analogies simultaneously perpetuated Holocaust memory and highlighted the Holocaust's legitimacy in the public eye. They also established connections between American Jews and European Jews, American Jews and Bosnian Muslims, and Americans of all religious faiths. Discussions of the Holocaust reinforced (and in some cases challenged) a sense of Jewish ownership over the Holocaust. Ultimately, the persecution of Muslims during the Bosnian civil war was discussed in terms of Holocaust memory in a way that gave the crisis legitimacy while also diverting energy to discuss the merits of the analogies themselves.

Unfortunately, Bosnia is not the only case of genocide our world has seen. Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda: mass atrocities have ravaged these countries and others. The hope is that citizens and world leaders will have learned from the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, that they will see the

warning signs and see how intervention is necessary and possible. Analogies can play a role in cultivating a sense of agency, but they must be employed carefully so as to preserve the dignity of both the Holocaust and the atrocity in question. The Holocaust is a distinct historical event, executed on a scale that has thankfully yet to be replicated. Each genocide that has occurred before and after that is significant and individualistic. But that is not to say that there are no similarities among them and that the Holocaust cannot or should not be discussed in the context of other potential massacres. Acknowledging the Holocaust enables people to imagine a situation where violence escalated into unthinkable tragedy. But too much discourse about the Holocaust or Jewish peril, or even pausing conversations about current crises such as the Srebrenica genocide to qualify the extent to which it echoes the Holocaust, can be detrimental to the primary goal of the discourse: getting the world to wake up to the threat of persecution. Frequently referencing the Holocaust's inherent uniqueness and drawing lines between it and other genocides takes attention away from the current issue on the table. It is our responsibility as Jews, as Americans, and as global citizens to advocate for oppressed minorities and to prevent genocides. This, in a sense, is its own form of Holocaust memory work – analogies or no analogies.

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Endnotes:

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