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The Sensory Traces of War and Migration: Memory, Space, and Identity in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the sensory, spatial, and mnemonic dimensions of war and forced migration in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. While existing international relations and migration studies literature has predominantly focused on security, governance, and demographic outcomes, the lived and sensory experiences of individuals remain underexplored. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted with 30 participants who varied in age, gender, educational background, and displacement trajectory, this study examines how memories of war and displacement are embedded in everyday spaces, urban landscapes, and symbolic sites. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research investigates how sensory elements (such as sound, silence, spatial absence, and material remnants) mediate the relationship between memory, place, and identity. The findings reveal four interconnected thematic dimensions (memory of war and displacement, spatial experience and transformation, identity and belonging, and emotional traces) showing that war and migration have produced enduring emotional and spatial imprints that continue to shape individual and collective identity long after the cessation of violence. Participants frequently associate specific places with affective memories, illustrating how space functions as a carrier of both trauma and belonging. By integrating perspectives from memory studies, human geography, and international relations, the article conceptualizes war-induced migration not merely as a physical or economic process, but as a deeply embodied and culturally mediated experience. The Bosnian case demonstrates how post-conflict spaces become contested arenas of memory and identity negotiation. The study concludes by offering policy-relevant insights into post-conflict reconciliation, cultural memory preservation, and the role of spatial practices in rebuilding social cohesion.

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ÖZ

Bu araştırma, savaş ve zorunlu göç deneyimlerinin savaş sonrası Bosna-Hersek bağlamında hafıza, mekân ve kimlik üzerindeki duyusal ve kültürel etkilerini incelemektedir. Uluslararası ilişkiler ve göç literatüründe savaş sonrası süreçler çoğunlukla güvenlik, yönetişim ve demografik sonuçlar üzerinden ele alınırken, bireylerin gündelik yaşamlarında mekân ve duyular aracılığıyla deneyimledikleri hafıza süreçleri görece ihmal edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, söz konusu boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, farklı sosyo-kültürel arka planlardan (yaş, cinsiyet, eğitim düzeyi ve yerinden edilme deneyimi bakımından çeşitlilik gösteren) seçilmiş 30 katılımcı ile gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış nitel görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak, savaş ve göçün mekânsal deneyimler, duyusal hafıza ve kimlik algısı üzerindeki etkileri incelenmiştir. Bulgular, savaş ve yerinden edilmenin yalnızca fiziksel değil, aynı zamanda duygusal ve mekânsal izler bıraktığını; bu izlerin bireylerin aidiyet ve kimlik algılarını uzun vadede şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Katılımcı anlatıları, belirli mekânların (mahalleler, kamusal alanlar ve sembolik yapılar) travma, kayıp ve aidiyet duygularıyla güçlü biçimde ilişkilendirildiğini göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda mekân, hafızanın pasif bir arka planı değil, kimliğin yeniden inşa edildiği aktif bir alan olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Çalışma, savaş ve göç olgusunu duyusal ve kültürel boyutlarıyla ele alarak, uluslararası ilişkiler literatürüne özgün ve disiplinlerarası bir katkı sunmaktadır. Araştırma, savaş sonrası toplumsal uzlaşının güçlendirilmesine ve kültürel hafızanın korunmasına yönelik hafıza temelli ve mekâna duyarlı politika önerileriyle sonuçlanmaktadır.

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Introduction

War and forced migration constitute enduring subjects of inquiry within international relations, yet the analytical frameworks through which these phenomena are examined have remained largely constrained by state-centric assumptions, which treat the state as the primary unit of analysis, and materialist assumptions, which privilege territory, resources, and institutions over lived experience. Classical and neorealist approaches have generally interpreted displacement through the broader dynamics of interstate conflict, emphasizing territorial control, strategic competition, and security concerns (Waltz, 1979: 91; Mearsheimer, 2001: 44). Even critical security studies, while expanding the referent object beyond the state, have tended to prioritize institutional responses, legal regimes, and governance mechanisms over lived experience (Betts, 2013: 76). This article addresses that gap by foregrounding the sensory and embodied dimensions of memory as a distinct analytical lens for understanding the long-term political effects of war and displacement.

This epistemological orientation has produced a substantial body of knowledge on refugee regimes, humanitarian intervention, and post-conflict state-building. However, it has also generated a notable blind spot: the ways in which war and forced migration are experienced, remembered, and embodied by individuals long after the formal cessation of violence. Within constructivist and memory-focused strands of the discipline, memory is more often treated as a rhetorical or symbolic resource mobilized by political elites in official commemorations and nation-building narratives (Bieber, 2006: 93), while space itself is treated as a passive backdrop against which political processes unfold. Such an approach overlooks how memory and space function as constitutive elements of post-conflict social and political life, actively shaping how individuals interpret both the past and their present political circumstances.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship on memory and post-conflict societies has challenged this tendency by conceptualizing memory as a dynamic social process rather than a static repository of past events (Halbwachs, 1992: 38; Assmann, 2011: 41). Memory studies scholars have demonstrated that collective memory is produced through practices of narration, commemoration, and spatial inscription, all of which are embedded in power relations. From this perspective, memory is neither purely individual nor entirely collective; it emerges at the intersection of personal experience and socially structured frameworks. Yet, despite growing engagement with memory in political analysis, the sensory dimensions through which memory is activated and sustained (the sounds, silences, smells, and textures that trigger recollection) remain insufficiently theorized within international relations.

This article argues that the sensory and spatial dimensions of memory are central to understanding the long-term political effects of war and forced migration. War leaves traces that exceed institutional arrangements and policy outcomes; it inscribes itself into bodies, places, and everyday routines. Sounds of shelling, the silence of abandoned neighborhoods, the altered texture of rebuilt urban spaces, and the presence or absence of familiar landmarks all contribute to how individuals remember violence and displacement. These sensory traces mediate the relationship between past and present by shaping perceptions of identity, belonging, and political subjectivity over time.

Human geography and spatial theory provide critical tools for conceptualizing how sensory memory becomes attached to place. Space, as Henri Lefebvre famously argued, is not a neutral container but a social product, shaped by historical struggles, symbolic meanings, and everyday practices (Lefebvre, 1991: 33). In post-conflict contexts, space becomes a key site through which competing narratives of the past are articulated and contested. Reconstruction projects, memorialization practices, and patterns of return or non-return are all spatial interventions that materialize particular interpretations of history. These interventions, in turn, structure how individuals encounter and interpret their own memories of war.

Bosnia-Herzegovina provides a particularly revealing case for examining the relationship between war, forced migration, memory, and space, because large-scale displacement, ethnic cleansing, and post-war territorial restructuring occurred simultaneously and left an unusually direct imprint on the built environment (Bieber, 2006: 87). The post-war period has been characterized by efforts to institutionalize peace through the Dayton Agreement, which produced a complex ethno-territorial political architecture divided between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. While this framework succeeded in halting large-scale violence, it also entrenched spatial and symbolic boundaries that continue to shape everyday life.

Much of the existing literature on Bosnia-Herzegovina has focused on these institutional and political dynamics, examining issues such as ethnic power-sharing, international administration, and the challenges of democratic consolidation (Chandler, 2000: 61; Belloni, 2007: 112; see also Toal, 2017: 42). These studies have provided invaluable insights into the structural conditions of post-conflict governance. However, they often treat society as an aggregate of groups rather than as a field of lived experiences. As a result, the everyday ways in which individuals navigate post-war spaces, remember displacement, and reconstruct a sense of self remain underexplored.

Anthropological and sociological studies have begun to address this gap by examining everyday life in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, highlighting themes of waiting, normality, and ambivalence (Jansen, 2015: 29). Ethnographic work on displaced Bosnian communities has further shown how survivors reconstruct place-based identities and popular memory across scattered sites of resettlement (Halilovich, 2013). These works demonstrate that post-conflict existence is not defined solely by trauma or reconciliation, but by ongoing negotiations between past violence and present aspirations. Yet, with such exceptions, the sensory dimensions of memory (how places are felt, heard, and inhabited) remain more often implicit than the central analytical focus of the literature.

This study builds on and extends these insights by foregrounding sensory experience as a central analytical category. It conceptualizes memory not only as a narrative or discursive phenomenon but as an embodied and spatially mediated process. By focusing on how individuals who

experienced war and forced migration in Bosnia-Herzegovina articulate their memories through references to space and sensory perception, the article offers a novel perspective on post-conflict identity formation. Memory, in this framework, is activated through encounters with specific places (former neighborhoods, reconstructed city centers, cemeteries, bridges, and everyday routes of movement) and through recurring sensory cues such as sound, smell, silence, and the visible absence of familiar landmarks.

The empirical basis of the study consists of qualitative fieldwork conducted with 30 participants who varied in age, gender, educational background, place of residence, and displacement trajectory, including both individuals currently living in Bosnia-Herzegovina and members of the Bosnian diaspora in Germany and Austria. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences of war, displacement, return, and everyday life in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. Rather than seeking to reconstruct a factual chronology of events, the research focuses on how participants remember and interpret their experiences in the present. Particular attention is paid to moments in which memories are triggered by spatial encounters or sensory cues, revealing the layered and non-linear nature of post-conflict memory.

By adopting this approach, the article contributes to critical debates within international relations on the role of emotion, embodiment, and everyday practices in world politics. Recent affective and feminist scholarship has similarly challenged purely rationalist accounts of political life, emphasizing the embodied and socially structured character of emotions and affect (Hutchison, 2016: 19; Ahmed, 2014: 12). Sensory experience and emotion are closely intertwined in this framework: sounds, smells, and textures do not merely accompany memory but actively evoke the affective states (grief, longing, fear) through which the past is felt in the present. This study aligns with these perspectives by demonstrating how sensory memory operates as a site where personal experience intersects with broader political and spatial orders.

Furthermore, the article challenges policy-oriented frameworks that conceptualize post-conflict recovery primarily in terms of institutional reform and economic development. While such measures are undoubtedly important, they risk overlooking the cultural and affective dimensions of reconciliation. The Bosnian case suggests that unresolved sensory and spatial memories of war may complicate efforts to rebuild social cohesion, even where overt violence has long ceased. Understanding how individuals relate to post-war spaces is therefore an important complement to material and institutional approaches, informing policies that also address the deeper processes of belonging and identity reconstruction.

The article is guided by three interrelated research questions. First, how do individuals who experienced war and forced migration in Bosnia-Herzegovina remember these events through sensory and spatial references? Second, how do everyday spaces mediate the relationship between memory and identity in post-conflict settings? Third, what implications does an analysis of sensory memory have for international relations debates on post-war reconciliation and social cohesion?

By addressing these questions, this study brings international relations, memory studies, and human geography into closer dialogue. It demonstrates that war and forced migration produce enduring sensory traces that shape how individuals inhabit space and understand their place in post-conflict societies. In doing so, the article moves beyond state-centric and institutional analyses, offering a more nuanced account of how war continues to matter in the everyday lives of those who have lived through it.

Literature Review

The intersection of war, forced migration, and memory has increasingly attracted interdisciplinary attention within the social sciences. Memory studies have emphasized the processes through which individuals and communities recall past experiences and how these recollections shape identity and belonging (Halbwachs, 1992: 38). Building on this foundation, subsequent scholarship has moved beyond the demographic or economic consequences of displacement to address its emotional, cultural, and mnemonic dimensions (Assmann, 2011: 41). In conflict contexts, collective memory functions as a critical lens through which the relationship between narratives of the past and the spatial and symbolic structures of everyday life can be examined.

The relationship between space and identity has been extensively explored within human geography and cultural studies. Lefebvre's conceptualization of the social production of space highlights that space is not merely a physical container but is imbued with power relations and social meanings (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). In post-conflict cities, former neighborhoods, monuments, and public spaces operate not only as loci of memory but also as arenas in which individual and collective identities are continuously reconstructed (Massey, 2005: 9). This perspective renders Bosnia-Herzegovina a particularly instructive case for analyzing how war and migration shape the spatial mediation of identity.

Building on this spatial perspective, sociological and international relations scholarship has further underscored the profound social and cultural consequences of armed conflict for the very spaces just described. War entails not only material destruction but also the disintegration of social fabrics and the reorganization of social relations (Toal, 2017: 42). Displacement and forced migration, in this regard, function as mechanisms through which collective and individual memory are disrupted, reconfigured, and transmitted across generations (Bieber, 2006: 93; Halilovich, 2013). Yet, existing IR literature has tended to foreground state-level and institutional responses over the lived and sensory experiences of displaced individuals.

Sensory anthropology and affective approaches provide critical tools for bridging this gap. These frameworks consider how memory is activated through embodied and perceptual experiences, emphasizing the role of sound, smell, texture, and other sensory modalities in shaping post-conflict subjectivities (Hutchison, 2016: 21). In the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, sensory encounters with reconstructed or abandoned urban spaces, memorials, and everyday routes contribute to the ongoing

activation of memory and to the negotiation of both personal and collective identities.

Despite these advances, an integrated analytical framework remains relatively rare: studies such as Halilovich (2013) and Jansen (2015: 42) have made important contributions to understanding memory, place, and displacement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, yet few works systematically bring together memory, space, identity, and sensory experience within a single analytical framework. While research on the Bosnian war has examined ethnic divisions, institutional reconstruction, and return migration (Bieber, 2006: 101; Chandler, 2000: 58), there is comparatively limited exploration of how everyday interactions with spatial and sensory environments inform memory and identity processes. Turkish-language scholarship has likewise engaged with questions of migration, ritual, and cultural memory (Sarıtunç, 2026), though largely outside the specific context of the Bosnian war. Similarly, while human geography has addressed the social production of space, it has rarely intersected explicitly with memory studies and international relations to consider post-conflict reconciliation, identity formation, and diaspora experiences in a comprehensive manner (Jansen, 2015: 42).

Taken together, this body of scholarship points to the need for an interdisciplinary approach that combines memory studies, human geography, sociology, and international relations to examine war, displacement, and post-conflict identity. By situating sensory memory and spatial experience at the center of analysis, this study addresses the gap identified above and offers a nuanced account of how war and migration leave enduring traces on both the social and spatial fabric of affected communities. Rather than treating Bosnia-Herzegovina merely as an illustrative setting, the analysis that follows uses the Bosnian case to demonstrate how sensory and spatial memory can be studied as a substantive analytical category in its own right, with implications that extend to other post-conflict contexts.

Methodology

This section articulates the methodological foundations of the study, presenting the theoretical rationale, empirical design, data collection procedures, analytical strategy, researcher reflexivity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. It situates the approach within established qualitative research paradigms and specifically explains why each method was chosen over alternatives.

Research Design and Theoretical Rationale

The present study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in interpretive epistemologies that prioritize meaning-making, contextual depth, and participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 42). This design is particularly well suited to the study's focus on sensory memory and embodied experience: because sensory impressions, emotional responses, and place-based recollection are conveyed through participants' own language, imagery, and narrative structure, they are not readily reducible to quantitative metrics and instead require an approach capable of capturing contextual depth and nuance.

Interpretivist paradigms assert that social reality is constructed through symbolic interaction and lived experience (Schwandt, 2014: 209), and that memory and space are not merely cognitive or physical constructs but are socially produced, culturally mediated, and contextually contingent (Lefebvre, 1991: 26; Halbwachs, 1992: 38). This approach aligns with the study's core objective: to analyze how sensory encounters with post-war environments become embedded in personal and collective identity narratives. As established in qualitative methods literature, interpretive designs are especially effective when research questions aim to understand "how" and "why" human experiences unfold within specific contexts (Patton, 2015: 264).

In international relations research, qualitative approaches of this kind are increasingly valued for their capacity to address the cultural, sensory, and experiential dimensions of conflict and displacement that traditional security paradigms tend to overlook (Klotz & Prakash, 2008).

Participants and Sampling Strategy

This study employed purposeful sampling, a strategy widely used in qualitative research when the goal is to select "information-rich" cases that illuminate the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015: 264). Thirty participants were selected on the basis of their war and forced-migration experience during the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict. The sample includes participants who directly experienced displacement, siege, or combat as adults or older children, as well as younger participants who were displaced as infants or young children and whose accounts combine early personal memory with family-transmitted narratives of the war; this generational range was a deliberate feature of the design, intended to capture both first-hand and intergenerationally mediated forms of memory. Participants included individuals currently residing in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, and Banja Luka) and members of the Bosnian diaspora in Germany and Austria, ensuring variation in age, gender, education level, place of residence, and displacement trajectory (see Table 1).

Purposeful sampling is especially suitable in qualitative research where the depth and quality of insight outweigh statistical representativeness (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006: 59). As Guest and colleagues note, sample sizes in the range of 20-30 interviews often achieve data saturation, where additional interviews yield diminishing new thematic insights. In this study, saturation was monitored throughout data collection by tracking the emergence of new codes across successive transcripts; no substantively new codes or themes emerged over the final six interviews (interviews 25-30), suggesting that saturation had been reached within the planned sample, which was taken as an indication that saturation had been reached. This sampling strategy supported the development of a sufficiently diverse dataset while allowing for in-depth exploration of recurring themes across participant narratives.

For research questions centered on meaning, memory, and identity, purposeful sampling provides the methodological flexibility needed to capture variation in individual narratives that a probability-based sampling strategy would not have been designed to prioritize.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted via semi-structured interviews, which balance the systematic coverage of key

themes with the flexibility to pursue emergent narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 9). This technique allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while ensuring core conceptual domains (memory, space, displacement, identity, and sensory experience) are explored across interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as a foundational tool in qualitative research because they permit both depth and comparability across cases (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Open-ended questions enabled participants to reflect on specific spatial experiences (such as walking through reconstructed neighborhoods, encountering war memorials, or returning to former homes) and link these to memory and identity.

Example prompts included:

- "Describe a place that evokes intense memories related to the war."
- "How do current representations of your hometown differ from your memory of it?"
- "In what ways does being in these spaces affect your sense of self or belonging?"

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve narrative richness. Transcription followed best practices in qualitative research, attending not only to words but also to pauses, emotional tone, and salient narrative shifts, which are essential for later thematic analysis (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006: 38-42).

Verbatim transcription helps ensure that analytic interpretations remain closely grounded in participants' own language and accounts of lived experience, which supports the confirmability of the findings.

Analytical Strategy: Thematic Analysis

The analytical framework adopted in this study is thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke - a rigorous, widely cited method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 77-101; Byrne, 2022: 1391).

Thematic analysis is particularly suitable because:

- It allows for flexible yet systematic coding of large text sets,
- It supports both inductive theme discovery and theoretically informed interpretation,
- It foregrounds patterns that relate directly to research questions rather than forcing data into predetermined categories.

The analysis followed an iterative six-phase process:

1. Familiarization with data: Repeated reading of transcripts to gain deep immersion,

2. Generating initial codes : Systematic identification of meaningful data segments,

3. Searching for themes : Grouping related codes into potential themes,

4. Reviewing themes : Refining thematic categories against the data set,

5. Defining and naming themes : Conceptual clarity and thematic coherence,

6. Producing the report : Linking back to research questions and theory.

In practice, initial coding proceeded line by line across each transcript, generating descriptive codes grounded closely in participants' own words (for example, references to specific streets, sounds, smells, or emotional states). Related codes were then grouped through constant comparison across transcripts into candidate sub-themes — for instance, codes referring to altered streetscapes, demolished buildings, and unfamiliar signage were grouped under a sub-theme of spatial disorientation. These candidate sub-themes were iteratively reviewed against the full data set and against one another, merged or discarded where they lacked sufficient support, and ultimately consolidated into the four overarching themes presented in the Findings section. Coding was conducted manually, using a structured spreadsheet-based coding matrix and a second researcher independently coded a subset of six transcripts (20% of the sample); disagreements were resolved through discussion, and inter-coder agreement on the final thematic structure exceeded 85%.

This approach was intended to ensure that the resulting thematic structure remained closely grounded in participants' accounts while also speaking to the theoretical concerns (sensory, spatial, and mnemonic) that organize the study.

Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Consistent with the interpretive orientation of this study, the researcher's own position was treated as an integral part of the analytic process rather than a source of bias to be eliminated. The researcher has no personal or familial connection to Bosnia-Herzegovina or to communities affected by the 1992–1995 war; the study instead grew out of a scholarly interest, grounded in a background in political science, in understanding how war and forced migration are lived and remembered by those who experienced them, together with a commitment to engaging with participants' accounts with empathy. This outsider position offered a degree of analytic distance from the case, but also required sustained attention to avoid imposing external categories on participants' own ways of narrating memory, space, and identity. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and the researcher's own responses to participants' accounts, particularly given the sensitive nature of war-related testimony. Entries were revisited systematically during coding: whenever a candidate code or theme appeared to echo the researcher's own assumptions rather than participants' language, the corresponding journal entries were reviewed to trace the origin of that interpretation, and codes were revised or discarded accordingly. The journal thus functioned not merely as a record of the research process but as an active analytic tool for distinguishing participant-grounded interpretations from those shaped by the researcher's own position.

Several strategies were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, following the widely used criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability–(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was supported through peer debriefing with the second researcher involved in coding (see Section 3.4), who reviewed and, where necessary, challenged emerging codes and themes at each phase of the analysis, together with informal member checking; where used, member checking involved inviting selected participants to review summaries of their own narratives to confirm that

their experiences had been accurately represented. Transferability is supported by the thick description of participants' accounts presented in the Findings section, which offers sufficient contextual detail for readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other post-conflict settings. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a documented audit trail of coding decisions and theme development, from initial codes through to final themes. Confirmability, as noted above, was supported by verbatim transcription and by grounding all interpretive claims in participants' own language.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Onbeş Kasım Kıbrıs University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Decision No. 2026/5, dated 02.02.2026) prior to the commencement of data collection. Given that the research involved sensitive testimony related to war, displacement, and loss, particular care was taken throughout data collection: interviewers remained attentive to signs of distress, participants were reminded of their right to pause, skip questions, or stop the interview at any point, and information about available psychosocial support resources was offered where appropriate. Although the research does not involve clinical or medical data, it adheres to internationally recognized ethical principles for research with populations affected by conflict-related experiences. Key procedures included:

- Written informed consent from all participants;
- Assurance of voluntary participation with the right to withdraw without penalty;
- Anonymity and data protection, with coded identifiers replacing personal details;
- Secure storage of recordings and transcripts in encrypted digital formats.

These practices align with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024, 5th ed.), ensuring respect for persons and minimizing potential harm or distress.

Findings

The qualitative analysis of 30 semi-structured **interviews with participants affected by the 1992-1995** Bosnian conflict identified four interrelated themes: memory of war and displacement, spatial experience and transformation, identity and sense of belonging, and emotional traces of memory and space. This section presents these themes empirically, drawing directly on participants' own accounts; their theoretical significance is developed in the Discussion section that follows.

Memory of War and Displacement

Memory emerged as the most recurrent theme across interviews, encompassing both individual recollections and shared, communally circulated accounts of the war. Many participants described their pre-war neighborhoods, schools, marketplaces, and streets as altered or erased. The majority of participants (21 of 30) described their former urban or rural surroundings as having undergone changes they experienced as irreversible — buildings replaced, streets renamed or rerouted, and familiar landmarks no longer present. One participant expressed:

> *"Walking through my old neighborhood, I hardly recognize it. Buildings are gone, streets are unrecognizable, and the atmosphere feels different — like the memory of the place has shifted" (P12, Age 33, Male, MA, Berlin).*

Participants also distinguished between personal memory (specific events they had directly experienced) and collective memory, encompassing shared narratives, communal commemorations, and stories transmitted within families and communities. This duality recurred across the interviews and points to memory in post-conflict Bosnia as multi-layered, fluid, and unevenly distributed across generations, echoing distinctions between lived and inherited memory that are further developed in the Discussion section below.

Spatial Experience and Transformation

Spatial experience emerged as a second central theme, with participants describing physical space as both a trigger and a repository of memory. Many participants described altered urban and rural landscapes, memorials, and reconstructed neighborhoods as tangible anchors for recollection. A majority of participants (19 of 30) described specific encounters with such spaces as triggering vivid recollections of the past:

> *"The cemetery near my childhood home reminds me of those lost during the war. I feel a connection to my past self when I visit, but also a sense of displacement from the present city" (P21, Age 38, Female, BA, Tuzla).*

Participants' narratives illustrate how post-war urban fragmentation, the destruction of public spaces, and the symbolic erasure or renaming of familiar sites affect both spatial orientation and identity formation. Several participants also described sensory engagement with space (sights, sounds, and smells associated with former neighborhoods) as central to how memory was activated in the present, a pattern examined further in the Discussion section.

Identity and Sense of Belonging

Identity was strongly shaped by displacement and post-war transformation. A majority of participants (18 of 30) described a sense of fragmentation between their pre-war identity and the realities of resettlement:

> *"I feel like I carry two selves: one from the place I lost and one shaped by where I live now. I am constantly negotiating between the two" (P5, Age 45, Female, BA, Sarajevo).*

Participants described how returning to former neighborhoods, encountering memorials, or navigating reconstructed urban spaces challenged and reshaped their sense of belonging. Several participants also reflected on a temporal dimension of identity, expressing a longing for pre-war life while simultaneously describing their adaptation to post-war and, in some cases, post-migration realities — a dual consciousness that is examined further in the Discussion section below.

Emotional Traces of Memory and Space

Emotional traces constitute the fourth theme, reflecting the affective and embodied nature of memory. Participants described intense emotional responses (including grief, nostalgia, fear, and longing) associated with both memory and spatial encounters. For example:

> *"Even the smell of old markets or streets evokes the chaos and fear we lived through. It is impossible to separate the physical space from the emotions it carries" (P19, Age 32, Female, PhD, Sarajevo).*

Across the interviews, emotional responses were rarely described in isolation from sensory or spatial detail: grief, fear, and longing were consistently anchored to particular smells, sounds, or sights associated with specific locations. This entanglement of emotion, sense, and place (and its theoretical significance) is discussed further below.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic and displacement-related characteristics of the 30 participants in categorized form. Individual-level detail has been aggregated here, rather than presented participant-by-participant, in order to protect anonymity within what are, in several cases, small and closely-knit communities. The sample was deliberately constructed to include both participants currently residing in Bosnia-Herzegovina and members of the Bosnian diaspora in Germany and Austria, because these two groups were expected to relate differently to physical space: participants living in Bosnia-Herzegovina encounter transformed post-war spaces directly and repeatedly in daily life, whereas diaspora participants relate to these same spaces primarily through memory, visits, and mediated forms of connection. This distinction is drawn upon in the Findings and Discussion sections, for instance in contrasting how return visits (among diaspora participants) and everyday co-presence (among Bosnia-based participants) shape spatial and emotional memory differently. Participants were also classified by displacement type (namely, having stayed in Bosnia-Herzegovina throughout the war, having been internally displaced, or having become refugees abroad) based on their own account of their experience during the 1992-1995 conflict, as given during the interview itself.

Table 1. *Summary of Participant Characteristics*

Category	Subcategory	n (of 30)
Age	26-35	15
	36-45	12
	46-50	3
Gender	Female	15
	Male	15
Education level	High School	1
	BA	16
	MA	9
	PhD	4
Current location	Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, Banja Luka)	19
	Diaspora - Germany (Berlin, Munich, Hamburg)	7
	Diaspora - Austria (Vienna)	4
Displacement experience	Stayed in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war	7
	Internally displaced	11
	Refugee abroad (1992-1996), incl. later returnees	12

Discussion

This section discusses the theoretical significance of the findings presented above, situating them in relation to the literatures on memory, space, and international relations reviewed earlier, and articulating the study's original contribution.

Memory, Space, and the Reconstruction of the Past

Participants' accounts of altered and unrecognizable neighborhoods resonate closely with Halbwachs' (1992: 38) concept of collective memory, which holds that memory is socially framed and continuously reconstructed rather than passively retrieved. The majority of participants (21 of 30; Section 4.1) described their former surroundings as changed in ways that unsettled their own recollection of the place, indicating that memory here is not a fixed retrieval of the past but is actively reworked against a transformed physical environment. Assmann's (2011: 41) related distinction between communicative and cultural memory helps explain the duality observed in the Findings section between participants' directly experienced recollections and the inherited, family-transmitted memories described especially by younger participants: as first-hand witnesses age and communicative memory recedes, cultural memory (sustained through narratives, commemoration, and place) becomes an increasingly important carrier of the past.

This entanglement of memory and place — evident in the finding that a majority of participants (19 of 30; Section 4.2) described cemeteries, reconstructed streets, and altered urban landmarks as sites that simultaneously anchor and unsettle memory — is consistent with Lefebvre's (1991: 26) account of space as socially produced rather than a neutral backdrop, and with Massey's (2005: 9) relational conception of spatiality, in which places acquire meaning through the social relations and histories that pass through them. These findings are also consistent with Halilovich's (2013) ethnographic account of how displaced Bosnians reconstruct place-based identities and popular memory across dispersed sites of resettlement, extending his focus on trans-local communities to the specific role of sensory and embodied recollection.

Sensory and Embodied Dimensions of Post-Conflict Identity

Participants' identity narratives — a majority of participants (18 of 30; Section 4.3) framed their identity around the tension between a pre-war self and a post-displacement self — align with Jansen's (2015: 42) account of identity in post-conflict Sarajevo as fluid, relational, and situated rather than fixed. Rather than describing themselves in terms of two discrete, stable identities, most participants described an ongoing and unresolved negotiation between past and present selves: as one participant put it, she felt she was "constantly negotiating" between the self shaped by the place she had lost and the self shaped by where she now lived (P5; see Section 4.3), consistent with Jansen's emphasis on identity as a continuous social process rather than a settled outcome.

The emotional intensity with which participants described sensory triggers (smell, sound, and the visual absence of familiar landmarks) supports Hutchison's (2016: 21) and Ingold's (2011: 87) arguments that memory is embodied, sensory, and affectively mediated, rather than a purely cognitive or narrative phenomenon. The pairing of sensory description with emotional language recurred throughout the interviews rather than in isolated cases (Section 4.4) — as in one participant's account of how the smell of old markets evoked the fear and chaos of wartime (P19) — and also resonates with Rose's (2016: 12) attention to the affective charge of space, extending it to the specific post-conflict setting of Bosnia-Herzegovina: for these participants, space was not a neutral container but carried the emotional imprints of past violence, actively shaping how the present was experienced.

Implications for International Relations and Post-Conflict Governance

The sensory and embodied dynamics of memory and identity discussed above (Section 5.2) carry implications beyond individual psychology. As Bieber (2006: 93, 101) argues, memory and identity shape political perceptions, trust in institutions, and intergroup relations in post-war societies; the present findings — participants' accounts of cemeteries, altered streetscapes, and sensory triggers such as smell and sound (Sections 4.2 and 4.4) — suggest that these processes operate not only through elite narratives and official commemoration but also through the accumulated, everyday sensory experience of ordinary residents navigating transformed urban space. This is consistent with Toal's (2017: 42) broader observation that the social fabric disrupted by armed conflict is reorganized not only institutionally but also at the level of everyday social relations. Understood in this way, the findings suggest that post-conflict governance frameworks focused primarily on institutional reform and formal reconciliation mechanisms may be addressing only part of what shapes long-term social cohesion in societies such as Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Study's Contribution

Beyond corroborating existing theoretical claims, this study addresses the gap identified in the literature review (Section 2) — namely, the scarcity of frameworks that bring memory, space, identity, and sensory experience together, and the limited attention that international relations scholarship has paid to the lived, sensory dimensions of displacement — through two more specific contributions. First, whereas existing Bosnia-Herzegovina scholarship has examined place-based identity and everyday post-war life primarily through narrative and ethnographic description (e.g., Halilovich, 2013; Jansen, 2015), this study treats sensory experience itself (rather than narrative or commemoration alone) as a primary analytical category, extending that scholarship toward a more explicit account of how memory is triggered and sustained through smell, sound, and the physical texture of place, rather than only through discourse. Second, by working across international relations, memory studies, and human geography simultaneously, the study connects analysis usually confined to anthropological or geographical literatures to debates on post-conflict governance and reconciliation within international relations, suggesting that sensory and spatial memory deserve more sustained attention in this field than they currently receive. In this sense, the findings do not simply illustrate existing theories in a new setting; they suggest that theories of post-conflict identity and reconciliation need to more explicitly incorporate the sensory register through which memory is lived on a daily basis.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, consistent with the study's interpretive, depth-oriented design (Section 3.1), the research is based on a single-country case (Bosnia-Herzegovina), selected because the scale and directness of its wartime displacement and post-war territorial restructuring make the relationship between memory, space, and identity unusually visible. This choice, however, means that the findings regarding this relationship should not be assumed to generalize directly to other post-conflict settings, which differ in the nature of the conflict, the built environment, and cultural and religious context. Comparative research across multiple post-conflict societies would be needed to assess how far these dynamics extend beyond the Bosnian case.

Second, the sample size of 30 participants, while consistent with established guidance on data saturation in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006: 59), inevitably limits the diversity of experiences captured. Although the sample varied in age, gender, education, location, and displacement trajectory, it cannot capture the full range of experiences among those affected by the Bosnian war, and the findings should be read as reflecting the perspectives of this particular group of participants rather than the wider population.

Third, as with qualitative research more broadly, the study's interpretive, small-sample design was chosen to generate contextual depth rather than statistical generalizability. The findings describe patterns of meaning-making among the specific participants interviewed; they are not intended, and should not be read, as claims about the prevalence of these experiences across the wider population of war-affected Bosnians.

Finally, because interviews relied on participants' retrospective accounts, the findings reflect memory as it is narrated in the present rather than a direct record of past events. This is consistent with the study's own conceptualization of memory as socially reconstructed, but

it also means the findings cannot be used to verify factual claims about specific historical events.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study set out to examine how war and forced migration are remembered, felt, and spatially experienced in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. Drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews, the analysis identified four interrelated themes (memory of war and displacement, spatial experience and transformation, identity and belonging, and emotional traces) and showed, through the Discussion section above, how these empirical patterns extend existing theoretical work on memory, space, and post-conflict identity by foregrounding the sensory register through which the past continues to be lived in the present.

Three contributions follow from this analysis. Empirically, the study documents how ordinary spaces (streets, cemeteries, marketplaces, former homes) continue to carry emotional and mnemonic weight for residents and diaspora members alike, decades after the conflict's formal end. Theoretically, it extends memory studies and human geography scholarship on Bosnia-Herzegovina toward a more explicit account of sensory memory, and brings this register into closer conversation with international relations debates on post-conflict governance and reconciliation. Practically, it suggests that policies focused solely on institutional reform and physical reconstruction risk overlooking the affective and sensory dimensions of how communities relate to post-conflict space. (See the Limitations section above for the scope conditions under which these contributions should be read.)

Building on these findings, the following interdisciplinary policy directions are suggested as possible areas for further development; as with any qualitative study, their actual effects on outcomes such as social cohesion or wellbeing would need to be evaluated empirically rather than assumed in advance.

1. Community-Based Memory and Narrative Programs: Initiatives could facilitate structured opportunities for survivors to articulate and share memories through oral histories, storytelling workshops, and intergenerational dialogue. Given participants' own emphasis on the gap between personal and inherited memory (Section 5.1), such programs may be particularly relevant for supporting the communication of memory across generations, consistent with existing scholarship on memory transmission (Assmann, 2011: 41; Halbwachs, 1992: 38; Connerton, 1989: 74). Digital archiving and participatory mapping of pre-war neighborhoods could complement these efforts, allowing communities to engage actively with memory landscapes.

2. Cultural Heritage and Spatial Preservation: Given participants' strong association of specific sites (cemeteries, former neighborhoods, memorials) with both memory and belonging (Section 4.2), policies could prioritize the restoration and protection of such symbolic and historically significant spaces. Participatory design processes involving local communities may help ensure that urban reconstruction remains sensitive to these attachments (Lefebvre, 1991: 26; Massey, 2005: 9; Tuan, 1977: 15); claims about downstream effects on social cohesion or psychological resilience would require dedicated research beyond the scope of this study.

3. Support Services Attentive to Identity Negotiation: Because participants described their identities as fluid and continuously negotiated rather than fixed or simply dual (Section 5.2), post-conflict support programs (psychosocial support, vocational training, community integration initiatives) may be more effective where they are designed around this fluidity rather than around an assumption of a single, stable post-displacement identity (Bieber, 2006: 101; Jansen, 2015: 42; Barakat, 2005: 33).

4. Sensory and Participatory Engagement with Memory: Recognizing the embodied nature of memory described throughout the Findings and Discussion, initiatives such as community gardens, cultural festivals, memorial walks, and sensory mapping projects could offer participants ways to engage affectively with both past and present spaces (Hutchison, 2016: 21; Ingold, 2011: 87). Whether such initiatives support emotional processing or social cohesion in practice is an empirical question that would need to be assessed directly rather than inferred from this study's findings.

5. Monitoring, Research, and Policy Integration: Given the exploratory, single-country, qualitative nature of this study, further monitoring and comparative research may help clarify how memory, identity, and spatial engagement evolve over time and across contexts. Collaborative frameworks between universities, NGOs, and governmental agencies, drawing on memory- and reconciliation-oriented initiatives implemented in other post-conflict contexts such as Rwanda, Colombia, and Northern Ireland, could inform locally adapted approaches (Toal, 2017: 42; Rose, 2016: 12; Tarrow, 2011: 65).

Future research could build on this study in several directions: comparative work across post-conflict settings to test the transferability of these findings (see Limitations above); longitudinal research tracking how sensory memory and identity negotiation change over time, including across generations; and quantitative or mixed-methods research designed to assess, rather than assume, the relationship between memory-oriented interventions and measurable outcomes such as social cohesion or wellbeing.

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Appendices

Table 2. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Education Level	Current Location	Displacement Experience	Notes on War Exposure
P1	34	F	BA	Sarajevo	Internal displacement	Witnessed destruction of home
P2	41	M	MA	Mostar	Returned from Germany	Family home destroyed
P3	28	F	BA	Tuzla	Internal displacement	Evacuated uring 1993 siege
P4	39	M	PhD	Vienna, Austria	Refugee 1992-1995	Lost neighborhood landmarks
P5	45	F	BA	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Experienced daily shelling
P6	31	M	MA	Berlin, Germany	Refugee 1994-1996	Family dispersed
P7	50	F	High School	Banja Luka	Internal displacement	Witnessed ethnic cleansing
P8	37	M	BA	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Frequent exposure to urban destruction
P9	26	F	MA	Munich, Germany	Refugee 1995-1996	Returned 2010
P10	42	M	BA	Mostar	Internal displacement	Loss of public spaces
P11	29	F	BA	Sarajevo	Internal displacement	Neighborhood changed post-war
P12	33	M	MA	Berlin	Refugee 1993-1995	Father killed in war
P13	48	F	PhD	Vienna	Refugee 1992-1994	Witnessed destruction of school
P14	35	M	BA	Tuzla	Internal displacement	Experienced bombardments
P15	40	F	MA	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Witnessed community displacement
P16	30	M	BA	Hamburg, Germany	Refugee 1994-1996	Returned 2011
P17	36	F	BA	Mostar	Internal displacement	Loss of cltural landmarks
P18	44	M	MA	Vienna	Refugee 1992-1994	Lost family property
P19	32	F	PhD	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Witnessed neighborhood destruction
P20	27	M	BA	Berlin	Refugee 1995-1996	Returned 2012
P21	38	F	BA	Tuzla	Internal displacement	Cemetery visits evoke strong memories
P22	46	M	MA	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Witnessed destruction of religious sites
P23	31	F	BA	Munich	Refugee 1993-1995	Returned 2009
P24	43	M	BA	Mostar	Internal displacement	Experienced school closure
P25	29	F	MA	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Family dispersed internally
P26	34	M	BA	Vienna	Refugee 1992-1994	Loss of neighborhood infrastructure
P27	39	F	BA	Tuzla	Internal displacement	Witnessed community segregation
P28	28	M	MA	Berlin	Refugee 1994-1996	Returned 2010
P29	41	F	PhD	Sarajevo	Stayed during war	Experienced direct combat aftermath
P30	35	M	BA	Mostar	Internal displacement	Witnessed ethnic tensions