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“Dangerous Individuals”: Erasing or Enhancing Genocidal Perpetrators in Social Media GIFs

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ABSTRACT

What role do user-generated GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) have in social media and how do they contribute to distorted representations of genocides? This article analyses the availability of GIFs in Facebook Messenger in light of Facebook’s own Community Standards that prohibit the sharing of content with references to “dangerous individuals.” The company explicitly proscribes the representation of perpetrator(s) of multiple-victim violence. This article examines the narrative power of GIFs related to the Holocaust, the former Yugoslavia, and the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and the representation of political and military leaders. Our systematic search documents a selective execution of the Community Standards as well as selective censorship of *génocidaires*. Rather than analysing how users create and Facebook manages these GIFs, we take this observation as a troubling indication of selective portrayal of historical truths. By making some perpetrators hypervisible, GIFs privilege certain narratives, while simultaneously muting the crimes and victims. While much attention has been given to social media’s power to (mis)represent and (re)create truths about ongoing conflicts, less attention has been given to the representation of past conflicts. Few studies examine the role of GIFs in the representation of historical figures. Drawing on memory studies and studies of historical and social representation, this article contributes to filling this gap. It argues that Facebook creates and reproduces a distorted understanding of “dangerous individual.” GIFs depicting convicted perpetrators of genocide are especially problematic given current strong trends of denialism and revisionism in countries like Serbia.

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Introduction

As digital knowledge of the past travels globally, virtual images replace conventional sites of remembrance.¹ Media platforms and digital formats blur boundaries between present

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¹ Uli Linke, “Anthropology of Collective Memory,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 181–7.

and past; they tell stories as well as shape memory recall, remembrance and forgetting.² In social media platforms, Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs) are a key form of user-generated images, through which past moments can be recorded, stored, and then “brought back to life, restaged, or replayed.”³ Individualized access to the internet, digital tools and skills not only change the practices of remembering, but also facilitate the creation of new historical narratives.⁴ The power of social media to create and recreate history draws significant public and scholarly attention. Increasingly, social, and legal studies focus on algorithmic governance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), news modification and political censorship or lack thereof. For instance, the role of Facebook and the lack of censorship in ongoing or emerging conflicts and genocidal situations like in Myanmar and Ethiopia⁵ has led to admissions of complicity in criminal acts and ensuing lawsuits.⁶ Or, when the recent war in Ukraine erupted, the corporate owner of Facebook and Instagram, Meta, made temporary allowances for some forms of violent expression, such as “death to the Russian invaders.” This policy change applied only to users in selected countries,⁷ and was a break with Meta’s own Community Standards that “apply to everyone, all around the world, and to all types of content.”⁸

Less scholarly attention is paid to the position of social media regarding past instances of genocidal violence and its perpetrators. In this article, we focus on the representation of genocides in GIFs in Facebook Messenger and their potential in consolidating or constructing conflicting and/or harmful narratives. In doing so, we highlight Facebook’s selective execution of its Community Standards in the appearance of GIFs portraying historic atrocities. Linke asserts that select trauma histories circulate as universal tropes for human atrocities.⁹ The Holocaust is an exemplary case. By exposing the linkages between modernity, racialization, and violence, Huysen argues that the Holocaust has acquired a totalizing dimension that is continuously appropriated and meaningfully attached to other “local situations that are historically distant and politically distinct from the original

² Martin Pogacar, *Media Archaeologies, Micro-Archives and Storytelling: Re-Presenting the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³ Alison Winter, *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 4.

⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, “Censorship and Memory: Thinking Outside the Box with Facebook, Goebels, and Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 4, no. 1 (2021): 39.

⁵ Kyle Rapp, “Social Media and Genocide: The Case for Home State Responsibility,” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 4 (2021): 486–502.

⁶ Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, UN Doc. A/HRC/39/64, 12 September 2018, para. 74; Sarah Federman and Ronald Niezen, “Narratives in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity,” in *Narratives of Mass Atrocity: Victims and Perpetrators in the Aftermath*, eds. Sarah Federman and Ronald Niezen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 19–20; Evelyn Douek, “Facebook’s Role in Genocide in Myanmar: New Reporting Complicates the Narrative,” *Lawfare*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/facebooks-role-genocide-myanmar-new-reporting-complicates-narrative>; Emmanuel Akinwotu, “Facebook’s Role in Myanmar and Ethiopia Under New Scrutiny,” *The Guardian*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/07/facebooks-role-in-myanmar-and-ethiopia-under-new-scrutiny>.

⁷ Munsif Vengattil and Elizabeth Culliford, “Facebook Allows War Posts Urging Violence Against Russian Invaders,” *Reuters*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-facebook-instagram-temporarily-allow-calls-violence-against-russians-2022-03-10/>. The countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

⁸ Meta, “Facebook Community Standards,” <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/>. Only four days later, Meta altered the policy again, narrowing it to allow only users in Ukraine to voice opposition to Russia’s attack. On the same day, Russia opened a criminal case against the social media firm (see Munsif Vengattil, “Meta Narrows Guidance to Prohibit Calls for Death of a Head of State,” *Reuters*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/meta-narrows-guidance-restrict-calls-death-head-state-2022-03-14/>).

⁹ Linke, “Anthropology of Collective Memory.”

event.”¹⁰ Such emergent memory markets do not necessarily inhibit critical inquiry, but may pose “fundamental questions about human rights violations, justice and collective responsibility.”¹¹ Nevertheless, as Linke pointed out, “the mass-mediated traffic of present pasts encourages a habitus of selective remembering, rendering some aspects of traumatic events hypervisible while muting the recall of others. ... Representations of the past are fabricated, staged for popular entertainment.”¹² Unlike remembrances produced by collective experience or lived time, such collages of history, fiction, and memory are not “embodied in the social” and therefore more easily forgotten. Commodified memory “is sucked into the timeless present of the all-pervasive virtual space of consumer culture.”¹³ Due to their strong position in a consumer culture, social media platforms increasingly facilitate and fuel user-generated creations of parallel universes of memory and remembrance.

A GIF is an image file format that was developed in the late 1980s and is nearly as old as the Internet itself. After a drop in popularity in the 1990s, GIFs have experienced a revival in social media. Today, they are a key communication tool widely used on various platforms.¹⁴ GIFs are user-generated, freely available, and largely unmoderated. They are available on numerous digital platforms, including WhatsApp, Slack, Skype, Twitter, and Weibo, and cover most of the world’s population that has access to the internet. In 2019, there were around 700 million active daily GIF users, a sevenfold increase in just three years, or approximately ten billion GIFs served per day, compared with one billion in 2016.¹⁵ These figures show that GIFs have an outreach extending far beyond individuals’ regular social circles, and harmful messages can potentially reach and influence very many people. With the strength of their visual impact,¹⁶ GIFs are a critical component of everyday social media experiences and shape people’s understanding of the world, both past and the present. Their historiographic features deserve empirical and analytical attention. Although this article focuses on Facebook, most of the analysis can be extrapolated to other platforms.

Studies of lay representation of history point out the ways in which various communities and groups depict history in a distinctive light,¹⁷ noting that “as opposed to residing within the mind, these narratives exist in the material world ... and are embodied in cultural practice, such as commemorative celebrations. ... Individuals engage with these collectively constructed stories through their own cultural participation.”¹⁸ In this context,

¹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13–14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² Linke, “Anthropology of Collective Memory,” 185.

¹³ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 10, 28.

¹⁴ Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, “Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF,” *Social Media + Society* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117725223>.

¹⁵ DMR, “Giphy Statistics, User Counts, Facts & News (2022),” updated 18 July 2022, <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/giphy-facts-statistics/>; Jon Fingas, “Giphy’s GIF Service Has Over 100 Million Users Every Day,” *Engadget*, 27 October 2016, https://www.engadget.com/2016-10-27-giphy-has-over-100-million-users-every-day.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHasiyd9zFrkR7ftx6p2Ye02sVd37cFPHFY--db9MtybEp1W1NCpi0dNvu_2X1xF1f_cCSA-Nb4al3TE8MOycZ7NmiB0DC_qy0WKX8wuyplpnuJ9_R3xD8zLOECwrro wxK9515WdlehBC0VV2PAql6UUltU0h05hLV3n7gljOm.

¹⁶ See Andrea Petò, “Death and the Picture. Representation of War Criminals and Construction of Divided Memory about WWII in Hungary,” in *Faces of Death. Visualising History*, eds. Andrea Petò and Klaartje Schrijvers (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2009), 39–56.

¹⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory. The Heritage of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Phillip L. Hammack and Andrew Pilecki, “Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2012): 78.

GIFs are transcending objects. They exist in the material – digital – world and present a narrative that is privately created and used. At the same time, once searchable, private GIFs become public and freely accessible and may serve as collective imagery assets of historical representations.

All GIFs examined for this research were created from photographs; therefore, we found cultural philosopher and critic Susan Sontag's views informative. Sontag held that photography introduces a new visual code that expands the viewer's notions of "what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe."¹⁹ Accordingly, GIFs supply "not only a record of the past, but a new way of dealing with the present."²⁰ Following narrative theory,²¹ which informs our analysis, they shape present conditions but also shape the future.²² This narrative approach extends the current scholarship on visual social media, in which the instant and immediate is privileged.²³

Existing research from communication and media studies shows that GIFs are similar to layered texts or parody and are often used to communicate hidden meanings in plain sight.²⁴ Apart from data and communication sciences, there is very limited research on GIFs and their (mis)use in social media. This article narrows the research gap. Studies on representations and portrayals of atrocities, genocide and war crimes emphasize socio-cultural and political conditioning as well as emotional appeals.²⁵ However, by exploring the aesthetic, affective, and ethical features of such portrayals, these studies focus on the content of the visual and textual representations, on *how* the instances and actors are represented, not on *if* and *which*. Our contribution offers anthropological and legal insights into GIFs and their *availability*. First, we argue that GIFs offer a distorted image of past genocides and/or genocidal perpetrators. Second, we contend that Facebook's policies of selection may have unintended and paradoxical effects that erase historic memories and atrocities while enhancing, or even facilitating, current troubling situations such as denial of genocide. We do not have access to the motivations and intentions of the creators of GIFs. Therefore, rather than examining the process of creation, dissemination, and selection of GIFs, we observe them as phenomena that pose troubling questions regarding the selective representation of genocide and conflict. We invite to further exploration of the issues raised in this article, such as the questions of how GIFs are created and used and by whom, in what kind of contexts, and which mobilization and narrativization they promote.

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 3–4. For a critique, see Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Malden: Polity Press, 2001), 297–8.

²⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 130.

²¹ Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²² Similarly, Jörn Rüsen, "Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and Its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture," *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (2012): 45.

²³ Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver, "Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and Gifs to Memes and Emojis," *Communication Research and Practice* 2 (2016): 47–62.

²⁴ Miltner and Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up," 1.

²⁵ Katarina Ristić, "Accused War Criminals Qua Perpetrators: On the Visual Signification of Criminal Guilt," *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 2, no. 2 (2019): 156–79; Katarina Ristić, "The Media Negotiations of War Criminals and Their Memoirs: The Emergence of the 'ICTY Celebrity'," *International Criminal Justice Review* 28, no. 4 (2018): 391–405; Vladimir Petrović, "Power(lessness) of Atrocity Images: Bijeljina Photos Between Perpetration and Prosecution of War Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 9, no. 3 (2015): 367–85; Rebecca Jinks, *Representing Genocide: The Holocaust as Paradigm?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

Methods and Analytical Approach

To examine differences in representations of perpetrators, we combined digital and qualitative methods to provide an empirical and legal analysis of GIFs available on Facebook Messenger. GIFs in Messenger are provided by the GIF hosts Giphy²⁶ and Tenor,²⁷ and we narrowed our analysis to only those appearing in Messenger. We employed a purposive sampling method,²⁸ in which historic and interdisciplinary research on genocide informed our search strategy, including the keywords used. We searched for GIFs that showed or were connected to historic occurrences of mass atrocities or genocide, with mass atrocities defined as “large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations”²⁹ and genocide as “the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”³⁰ To narrow the research focus, we emphasized on perpetrators of historically undisputed events of mass atrocities. As GIFs depict images, we excluded cases before the age of photography around 1830. For the purpose of this study, we looked at the Holocaust, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, and the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. We searched for the following terms: “Hitler,” “Nazi,” “Auschwitz,” “Himmler,” “Goebbels”/ “Göbbels,” “Milosevic,” “Karadzic,” “Mladic,” “Pol Pot,” “Ieng Sary,” and “Kaing Guek Eav.” The sample for the analysis is therefore limited. Nonetheless, it is sufficient to discuss issues of competing narratives, representation, and remembrance.

In our search, we used English terms and proper names. The analysis does therefore not include results in Cyrillic or Khmer script and language. The IP address of the computers performing the internet search on Facebook Messenger probably also influences the search results. We used computers located in Norway and acknowledge the relevance of IP addresses. However, we will not further consider it in the analysis. Instead, we encourage comparative cross-country studies.

We mapped the number of GIFs found, their visual and explicitly textual layers and characteristics, and we considered “no search result” for specific references. We then analysed how the search results corresponded with Facebook policies concerning representation of perpetrators and dissemination of hate ideologies. We neither performed a legal analysis of the crimes conveyed in GIFs nor focused on their legal classification, meaning that instances of mass killings may be considered for the current research, even if they do not reach the legal threshold of the crime of genocide. Likewise, we did not examine relevant national or regional regulations governing the creation, use, and dissemination of GIFs. Instead, the analysis takes an innovative perspective focusing solely on Facebook’s own policies and their execution.

In our search, we focused on atrocities that a court or tribunal has legally categorized as genocide within the meaning of a criminal statute. We also focused on *génocidaires* who

²⁶ Giphy, “Explore/Search Phrase ‘Facebook Messenger,’” <https://giphy.com/explore/facebook-messenger>.

²⁷ Tenor, <https://tenor.com/>.

²⁸ Ted Palys, “Purposive Sampling,” in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Vol. 2, ed. Lisa M. Given (Los Angeles: Sage), 697–8.

²⁹ Scott Straus, “What Is Being Prevented? Genocide, Mass Atrocity, and Conceptual Ambiguity in the Anti-Atrocity Movement,” in *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention*, eds. Sheri P. Rosenberg, Tiberiu Galis, and Alex Zucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 29; United Nations, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes* (2014), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

³⁰ Article 2, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948.

were held accountable for their criminal actions. Our rationale for this emphasis is that the evidence of these crimes has been duly and publicly examined and deemed sufficient for a conviction. However, a court only establishes the facts of the case before it; therefore, its judgment should not be considered a complete source of history or truth.³¹ Nonetheless, the evidence presented and evaluated, as well as the verifiability, objectivity, and accessibility of judgements, make them invaluable sources for both concerned individuals and the general public. As such, they play a role in the historiography of a conflict. For the present analysis, the judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) contain extensive discussions of factual situations, giving them distinct authority.³² We will return to the importance of the judgements in our presentation of the empirical material.

Theoretical Inspirations

This study draws on analytical and theoretical perspectives from anthropology of history, international criminal law, as well as genocide and memory studies. The study is informed by narrative theory, which suggests that narrative thinking is a universal and fundamental human mode of thought for “ordering experience, of constructing reality.”³³ Narratives shape our knowledge and understanding of the world; they connect our past, present, and future while simultaneously reshaping them. However, narratives are not only linguistically and contextually constituted, but also have a central temporal dimension that is necessarily indeterminate.³⁴ Mirroring the inconsistency and temporariness of life, narratives appear, develop, and disappear. Temporality is particularly important feature to consider in this study because social media constitute a changeable environment that may elide, cover up, authorize, or silence concurring narratives. While navigating a polyphonic context,³⁵ in which multiple narratives circulate and compete for dominance, individuals and groups chose those that create a sense of personal coherence, group identity, or collective solidarity and legitimize collective beliefs, emotions, and actions. Narratives can, for instance, mobilize and actualize the past to strengthen and position national and ethnic identities in relation to others.³⁶

The recent developments in Ukraine and sudden Facebook policy changes that allow (or even incite) violence and perpetration of crimes, demonstrate the importance of the temporality.³⁷ In the dynamic tensions between narratives (i.e. who is/was the

³¹ Nanci Adler, “Introduction: On History, Historians, and Transitional Justice,” in *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling*, ed. Nanci Adler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 3, 7.

³² Richard Ashby Wilson, “The Spark for Genocide? Propaganda and Historical Narratives at International Criminal Tribunals,” in *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling*, ed. Nanci Adler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 101; William Schabas, “Prosecuting Genocide,” in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 262.

³³ Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11.

³⁴ Linda Garro and Cheryl Mattingly, “Narrative as Construct and Construction,” in *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, eds. Cheryl Mattingly and Linda Garro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–49.

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³⁶ Federman and Niezen, “Narratives in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity,” 18.

³⁷ Vengattil and Culliford, “Facebook Allows War Posts Urging Violence Against Russian Invaders.” *Reuters*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-facebook-instagram-temporarily-allow-calls-violence-against-russians-2022-03-10/>.

perpetrator? What is allowed to be expressed? Who can be remembered and how?), new understandings of the past emerge. While the anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated “[history] does not describe what happened but what happens,”³⁸ according to narrative theory, how history is narrated describes what happens. Through representations of history, we learn what is at stake in the present. Creating a moral and cognitive framework, the images of the meaningful past manage our expectations and direct us toward future actions. Within this framework, we consider GIFs as tools for telling history and privileging *some* narratives, while remaining silent on or even silencing others.

History informs truth, memory, and representation, and discourses about them are interlinked.³⁹ While scholars analytically distinguish truth, memory, and representation, these divisions are much more challenging and problematic for the group(s) concerned.⁴⁰ Narrative privileging and moments of silencing complicate and constitute issues of truth and falsity, especially in post-genocidal contexts.⁴¹ Narratives have the ability to change and influence the course of the story, and thus, memories. In doing to, they may consolidate memory and motivate particular social practices, such as participation in violence that maintains conflict. In this way, beliefs and emotions become shared and socially distributed across a collective.⁴² Emotions like anger and hatred are encoded into the collective narratives that individuals encounter in conflict settings.⁴³

This approach aligns closely with theories of social representations that theorize the role of narratives in the provision of a collective meaning. Like narratives, social representations “concern the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe.”⁴⁴ They help individuals and groups making sense of socially significant phenomenon,⁴⁵ such as historical events. What connects narrative theory and theories of social representations is the assumption that history acts as a “symbolic reserve” that can be drawn upon depending on its relevance to present needs.⁴⁶ Moreover, social representation theories emphasize that representations of history are contested⁴⁷ in that different communities may hold different views or opposing social representations about the same topic or event.⁴⁸ This can occur when communities or

³⁸ Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

³⁹ Alexander L. Hinton and Kevin L. O'Neill, *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 192; James A. Tyner, Gabriela Brindis Alvarez, and Alex R. Colucci, “Memory and the Everyday Landscape of Violence in Post-Genocide Cambodia,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 8 (2012): 855–6.

⁴² Daniel Bar-Tal, Eran Halperin, and Joseph de Rivera, “Collective Emotions in Conflict Situations: Societal Implications,” *Journal of Social Issues* 63, no. 2 (2007): 441–60.

⁴³ For example, Eran Halperin, “Group-Based Hatred in Intractable Conflict in Israel,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 5 (2008): 713–36.

⁴⁴ Serge Moscovici, “Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18, no. 3 (1988): 214.

⁴⁵ Caroline Howarth, “A Social Representation Is Not a Quiet Thing: Exploring the Critical Potential of Social Representations Theory,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (2006): 65–86.

⁴⁶ James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, “How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 537–56.

⁴⁷ Chris G. Sibley and James H. Liu, “Social Representations of History and the Legitimation of Social Inequality: The Causes and Consequences of Historical Negation,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 42, no. 3 (2012): 598–623.

⁴⁸ Moscovici, “Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations”; Alain Clemence, Willem Doise, and Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi, *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Representations* (London: Routledge, 2014).

groups disagree on the extent of different representational profiles of history, which means they perceive differently the importance or evaluation of historical events or figures.⁴⁹

These theories inform our understanding of censorship as a narrative power that facilitates authorization and silencing of historical truths. GIFs as visual representations of history and vehicles of narrative history writing are “the venues within which alternative remembrances”⁵⁰ – unauthorized and unapproved memories and representations of the past – can be located and analysed. Our study presents three different cases: each in its own way questions which narratives, through the visual representations in GIFs, become dominant and which ones are silenced.

Setting the Stage: GIFs, Mass Violence, and the Perpetrators

“Germans had Hitler, Serbs have Mladić,” said Munira Subašić, whose son and husband were killed by Bosnian Serb forces that overran Srebrenica.⁵¹ Subašić’s juxtaposition of Hitler and Mladić was based on her personal and direct experience as a survivor of the crimes perpetrated in Srebrenica. Numerous scholarly works discuss the legitimacy of comparisons to the Holocaust and point to the misuse of Holocaust terminology.⁵² We do not make such comparisons, but acknowledge that participants in conflict use them, and Subašić’s statement illustrates lay representations of perpetrators and contextualizes this study.

We compared the representation of political and military leaders in GIFs through the narrow lens of Facebook’s own Community Standards. In the following, we present results related to the Holocaust, the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. We selected heads of state, certain high-ranking generals, and influential ministers, thus members of the most powerful political and military tier of the respective regime. This selection corresponds to the indictment strategies of international criminal courts that concentrate on those who bear the greatest responsibility.⁵³ With this focus, we created a certain symmetry of the individuals representing the state, which allowed for a legitimate comparison.

⁴⁹ See Sibley and Liu, “Social Representations”; Katja Hanke, et al., “‘Heroes’ and ‘Villains’ of World History across Cultures,” *PLoS One* 10, no. 2 (2015): e0115641.

⁵⁰ Rubie S. Watson, “Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism: An Introduction,” in *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism*, ed. Rubie S. Watson (Santa Fe: SARIS Press, 1994), 2.

⁵¹ Ivana Sekularac and Anthony Deutsch, “Bosnia’s Mladic Orchestrated Europe’s Worst Atrocities Since World War Two,” *Reuters*, 8 June 2021, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-warcrimes-mladic-profile-news-idCAKCN2DK10Y](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-warcrimes-mladic-profile-news/idCAKCN2DK10Y).

⁵² Aleksandra Bartoszko, Halvor Hanisch, and Per K. Solvang, “It Did Not Come with Hitler and Did Not Die with Hitler: The Uses of the Holocaust by Disability Activists in Norway,” *Vulnerable Groups & Inclusion* 3, no. 1 (2012): 17, 177; Michael J. Bazylar, *Holocaust, Genocide, and the Law: A Quest for Justice in a Post-Holocaust World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kathrine Bischooping and Andrea Kalmin, “Public Opinion About Comparisons to the Holocaust,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (1999): 485–507; Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); David B. MacDonald, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Dan Stone, “The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond ‘Uniqueness’ and Ethnic Competition,” *Rethinking History* 8, no. 1 (2004): 127–42; Alan Rosenbaum and Israel Charny, eds., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 28–61.

⁵³ Aryeh Neier, “Rethinking Truth, Justice, and Guilt after Bosnia and Rwanda,” in *Human Rights in Political Transitions: Gettysburg to Bosnia*, eds. Carla Hesse and Robert Post (New York: Zone Books 1999), 46.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is often considered the archetype that gave rise to the legal concept of the crime of genocide.⁵⁴ Historic research undisputedly has established that Nazi perpetrators, under the command and direct order of Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler, murdered more than six million Jews.⁵⁵ The probably best-known site of these mass atrocities is the concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which has become a symbol of terror, genocide, and the Holocaust. An estimated 1.1 million Jews and members of other persecuted groups perished there.⁵⁶

GIF searches in Facebook Messenger using the keywords “Hitler,” “Nazi,” and “Auschwitz” all generate the message “No GIFs to show” (Figure 1).

Hitler’s picture – the image of the Second World War and the Holocaust – does not appear among GIFs. It is safe to assume that censorship of the search words has led to this result. A discussion of censorship follows below.

Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels were among the most influential members of the Third Reich and belonged to the regime’s highest echelon. In contrast to the search for the keyword “Hitler,” the keywords “Himmler” and “Goebbels”/ “Göbbels” render original images and films from the 1930s and 1940s (Figure 2).

As *Reichsführer* of the *Schutzstaffel* and second most powerful man in the Third Reich, Himmler oversaw the creation and management of the Nazi police state. He established the first concentration camp at Dachau and organized extermination camps throughout occupied Europe.⁵⁷ Himmler later committed suicide.

Goebbels, for his part, was minister of propaganda for the Third Reich.⁵⁸ Following Hitler’s suicide in April 1945, Goebbels served as chancellor for one day, before he, too, committed suicide.⁵⁹ Unlike the other twenty-four high-ranking Nazi representatives who stood trial before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg in 1946, Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels evaded justice. Their suicides resulted in impunity, but not in oblivion. Quite to the contrary: GIF images of Himmler and Goebbels allow remembrance and representation, more than seventy years after their deaths.

The Armed Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a federation comprised of the six republics Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. Coinciding with the collapse of communism during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Yugoslavia experienced a period of intense political and economic crisis. National tensions and demands for sovereignty led to the collapse of the federation and eventually to intense ethno-national conflicts. By 1991, the break-up of the country loomed, and Slovenia and Croatia declared independence. The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) was the deadliest. It took a massive toll on its population, infrastructure, and cultural

⁵⁴ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple, 2006); Martin Shaw, “The Concept of Genocide: What Are We Preventing?,” in *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Bert Ingelaere et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 28.

⁵⁵ Bazylar, *Holocaust, Genocide, and the Law*.

⁵⁶ Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, “History,” <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/>.

⁵⁷ Britannica, “Heinrich Himmler,” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Heinrich-Himmler>.

⁵⁸ Kansteiner, “Censorship and Memory,” 43–45, discussing how Goebbels’ censorship politically failed.

⁵⁹ Britannica, “Joseph Goebbels,” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Goebbels>.

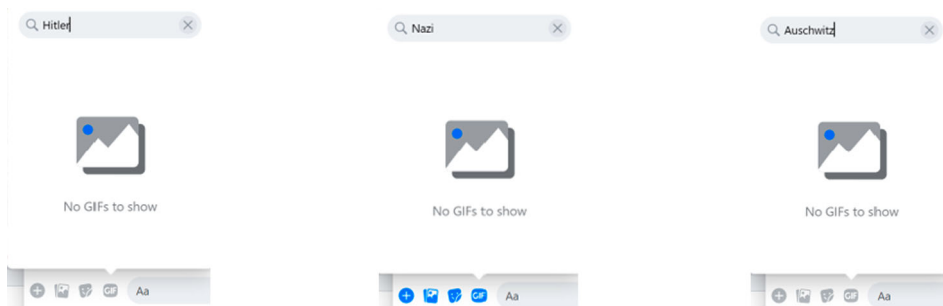


Figure 1. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Hitler, Nazi, Auschwitz).

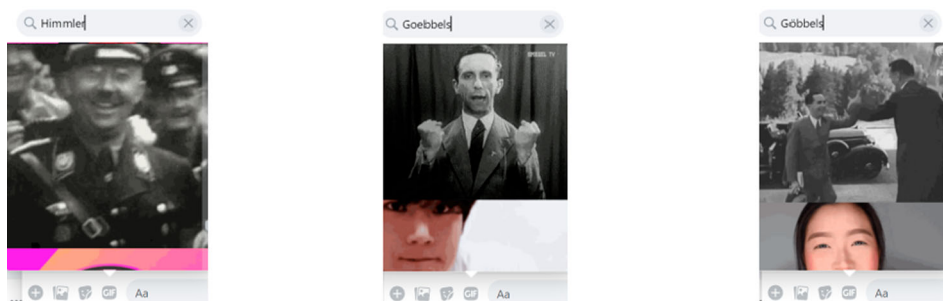


Figure 2. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 15 March 2022 (Himmler) and 25 November 2022 (Goebbels/ Göbbels).

heritage. Estimates point to around 100,000 deaths and 2.2 million people displaced.⁶⁰ Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a segregated society with ethnically divided schools where one-sided histories are taught and with an ethnically divided media landscape.⁶¹ This division extends to social media and GIFs. The availability of GIFs of the conflict's main protagonist Milošević, Karadžić, and Mladić evolved during the research. Within a few months, the number of GIFs increased significantly, demonstrating the volatility, selective representation of war, and inconsequent censorship. The subsequent discussions will show that GIFs of convicted *génocidaires* are particularly problematic given strong trends of denialism and revisionism in Serbia.

The Serbian leader of post-Tito Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević, had a key role in the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶² Indicted by the ICTY for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, Milošević was found dead in his cell in The Hague in

⁶⁰ Robert Hayden, "Mass Killings and Images of Genocide in Bosnia, 1941–45 and 1992–95," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 490–1; Stephan Parmentier, Mina Rauschenbach, and Maarten van Craen, "New Epistemologies for Confronting International Crimes: Developing the Information, Dialogue, and Process (IDP) Approach to Transitional Justice," in *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling*, ed. Nanci Adler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2018), 79; ICTY, "The Conflicts," <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>.

⁶¹ Ana Mijić, "Identity, Ethnic Boundaries, and Collective Victimhood: Analysing Strategies of Self-Victimisation in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Identities* 28 (2021): 473.

⁶² Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 590–1.

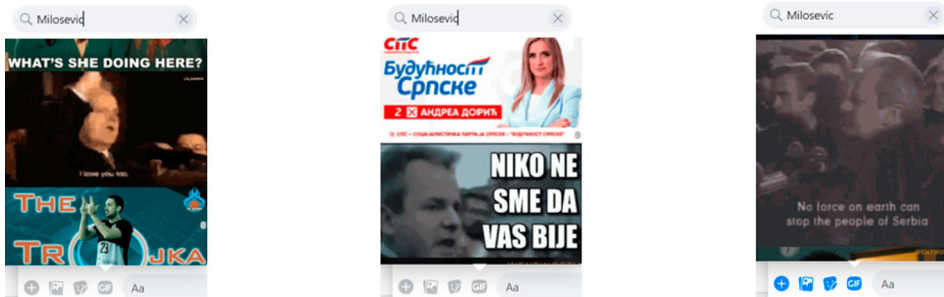


Figure 3. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Milosevic).

2006. He too evaded justice, but his memory remains very much alive. A GIF search of his name resulted in the following images, including one with the caption “No force on earth can stop the people of Serbia” (Figure 3).

In July 1995, the Bosnian Serb Army took control of the “safe haven” of Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia. Within a few days, approximately 25,000 Muslim women, children, and elderly were uprooted and transported across the front line into Bosnian Muslim-held territory, and the remaining civilian Muslim men and boys – approximately 8,000 – were killed.⁶³ The Srebrenica massacre was the single worst atrocity in the former Yugoslavia and in Europe after World War II. Despite ample available evidence of the mass executions in Srebrenica,⁶⁴ revisionist reports claim that the victims were active soldiers, the killing served to eliminate a military threat, and was therefore not genocide.⁶⁵ On 24 March 2016, the ICTY Trial Chamber convicted Radovan Karadžić, the former president and supreme commander of the Republika Srpska, of genocide in Srebrenica, and of persecution, extermination, murder, deportation, unlawful attacks on civilians and hostage-taking, among other crimes. He was sentenced to forty years of imprisonment.⁶⁶ Upon appeal on 20 March 2019, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) Appeals Chamber confirmed most convictions and imposed a sentence of life imprisonment.⁶⁷

The search words “Karadzic” showed pictures and films from the 1990s when the war was raging, and some GIFs seemingly even contained short propaganda films. For example, one GIF showed two soldiers in uniform in what appears to be a field. One soldier is playing a harmonica, the other one is singing with both arms raised. The text reads “Karadzic, lead your Serbs” (Figure 4).⁶⁸

⁶³ *The Prosecutor v. Krstić*, ICTY Trial Judgment, Case No. IT-98-33-T, 2 August 2001, para. 1. See also Jelena Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide: A Reflection on a Controversy,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 1 (2022): 74.

⁶⁴ International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), “Facts About Srebrenica,” https://www.icty.org/x/file/Outreach/view_from_hague/jit_srebrenica_en.pdf. See discussion in Cohen, *States of Denial*, 283.

⁶⁵ Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide,” 74; Nermina Kuloglijja, “Bosnian Serb Report Claims Many Srebrenica Victims Weren’t Civilians,” *Balkan Insight*, 21 July 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/21/bosnian-serb-report-claims-many-srebrenica-victims-werent-civilians/>.

⁶⁶ ICTY, “Case Information Sheet/Radovan Karadžić,” https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/cis/en/cis_karadzic_en.pdf.

⁶⁷ International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), “Cases/Karadžić, Radovan (MICT-13-55-ES),” <https://www.irmct.org/en/cases/mict-13-55>.

⁶⁸ In the past two decades, the song has increasingly been used by nationalist online circles, in Serbia and beyond. It is known as part of the far-right online circles’ Remove Kebab movement. For a discussion, see Isaac Chakyan Tang, “Echoes of a Turbulent Past: Turbo Folk War Music in Serbia,” *Harvard International Review*, 22 April 2022.

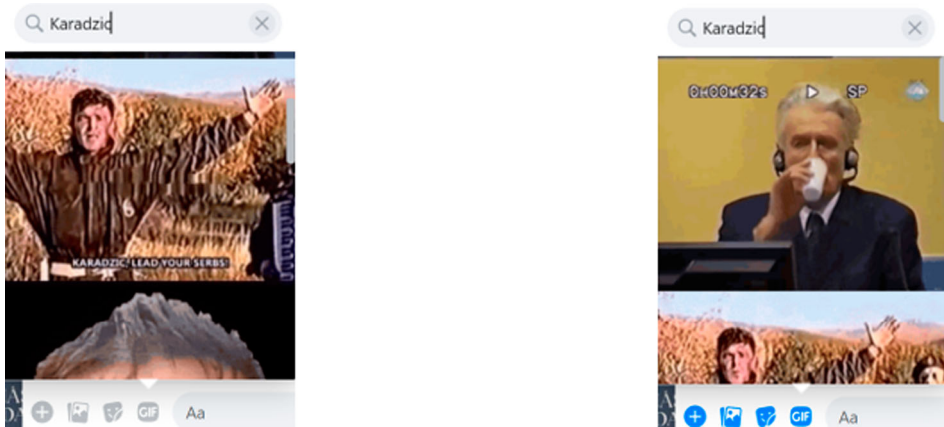


Figure 4. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Karadžić).

Ratko Mladić, nicknamed “The Butcher of Bosnia,” is the former Bosnian Serb colonel general and commander of the main staff of the army of Republika Srpska (VRS). On 22 November 2017, the ICTY Trial Chamber convicted Mladić of genocide and persecution, extermination, murder, and the inhumane act of forcible transfer in the area of Srebrenica in 1995, among other things.⁶⁹ On 8 June 2021, the Appeals Chamber of the IRMCT affirmed Mladić’s convictions for genocide, crimes against humanity, and violations of the laws or customs of war, as well as the sentence of life imprisonment imposed by the Trial Chamber.⁷⁰ A GIF search for his name rendered most results, such as the following (Figures 5 and 6).

In a case brought by Bosnia and Herzegovina against Serbia and Montenegro, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found Serbia in violation of the Genocide Convention for failure to prevent genocide in Srebrenica and to arrest General Mladić.⁷¹ Critiques claim that Bosnia’s suit against Serbia was primarily a tool by which Bosniak political forces sought to undermine the Bosnian Serbs and eliminate the Republika Srpska.⁷² Christian Axboe Nielsen termed the claims a “victim Olympics,” in which each party was obsessed with the genocide charge as the perceived gold medal.⁷³ Other scholars asserted that the determination of genocide in Srebrenica was not simply a remembrance of the fate of the victims, but rather, a remembrance (mis)used for political goals, including the creation of collective guilt and, conversely, collective victimhood. Interconnected, the denial of genocide has political goals connected to maintaining the uniqueness of the Holocaust and continues to serve current political actors.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ ICTY, “Case Information Sheet/Ratko Mladić,” https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic/cis/en/cis_mladic_en.pdf.

⁷⁰ IRMCT, “Cases/Mladić, Ratko (MICT-13-56),” <https://www.irmct.org/en/cases/mict-13-56>.

⁷¹ International Court of Justice, *Case Concerning the Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), Judgment, 26 February 2007.

⁷² Robert Hayden, *From Yugoslavia to the Western Balkans: Studies of a European Disunion, 1991–2011* (Leiden: Brill 2013), 168.

⁷³ Christian Axboe Nielsen, “Collective and Competitive Victimhood as Identity in the Former Yugoslavia,” in *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling*, ed. Nanci Adler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 187.

⁷⁴ Hayden, “Mass Killings and Images of Genocide in Bosnia,” 508; Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide,” 72; Mijić, “Identity, Ethnic Boundaries, and Collective Victimhood,” 473; Tamara Trošt and Lea David, “Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (2022): 229. This can



Figure 5. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Mladic, part 1).

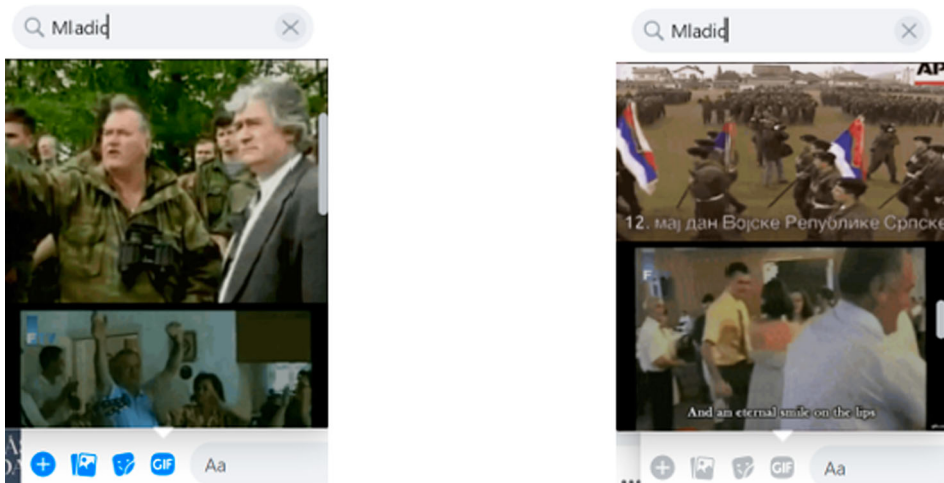


Figure 6. Screenshots on Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Mladic, part 2).

Khmer Rouge

The last case we examined was the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Pol Pot, “Brother Number One,” was prime minister of the Democratic Kampuchea and the leader/secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), commonly known as Khmer Rouge. Following the Second Indochina War (1954–1975), the party reengineered the society to create a fully communist, egalitarian, and agrarian state. Work was collectivized, and private property and currency abolished. The Khmer Rouge divided the population into “base people” (sound revolutionary workers and peasants) and “new people” (those considered reactionary exploiters).⁷⁵ Most city dwellers were

also be seen in the publication of two reports by the Independent International Commission for Investigating the Suffering of Serbs in Sarajevo in the Period from 1991 to 1995 and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Suffering of All People in the Srebrenica Region Between 1992 and 1995, both of which have been publicly criticized.

⁷⁵ Maureen Hiebert, *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017): 112–3; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005): 188–9, 192.

categorized as “new people” and forcefully moved to rural areas where they were put to work on infrastructure projects. The regime killed political and class enemies on a massive scale; researchers estimate that the death toll was approximately two million out of a population of about eight million.⁷⁶

In January 1979, the regime was overthrown by Vietnam, and the Revolutionary Council established the Revolutionary People’s Tribunal. This special tribunal convicted Pol Pot and his deputy, Ieng Sary, of genocide and sentenced them to life imprisonment *in absentia*. The judgment, however, was considered merely symbolic as the trials breached several procedural guarantees and applied a definition of genocide that did not correspond to the one of the Genocide Convention. Pol Pot never served a prison sentence. On 15 April 1998, media headlines declared that Pol Pot, “the Butcher of Cambodia,” had died while under house arrest.⁷⁷ Ieng Sary, on the other hand, was tried for genocide before the ECCC but died in 2013 before his trial was concluded.⁷⁸ A search for the keyword “Ieng Sary” rendered no valid results in GIFs, whereas the search for “Pol Pot” resulted in at least three different pictures (Figure 7).

The search results were not limited to Pol Pot but included an image of Duch (third from left above), originally called Kaing Guek Eav.⁷⁹ The same picture appeared in a search for the keyword, “Kaing Guek Eav” (fourth from left above). Duch was a Khmer Rouge cadre who ran the secret security prison, S-21 Tuol Sleng, termed the “Auschwitz of Cambodia,” where at least 12,000 so-called enemies of the regime were tortured and executed.⁸⁰ Less than 300 individuals are known to have survived Tuol Sleng.⁸¹ Duch was sentenced to life imprisonment by the ECCC Supreme Court Chamber in 2012.⁸²

Selective Transparency and Censorship of Genocide-Related GIFs

“Collective memory is not what everybody thinks”⁸³

The censorship of perpetrators of mass violence in GIFs is clearly limited: Hitler is censored, while other *génocidaires* and perpetrators of mass violence evaded censorship. Their faces and the crimes they represent are by no means suppressed, but rather enhanced and freely accessible to anyone using Facebook Messenger. With the unlimited, free availability of pictures of Pol Pot, Milošević, Mladić, Karadžić and others, GIFs arguably reproduce imageries of atrocities and genocide, regardless the context or interpretations

⁷⁶ Robert Cribb, “Political Genocides in Postcolonial Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, eds. Donald Bloxham and Dirk Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 459–63; Howard Ball, *Prosecuting War Crimes and Genocide: The Twentieth-Century Experience* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999): 94–103; Report of the Group of Experts for Cambodia Established Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 52/135, UN Doc. A/53/850 (15 March 1999); Tyner et al., “Memory and the Everyday Landscape of Violence,” 858–9.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Ball, *Prosecuting War Crimes and Genocide*, 94.

⁷⁸ International Crimes Database, “People’s Revolutionary Tribunal Held in Phnom Penh for the Trial of the Genocide Crime of the Pol Pot – Ieng Sary Clique,” <https://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/812/Pol-Pot-and-Ieng-Sary/>; Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), “Ieng Sary (Former Accused),” <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/indicted-person/ieng-sary-fomer-accused>.

⁷⁹ See picture in Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 17.

⁸⁰ Leo Cherne, “Cambodia – Auschwitz of Asia,” *Worldview* 21, no. 7–8 (2018): 21–5; David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (London: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸¹ Tyner et al., “Memory and the Everyday Landscape of Violence,” 860.

⁸² ECCC, “Case 001,” <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/case/topic/90>.

⁸³ Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

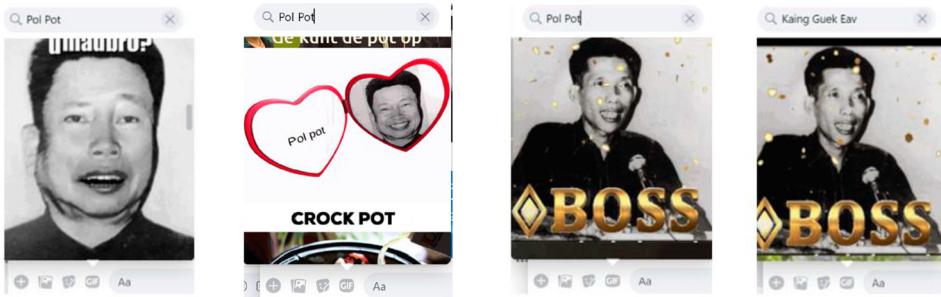


Figure 7. Screenshots of Facebook Messenger 25 November 2022 (Pol Pot, Kaing Guek Eav).

of the individual images. Moreover, the fact that Hitler's pictures are unavailable, while images of other perpetrators contribute to a selective representation of genocides, raises the question of whether all images of genocidal perpetrators should be subject to censorship.

Without going into issues of CSR, we must clarify that GIFs available on Facebook Messenger are produced and offered by the online databases and search engines Giphy and Tenor. While initially both were fully independent companies, Giphy embedded animated GIFs on Facebook in 2013, a move hailed as "mankind's greatest achievement."⁸⁴ Then in 2020, Facebook acquired Giphy.⁸⁵ Tenor, on the other hand, is now owned by Google.⁸⁶ Therefore, in the case of Giphy, the reproduction of images and films of genocidal perpetrators can be fully attributed to Facebook, a particularly important attribution considering the company's censorship policies, to be discussed subsequently.

Facebook works with so-called Community Standards that include policies of transparency on "violence and incitement,"⁸⁷ "hate speech,"⁸⁸ and "dangerous individuals and organizations."⁸⁹ These regularly updated, detailed policies contain guidelines for "what is allowed and what isn't,"⁹⁰ or, rephrased, censorship. Most relevant to this article is the company's policy on dangerous individuals, which reads:

We do not allow content that praises, substantively supports or represents events that Facebook designates as violating violent events – including terrorist attacks, hate events, multiple-victim violence or attempted multiple-victim violence, multiple murders or hate crimes. Nor do we allow praise, substantive support or representation of the perpetrator(s) of such attacks. We also remove content that praises, substantively supports or represents ideologies that promote hate, such as nazism [*sic*] and white supremacy.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Gordon Whitson, "Giphy Embeds GIFs on Facebook, Is Mankind's Greatest Achievement," *Lifehacker*, 29 August 2013, <https://lifehacker.com/giphy-embeds-gifs-on-facebook-is-mankinds-greatest-ac-1221414667>.

⁸⁵ Chaim Gutenberg, "Facebook Is Buying Giphy and Integrating It with Instagram," *The Verge*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/15/21259965/facebook-giphy-gif-acquisition-buy-instagram-integration-cost>.

⁸⁶ Matthew Lynley, "Google Is Acquiring GIF Platform Tenor," *TechCrunch*, 27 March 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/03/27/google-acquires-gif-platform-tenor/>.

⁸⁷ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Violence Incitement," <https://transparency.fb.com/nb-no/policies/community-standards/violence-incitement/>.

⁸⁸ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Hate Speech," <https://transparency.fb.com/nb-no/policies/community-standards/hate-speech/>.

⁸⁹ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Dangerous Individuals and Organizations," <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/dangerous-individuals-organizations/>.

⁹⁰ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Policies," <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies>.

⁹¹ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Dangerous Individuals and Organizations."

The formulation “such as” in the last sentence introduces two examples (Nazism and white supremacy) and implies an inclusive understanding of hate ideologies. However, as we have demonstrated, the censorship practice illustrates the opposite: a selective and exclusionary understanding and acknowledgement of harmful ideologies and violent events. The GIFs of perpetrators of genocidal violence, namely the men depicted, clearly fall under this paragraph. In fact, all the GIFs pictured above contain “content” that clearly “represents events” of “multiple-victim violence,” “multiple murders” and “hate crimes.” In addition, all contain images of “representation of the perpetrator(s) of such attacks.” While images of Hitler have been erased from the platform, cohering to the policy’s aim to “remove content that praises, substantively supports or represents ideologies that promote hate, such as nazism,” other imageries of hate remain available. GIFs disrupt the temporality of history and thereby contribute to the creation of entangled representations in social media.

Although Facebook claims that the Community Standards are “based on feedback from people and the advice of experts in fields like technology, public safety and human rights,”⁹² the company itself interprets and applies the standards. In doing so, it acquires a quasi-judicial position: not only does it interpret the terms “multiple-victim violence” or “multiple murders,” it also defines who is a perpetrator. Facebook even argues in legal language, noting that it weighs the “public interest value against the risk of harm,” and “look[s] to international human rights standards to make these judgments.”⁹³ Facebook is a company in the Global North, with a management and board of directors consisting nearly only of white members with a Western education. One might wonder whether there is a risk of bias in interpreting these rules, especially regarding “values.” While this question goes beyond the current research, a recent study concluded that digital platforms’ interpretation of values is at “best hypocritical and at worst manipulative and negligent.”⁹⁴ Other research inquires the responsibility for anchoring values in platform societies that are driven by algorithms.⁹⁵

Censoring only Hitler raises a paradox: his exclusion from GIF search engines enhances his position. From the perspective of an individual user searching for GIFs of the above perpetrators, only Hitler appears to be defined as a perpetrator proper subject to Facebook’s censorship. Censorship is selective per definition; however, as Lakoff and Johnson argued, “our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.”⁹⁶ By silencing only one selected perpetrator, Facebook claims power to define and manage the concept and social representation of “perpetrator,” and in turn, influences users’ understanding of the world. It arguably also diminishes the other atrocities.

Our findings demonstrate the narrative potential of GIFs. According to narrative theory, the choices about how and which past is remembered and portrayed matters for the future as they direct social attention toward or away from acknowledging the past and thus preventing future harms. Stevenson pointed out that “[p]ower is not solely based

⁹² Meta, “Facebook Community Standards,” <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Julia DeCook et al., “Safe from ‘Harm’: The Governance of Violence by Platforms,” *Policy & Internet* 14, no. 1 (2022): 66.

⁹⁵ José van Dijck, “Governing Digital Societies: Private Platforms, Public Values,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 36 (2020): 1–4; Rebecca Scharlach, Blake Hallinan and Limor Shifman, “Governing Principles: Articulating Values in Social Media Platform Policies,” *New Media & Society* online first, (2023): 1–20.

⁹⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

upon material dimensions, but also involves the capacity to throw into question established codes and to rework frameworks of common understanding.⁹⁷ Here, Facebook wields power in determining who is guilty of international crimes, who is a perpetrator, and who should be erased. By censoring only some GIF images, it creates a specific narrative that contains only certain parts of history. In the words of Sontag, Facebook decides “what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.” Irrespective of what narrative the individual images tell, Facebook creates and reproduce a distorted understanding of a “dangerous individual.”

Recently, Facebook changed its policies from advocating full free speech⁹⁸ to imposing penalties on users who repeatedly share misinformation. This change largely originated from harsh criticism of the company’s inaction during the riots and storming of the US Capitol in January 2021.⁹⁹ Despite these alterations, Facebook still comes under attack for one-sided censorship, for instance, in the conflict over the Occupied Palestinian Territories. “It is becoming clear that just a handful of companies hold the ultimate power over speech in these situations,” claimed Jillian York, a free speech activist with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who has been monitoring censorship in Palestine.¹⁰⁰

Social media’s importance increases as users document human rights’ violations via Facebook and other platforms, and thereby contribute to news broadcasting where mainstream media outlets lack access. In doing so, the platforms fill an important gap in creating awareness about ongoing incidents. Thus, restrictions on free speech can be criticized for not allowing a full picture of reality on the ground,¹⁰¹ as silencing only one side in a conflict creates a distorted narrative.¹⁰² Yet, in cases of genocide and other atrocities, we can see free speech in a different light: unrestricted access to freely available pictures, films, and images of (foremost convicted) perpetrators of historically undisputed atrocities arguably contributes to their glorification, a reduction of the harms produced, and a diminishment of the deaths and violence perpetrated. In other words, the unimpeded availability of images of perpetrators of the most horrendous crimes distorts the history of genocide and conflict, especially if images are misused in attempts to rewrite history and to deny atrocities perpetrated. In the next section, we discuss these issues further and why the gap between the intention and implementation of Facebook’s Community Standards matters.

Competing Narratives and Denialism

Freely available GIF images of perpetrators of mass violence clearly violate the Facebook Community Standards. The selection of presented images originates from conflicts, and

⁹⁷ Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson, and Kate Brooks, “Reading Men’s Lifestyle Magazines: Cultural Power and the Information Society,” *The Sociological Review* 51, no. 1 (2003): 114.

⁹⁸ Danielle Abril, “Mark Zuckerberg Calls Facebook a Free-Speech Zone as Critics Demand More Restrictions,” *Fortune*, 17 October 2019, <https://fortune.com/2019/10/17/facebook-ceo-mark-zuckerberg-freedom-of-expression-speech/>.

⁹⁹ Danielle Abril, “Facebook Puts the Final Nail in Mark Zuckerberg’s Free Speech Master Plan,” *Fortune*, 5 June 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/06/04/facebook-free-speech-politicians-policy-newsworthiness-hate-speech-misinformation/>. See also Kansteiner, “Censorship and Memory,” 35.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Kari Paul, “Facebook Under Fire as Human Rights Groups Claim ‘Censorship’ of Pro-Palestine Posts,” *The Guardian*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/26/pro-palestine-censorship-facebook-instagram>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. For an analysis of American free expression and its incorporation into social media platforms’ governing documents (incl. Facebook’s Community Standards), see Jessica Maddox and Jennifer Malson, “Guidelines Without Lines, Communities Without Borders: The Marketplace of Ideas and Digital Manifest Destiny in Social Media Platform Policies,” *Social Media + Society* 6 (2020): 1–10.

¹⁰² Kansteiner, “Censorship and Memory,” 53.

some even contain propaganda. Although it is speculative to discuss how individual Facebook Messenger users understand the narratives of the GIFs, we claim that images of political and military leaders of a conflict, combined with the corresponding text of “Boss” or “Lead your Serbs,” convey a message of support or even hero status.¹⁰³ In other words, these GIFs narrate a history of what happened and to whom. By making the perpetrators hypervisible and presenting them as omnipresent and -potent heroes, the GIFs simultaneously mute the crimes and victims. In applying narrative theory, these images of the past strengthen, even if not intentionally, the present tensions and expectations among potential users. They also have power to reinforce tendencies of denialism.

Denialism is the assertion that something did not happen or is not true. Denialists reject scientifically supported facts and concepts in favour of ideas that are radical, controversial, or fabricated.¹⁰⁴ Historical denial, including denial of atrocity crimes, “is a matter of memory, forgetting and repression”¹⁰⁵ that contributes to selective memories of victimization and crimes. It presents “the crime of crimes”¹⁰⁶ as a historically contestable matter, thereby upholding genocidal ideologies.¹⁰⁷

Denials are part of the genocidal enterprise in that they aim to annihilate the victim group by erasing it from the surface of the earth and from our memories. They are often the last stage, when the perpetrators diminish the crimes by claiming that they never actually happened.¹⁰⁸ According to several scholars, denial is among the surest indicators of further conflicts or genocidal massacres.¹⁰⁹ An important aspect of denialism is the aim of the perpetrator to distort or rewrite history. It is not uncommon that history has to be revised, for example when archives are made public or new historical evidence becomes known. However, revisionism takes a different form when historically recognized facts are questioned, falsified, or distorted. The expression of revisionist views relating to the Holocaust, Srebrenica or other cases of mass atrocities become part of the denial of their existence.¹¹⁰ Those responsible for the mass atrocities are most interested in revising history by destabilizing the victim narrative and erasing histories of harm.¹¹¹ In claiming that genocide never occurred, the victims can neither assert victim status nor hold the perpetrators responsible for the crime. Such a narrative alteration is not uncommon, as the case of Serbia demonstrates, where the *génocidaires* claimed that – rather than being perpetrators – they were victims of genocide themselves.¹¹²

¹⁰³ Most of the Mladić GIFs show verses of the war song ‘General, general’ by Roki Vulovic. The song was sung to Mladić.

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed analysis of literal, interpretative, implicatory, individual, personal, official, and cultural denial, see Cohen, *States of Denial*, 7–11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁷ Elazar Barkan, “Historical Dialogue and the Prevention of Atrocity Crimes,” in *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention*, eds. Sheri P. Rosenberg, Tiberiu Galis, and Alex Zucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 177; Cohen, *States of Denial*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 79; Gregory Stanton, *The Ten Stages of Genocide* (1996), <https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages>.

¹⁰⁹ Elazar Barkan, “Historical Dialogue,” 177; Stanton, *The Ten Stages of Genocide*.

¹¹⁰ For analyses of different cases of denialism and revisionism of mass atrocities, see *Holocaust and Genocide Denial: A Contextual Perspective*, eds. Paul Behrens, Olaf Jensen, and Nicholas Terry (Abingdon: Routledge 2017).

¹¹¹ Federman and Niezen, “Narratives in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity,” 18–19.

¹¹² Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide,” 75; Martin Shaw, “The Concept of Genocide: What Are We Preventing?,” 30; Paul B. Miller, “Contested Memories: The Bosnian Genocide in Serb and Muslim Minds,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 3 (2006): 311–24; Adler, “Introduction,” 4–5.

Scholars and judges consider court judgements the best antidote to denialism. By contributing to the historical truth, judgements counteract revisionist accounts of genocide. Judge Patricia Wald of the ICTY for example stated that to “chronicle accurately for history some of the world’s darkest deeds is the special responsibility of the Tribunal.”¹¹³ Yet, sceptical voices assert that the criminal courts’ “determination of historical truth is more a matter of faith than science.”¹¹⁴ They claim that law and history have such distinct aims and methods that when courts try to address historical explanations, they inevitably fail and thereby contribute to a distorted version of history.¹¹⁵

In the case of Bosnia, the judgements arguably contributed to providing historical accuracy of the causes, consequences, and crimes perpetrated. However, they contain solely legal narratives that, although true, are not the whole truth. The judgements’ failure to fully reconcile different competing narratives of history leads to these narratives’ persistence in post-conflict societies.¹¹⁶ In Serbia, competing narratives to this day contribute to divisiveness, perceptions of victimization and, notably, denial of crimes. Already in the early post-war days, the narrative of Serbian victimization (rather than perpetration) was a central political argument of Bosnian Serb leaders who aimed at a delegitimization and secession from Bosnia. Directly connected to the narrative is the denial of the genocide. In 2008, for instance, the semi-autonomous Republika Srpska financed “The Srebrenica Historical Project” that sought to delegitimize the findings of genocide. Also in later years, the government institutionally and financially supported denialist and revisionist projects.¹¹⁷ In 2012, the then newly elected president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, denied that the Srebrenica massacre constituted genocide, which reflected his constituents’ sentiments.¹¹⁸ A few years later, Milorad Dodik, a Serb member of the collective federal presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, called for a change in representation of events, declaring Srebrenica “a fabricated myth,” “something that does not exist.”¹¹⁹ Although both the ICTY and ICJ concluded that approximately 8,000 people were killed at Srebrenica, the affected communities hold diametrically opposed social representations about the event. Applying social representation theory, the perpetrators and victims disagree on Srebrenica’s importance, evaluation, and representation. In creating dominant narratives on the perpetrators in social media, including GIFs, the social and visual representation of the victims is silenced. When GIFs glorify *génocidaires* who deny that genocide has occurred, and social media – by selective censoring – obscure the complexity of perpetration and victimhood, they become venues of alternative remembrances. Disputing the truth leads to the creation of diverging collective memories and social representations, which, in return, are important factors for identity building and

¹¹³ Patricia M. Wald, “Judging War Crimes,” *Chicago Journal of International Law* 1, no. 1 (2000): 195. See also Gabrielle McDonald, “Crimes of Sexual Violence: The Experience of the International Criminal Tribunal,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 39, no. 1 (2000): 1; Stanton, *The Ten Stages of Genocide*.

¹¹⁴ Schabas, “Prosecuting Genocide,” 265.

¹¹⁵ Henri Rousso, “Letter to the President of the Bordeaux Assizes Court,” in *The Papon Affair: Memory and Justice on Trial*, ed. Richard Golsan (New York: Routledge, 2000), 193–4.

¹¹⁶ Adler, “Introduction,” 3; Trošt and David, “Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region,” 236–7.

¹¹⁷ Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide,” 75–6.

¹¹⁸ Davide Denti, “Sorry for Srebrenica? Public Apologies and Genocide in the Western Balkans,” in *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, eds. Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 84–5.

¹¹⁹ Zamira Rahim, “Srebrenica Massacre Is ‘Fabricated Myth,’ Bosnian Serb Leader Says,” *The Independent*, 14 April 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/srebrenica-massacre-genocide-milorad-dodik-bosnia-myth-a8869026.html>; Subotić, “Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide,” 76.

societal cohesion.¹²⁰ In extension, the stark delineation of groups and their alleged lack of similarities is crucial in the mobilization of social differences prior to and during genocide.¹²¹ Vice versa, the blurring of victim-perpetrator boundaries, and the acknowledgment of their overlapping roles, are considered crucial in peacebuilding processes.¹²² Hence, upholding and endorsement of competing group identities by contesting and denying the truth, especially if supported by the highest office in Republika Srpska, contributes to the same mobilization that was essential for the genocidal policy to take hold.

GIFs that portray (and glorify) convicted perpetrators are particularly problematic given current strong trends of denialism and revisionism in Serbia and Republika Srpska. According to scholars, Serbia and Serbian-ruled territories are still governed by a culture of repression so entrenched in Milošević's homeland that the rulings of the ICTY "are flouted by many of its citizenry,"¹²³ although the historical narratives contained in the judgements are thorough, comprehensive, and "accurate enough to provide an evidentiary bulwark against historical revisionists."¹²⁴ The anthropologist Cornelia Sorabji asserts that memories of traumatic events in Bosnia continue "to affect the social fabric," possibly sustaining the type of hostility that fuelled the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s in the first place.¹²⁵ As soon as memories of genocide are disputed, repressed, and amended to willed amnesia, they serve to question and alter historic undisputed facts – thousands of murdered individuals, mass graves, suffering, forcibly dispersed people, destroyed families and societies. The perpetrators map out a specific narrative of the past that legitimates their current agenda.¹²⁶ This wilful change of representation challenges history, truth, and memory and contributes to denialism. The exigency to confront denialism is evident in a recently imposed ban on genocide denial by the former UN High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹²⁷ The concerns about denialism reverberate in a statement by the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu. As late as in February 2023, she expressed her concern over

¹²⁰ Stephan Parmentier, "Confronting the 'Crime of Crimes': Key Issues of Transitional Justice after Genocide," in *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Bert Ingelaere et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 115; Subotić, "Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide," 77; Ruti Teitel, "Bringing the Messiah Through the Law," in *Human Rights in Political Transitions: Gettysburg to Bosnia*, eds. Carla Hesse and Robert Post (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 186.

¹²¹ Chris Jones, "N'ajoutons pas la Guerre à la Guerre: French Responses to Genocide in Bosnia," in *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Bert Ingelaere et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 154.

¹²² Federman and Niezen, "Narratives in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity," 21.

¹²³ Adler, "Introduction," 2; Pablo de Greiff, "High-Level Policy Dialogue on Guarantees of Non-Recurrence: From Aspiration to Policy: Challenges and Lessons in Preventing Mass Violations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Stockholm, 15 October 2015.

¹²⁴ Richard Ashby Wilson, "The Spark for Genocide? Propaganda and Historical Narratives at International Criminal Tribunals," in *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling*, ed. Nanci Adler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 99.

¹²⁵ Cornelia Sorabji, "Managing Memories in Postwar Sarajevo: Individuals, Bad Memories, and New Wars," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12, no. 1 (2006): 1.

¹²⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 246; Trošt and David, "Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region," 228–40; Jens Rydgren, "The Power of the Past: A Contribution to a Cognitive Sociology of Ethnic Conflict," *Sociological Theory* 25, no. 3 (2007): 225–44.

¹²⁷ For the official version, see Office of the High Representative, "HR's Decision on Enacting the Law on Amendment to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina," 23 July 2021, <http://www.ohr.int/hrs-decision-on-enacting-the-law-on-amendment-to-the-criminal-code-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>. In October 2021, Zeljka Cvijanovic, President of Republika Srpska, announced a new presidential decree that opposes amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia introduced by Inzko, see Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), *Online Intimidation: Controlling the Narrative in the Balkans* (2021), 17.

continuous denial of the Srebrenica genocide and noted that the glorification of war criminals continues to present a serious challenge to reconciliation.¹²⁸

Moreover, by changing the narrative and denying that genocide of the Bosnian Muslims happened, social cohesions between the members of the in-group are created that “outwardly serves as accelerants, and inwardly as social glue.”¹²⁹ This process might explain the increased availability of GIFs of the responsables of mass atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. Regarding the continuous denial of the gravity or the occurrence of the genocide in Srebrenica, the ICTY itself wrote:

there are still many people in Serbia and Montenegro who try to deny the full enormity of the crime that Bosnian Serb military, police and other forces ... committed. They argue that the actual number of dead is exaggerated, that “only” around 2,000 died. They also argue that most of these 2,000 dead were casualties of war – Bosnian Muslim soldiers killed in battle. Some who are even bolder, claim that it was a “crime of passion” – revenge for all those Serbs killed in the villages around Srebrenica. Still others claim that what happened at Srebrenica was not genocide. The Tribunal has proved beyond a reasonable doubt that each of these claims is wrong.¹³⁰

This admittance by the ICTY reveals that its mandate to bring individuals to justice with the goal to establish peace in the region was not successful. The enforcement of the rule of law and the politics of punishment apparently did not restore peace and governance.¹³¹ The ICTY’s project of transformative justice, to date, has not been able to contribute significantly to reconciliation. On the contrary, its judgements are central to the construction of competitive victimhood in which the different groups focus exclusively on their own suffering. As each group seeks to demonstrate that its suffering is the greatest, the suffering of other groups is denied, questioned, or belittled.¹³²

For genocide trials, Christian Axboe Nielsen identified a thin, invisible line separating the narratives of individual victims from the collective identity that was the rationale for their deaths.¹³³ In his analysis, the competitive victimhood that manifests itself with respect to genocide was problematic for both the ICTY’s prosecutions and the subsequent reception of its verdicts in the former Yugoslavia.¹³⁴ Also in Cambodia, politics of memory have been highly contested, and victims, perpetrators, witness, and outside observers all imagine the past in different ways. O’Neill and Hinton asserted that “these contestations remain highly visible, particularly given the proliferation and rapidity of electronic media.”¹³⁵ Others also noted historical revisionism and attempts by government officials to downplay the extent of violence.¹³⁶

¹²⁸ United Nations, Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Statement by Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, on Bosnia-Herzegovina (23 February 2023), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/USGNderitu_Statement%20BiH_23Feb2023.pdf.

¹²⁹ Mijić, “Identity, Ethnic Boundaries, and Collective Victimhood,” 475.

¹³⁰ ICTY, “Facts about Srebrenica,” https://www.icty.org/x/file/Outreach/view_from_hague/jit_srebrenica_en.pdf.

¹³¹ Trošt and David, “Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region,” 237; Teitel, “Bringing the Messiah Through the Law,” 178–9, 184.

¹³² Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), *Online Intimidation: Controlling the Narrative in the Balkans* (2021), 19; Nielsen, “Collective and Competitive Victimhood,” 177.

¹³³ Nielsen, “Collective and Competitive Victimhood,” 179.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹³⁵ Kevin L. O’Neill and Alexander L. Hinton, “Genocide, Truth, Memory, and Representation. An Introduction,” in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation*, eds. Alexander L. Hinton and Kevin L. O’Neill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

¹³⁶ Cheryl Lawther, Rachel Killean, and Lauren Dempster. “Making (In?)Visible: Selectivity, Visibility and Authenticity in Cambodia’s Sites of Atrocity,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 1 (2022): 51.

The GIFs as managed by Facebook Messenger present and assist in the preservation of competing narratives while potentially facilitating future conflicts. They silence some voices, while glorifying others. In doing so, they protect certain users, while allowing others to be exposed to violence. This uneven treatment, especially regarding the glorification of convicted perpetrators of genocide and the interconnected denial of their criminal deeds, does not cohere with Meta's "effort to prevent and disrupt real-world harm."¹³⁷ Quite to the contrary, perpetrators of mass violence and "their ties to violence"¹³⁸ remain visible to all, and their images are freely accessible and available.

Conclusion

In this article, we pose questions of how Facebook defines and represents perpetrators of mass atrocities. Our findings highlight the narrative powers of GIFs, which serve as "bits of 'digital network memory'¹³⁹ residing in virtual timespace, where temporal records can be speeded up or brought to a standstill, creating parallel universes of memory, time, and space."¹⁴⁰ Symbolism exists in the way atrocity crimes and genocide are managed and represented through GIFs – with some faces erased, some enhanced and some untouched. The selective execution of Facebook's own policy, which testifies to the selective historical consciousness and the limited understanding of the legally and historically established facts, is not unproblematic from a social, moral, and legal perspective. On the contrary: research suggests that Facebook's inconsistent and often cursory efforts at content moderation and censorship may lead to actively cross-pollinating hate solidarity.¹⁴¹ Our findings document the paradoxical character of Facebook Community Standards regarding representation of perpetrators; they suggest that the execution of the policy may facilitate exclusion of victims of Yugoslavian or Cambodian atrocities from global acknowledgment and downplay their experiences as subjects of crimes, rather than they strive for inclusion and "disruption of real-world harm." These unintended effects challenge Facebook's self-image as a moral actor, one that is responsible for managing memories, representing history, and preventing future harms. Rather the opposite, executing its own definition, Facebook creates new narratives, and thus – according to narrative theory – controls space for new futures.

Another paradox emerges from the judgements of the international criminal tribunals that specifically aim to contribute to historical truth. Despite historical treatises of unprecedented length and narratives that provide an evidentiary bulwark against revisionism and denialism, these judgements are unable to prevent contested historical narratives and representations. For instance, the ICTY's and ICJ's findings of genocide in Srebrenica, and the convictions of Mladić and Krstić have not prevented the glorification of these "dangerous individuals" and the broad availability of their images in GIFs, and in turn, the conservation of their status as national heroes. By upholding such competing narratives, GIFs are unable to stifle revisionist accounts and thus contribute to the last stage of genocide: denial.

¹³⁷ Meta, "Facebook Community Standards/Dangerous Individuals and Organizations," <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/dangerous-individuals-organizations/>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Andrew Hoskins, "Digital Network Memory," in *Mediation, Re-mediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, eds. Astrid Erli and Ann Rigney (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 91–106.

¹⁴⁰ Linke, "Anthropology of Collective Memory."

¹⁴¹ Sarah Federman, "Afterword," in *Narratives of Mass Atrocity: Victims and Perpetrators in the Aftermath*, eds. Sarah Federman and Ronald Niezen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 331.

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