

## EDITORIAL

# MEMORY: A NEW HUMANITARIAN FRONTIER

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At a time when the humanitarian debate seems firmly focused on the future – digital transformation, autonomous weapons, climate change, the race to innovate, and so on – devoting an entire issue of the *Review* to the concept of memory may seem out of place. But memory is an essential part of this debate for more than one reason.

First, if conflict victims are to gain any relief from their trauma, the psychological impact of their experience can no longer be overlooked. Traumatic memories cause severe suffering among survivors of violence, those who have been uprooted, and the families of people who remain missing long after a conflict has ended. Humanitarian organizations are increasingly aware that they have an obligation – if not necessarily the means – to treat a form of suffering that has remained invisible or beyond their normal scope of work for far too long.

Understanding memory, not only individual memory but also collective memory, may be key to preventing future cycles of violence. Historical humiliations and representations of the past give rise to murderous identities, feed most conflicts and lay the groundwork for incompatible visions of the future.

The collective memory of societies is stored in their cultures and can be embodied in their landmarks and monuments. The emotion felt around the world in reaction to the accidental fire that engulfed Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris demonstrates that memory – whether tangible or not – is worth safeguarding. Memory, in the form of history, is an oft-discussed topic in times of conflict: the desire to rewrite history; the desire to wipe groups of people, and even memories of those people, from the face of the earth; and the desire to destroy literary, artistic and architectural treasures. The memory worth protecting can also be digital, and it can be stolen, manipulated or damaged. There is also the memory stored in our neurons, which we may one day be able to modify or even erase thanks to advances in neuroscience.

Memory has strong implications for societal dynamics, in particular when it comes to preventing or ending conflicts. A number of States have adopted memorialization laws that govern commemorations and monuments and that may go so far as to prohibit revisionist history or apologizing for past atrocities. But when the guns of war fall silent, must we choose between deterrent sanctions and a general amnesty, justice and reconciliation, establishing the truth and forgetting? It is no surprise that transitional justice has developed into a separate area of study in the field of social sciences.

The founding idea of modern humanitarianism was set out by Henry Dunant in a memory, that of the Battle of Solferino.<sup>1</sup> In this account, Dunant shares his undoubtedly traumatic memories of the horrible suffering of wounded soldiers as he expounds on the need to create relief societies and lay the foundation for international humanitarian law (IHL). But while memory has been the topic of countless historical, psychological and philosophical works, it has rarely been considered from a humanitarian perspective. This issue of the *Review* comprises a rich selection of articles that look at various dimensions of memory, a new frontier for humanitarian debate and action.

## Treating invisible wounds: An overwhelming need

“The horror... The horror...” Do these hallucinatory words from *Apocalypse Now*,<sup>2</sup> uttered by Colonel Kurtz (played by Marlon Brando) with his dying breath, refer to the trauma experienced by this character, the war crimes he committed, or both?

Armed conflicts destroy mechanisms that individuals use to protect their mental well-being at three levels – family, community and society. Traumatic memories cause severe suffering among those who experience war, including survivors directly affected by violence, those who have been uprooted, and the families of people who remain missing long after a conflict has ended. People exposed to armed conflict and other situations of violence, in addition to losing their normal support structure, are left burdened by traumatic experiences that can cause psychological disorders, permanently damage their health, prevent them from participating in society, and even trigger violent or suicidal behaviour. In the recent issue of the *Review* devoted to the conflict in Syria, Dr Mazen Hedar, president of the Syrian Association of Psychiatry, noted that around one million Syrians (or around 4% of the population) suffer from a severe psychological disorder and some five million from a moderate psychological disorder. Yet, in 2018, there were only eighty psychiatrists recorded as working in that country.<sup>3</sup> For Hedar, one of the few positive consequences of the conflict was the beginning of a change in the perception of psychological disorders, which he says continue to be “heavily stigmatized”.

In many places, mental disorders, unlike physical wounds, continue to be attributed to a shameful character flaw. In recent years, however, progress has been made in terms of both acknowledging the problem and treating it as a health issue. In the past, when members of armed forces experienced extreme trauma, they were said to have “shell shock” – meaning they had nearly lost their lives – but their mental disorders were not recognized by the army or society. Nowadays, we have a better understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder

1 Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva, 1986.

2 This 1979 film is loosely based on Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*.

3 Mazen Hedar, “Mental Health during the Syrian Crisis: How Syrians are Dealing with the Psychological Effects”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No. 906, 2017, p. 930.

(PTSD), which affects approximately 30% of returning combatants and is now recognized as a war injury by many militaries.<sup>4</sup> PTSD and other mental disorders caused by trauma can affect both victims and perpetrators, as well as witnesses of violence.

Humanitarian organizations are increasingly aware that they have an obligation – if not necessarily the means – to treat a form of suffering that has remained invisible or beyond their normal scope of work for far too long. Humanitarian action has long been primarily focused on treating “visible” wounds – that is, vital needs – urgently. Yet, owing in part to the prolonged nature of armed conflicts in which they intervene today, aid organizations have discovered that they must deliver psychosocial support as well. Much of the work that humanitarian organizations, and in particular the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), are already doing can have a direct or indirect impact on the sort of suffering engendered by traumatic memories. This includes work to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, sometimes by identifying mortal remains in the wake of a conflict, an essential task aimed at providing answers to families that live in perpetual suffering caused by the absence of a loved one.<sup>5</sup> The ICRC’s work on reuniting family members who have been separated by conflict is another example.

The ICRC has gradually built up its psychosocial support services. The organization’s mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) projects target various groups, including families of the missing, victims of violence, those who have been wounded or acquired disabilities as a result of armed conflict, people deprived of their liberty and former detainees, as well as those who provide assistance within their own communities.<sup>6</sup> MHPSS programmes are designed to build local capacities by training community actors, local psychologists or other mental health practitioners and making sure that support programmes can operate after the intervention of the ICRC.<sup>7</sup> In order to share its expertise, in 2018 the ICRC published guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support.<sup>8</sup>

The *Review* has decided to open this issue with an interview with French neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik. A Holocaust survivor and orphan, Cyrulnik takes his cues from his own childhood trauma as he analyzes the factors that foster resilience from a very young age. He refers to both individual and societal resources that help human beings cope with a trauma that they cannot forget. In the subsequent article, H el ene Dumas, the author of *Le genocide au village*,<sup>9</sup> taps

4 For example, see a study concerning US soldiers who served in the Vietnam War: Richard A. Kulka *et al.*, *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*, Brunner and Mazel, New York, 1990. For more information, see American Psychiatric Association, “What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?”, available at: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>.

5 To read more, see the recent issue of the *Review* on “The Missing”, Vol. 99, No. 905, 2017.

6 ICRC, *Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support*, July 2018, p. 4, available at: [www.icrc.org/en/publication/4311-guidelines-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support](http://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4311-guidelines-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support).

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 18.

8 *Ibid.*

9 H el ene Dumas, *Le genocide au village: Le massacre des Tutsi au Rwanda*, Seuil, Paris, 2014.

into the memories – presented as previously unpublished first-person narratives – of children who survived the Rwanda genocide.

## Ethical challenges: Whether to remember

Questions of remembrance and competing narratives of the past raise serious ethical challenges that may have strong implications on the lives of future generations. Competing versions of the past sometimes collide in full view – in speeches and movies, around statues and symbols, and so on. This suffering – a struggle with trauma or mourning, or with the anguish of absence where the hope of ever seeing a missing loved one again fades slightly with each passing day – is lonely, personal and constant. The memory of past conflicts is itself a battlefield, and like all battlefields, it is first and foremost a place of suffering.

Interest in history has been growing in the past few years, and the frequency of memorialization activities and commemorations may well be on the rise too. Some say that individuals and society cannot move forward or escape the prison of the past if they cannot let go of their memories. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur contends that memory and forgetting each have their place:

I continue to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is in this respect one of my avowed civic themes.<sup>10</sup>

For David Rieff, the author of *In Praise of Forgetting*, the “duty to remember” seems to have become a sort of moral imperative that nobody challenges any more.<sup>11</sup> But would it not be better for societies to forget, rather than to open up old wounds and fan the flames of past conflicts? The debate continues in David Rieff’s article in this issue.

Personal and collective identities are built around shared experience, which often consists of struggle and suffering. These identities are the glue that holds societies and nations together. Over time, moments of shared history take on the stature of myth – but they may also be simplified, amplified and used for other purposes. A dominant group may use its historical memory as a weapon of political domination, while the collective memory of subjugated groups can be forgotten, brushed aside or even erased. Conversely, a subjugated group can wield its memory as an instrument of rebellion or as part of a strategy of asserting collective victimhood, a sort of “victimization as protest” (*victimisation revendicative*).<sup>12</sup>

10 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2003.

11 David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting*, reprint ed., Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2017.

12 Tzvetan Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris, Arléa, 2015.

From a medical perspective, the memory of individuals is stored in neurons, and we may one day be able to modify memories or even erase them thanks to advances in neuroscience. In their article, Marijn Kroes and Rain Liivoja explain how current research in the neurosciences could be harnessed to modify fighters' memories in order to help them overcome trauma. Such memory modification techniques raise ethical, legal and societal questions, of course, that will have to be balanced with their therapeutic value.

## Reconciliation and (re)writing history: What to remember?

Memory is a tug of war, and the past never ceases to be rewritten, as statues are destroyed and new ones put up in their place. Countries that set up transitional justice mechanisms choose an official version of the past that subsequently guides them. Yet which version should be selected – that of the civilians, victims or combatants, that of the winners or the losers? What happens when an official narrative chosen by the State does not take into account the experiences and memories of a specific group in the society? Jill Stockwell looks back on Argentina after the era of political violence in 1976–83 and draws parallels with transitional justice dynamics in Sri Lanka. She favours encouraging everyone who was affected – even those who were on the “wrong side of history” – to express their memory. Here, the link between collective memory and individual memories is manifest.

Maintaining collective memory can have opposing effects: it can help heal the wounds of the past and encourage reconciliation, but it can also stoke hatred and set the stage for renewed violence. Is it possible to reconcile memory, justice and the need to foster reconciliation after an armed conflict? The *Review* devoted an issue to this question several years ago,<sup>13</sup> and the topic is taken up anew here. In this issue, Phuong N. Pham, Mychelle Balthazard, Niamh Gibbons and Patrick Vinck look at transitional justice processes in Cambodia. They draw on their research to describe the complex interplay between the imperatives of truth, forgiveness and vengeance.<sup>14</sup>

How do societies remember those who fought on the battlefield? The figure of the hero looms large in the way the memory of conflicts is constructed and values are handed down from one generation to the next. In his article, Gilbert Holleufer describes how the glorification of the “warrior ethos” that is associated with a certain definition of masculinity has historically led young men to embrace a culture of violence while at the same time giving meaning to their lives. According to Holleufer, the new breed of conflicts in “post-heroic” societies empties the traditional warrior ethos of its meaning. Modern figures like the drone pilot

13 See the issue of the *Review* on truth and reconciliation commissions, Vol. 88, No. 862, 2006. See also the issue on “Victims after the War: Humanitarian Action, Reparation and Justice”, Vol. 85, No. 851, 2003.

14 Phuong N. Pham *et al.*, “Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Cambodia’s Post-Khmer Rouge Society”, in this issue of the *Review*.

thousands of miles from his target and the terrorist who blows himself up in the middle of a crowd of civilians have little in common with the (mythical) figure of the knight. Holleufer explores the post-heroic masculine condition and the complex dynamics between feelings of humiliation and dignity among fighters.

The hero is not always a fierce warrior. The figure of the war hero can also take the form of the rescuer or the righteous. Australia and New Zealand, for example, guard the memory of two stretcher bearers who risked their own lives to save their comrades in arms during the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. As Tim McCormack writes: “The truly iconic Australian military heroes are all humanitarians.”<sup>15</sup> Algeria remembers the Emir Abdelkader – a forerunner of Henry Dunant – who set out strict rules on treating prisoners humanely.<sup>16</sup> A recent historical film, *Hacksaw Ridge*, tells the story of a conscientious objector working as an army medic in the Pacific War, ultimately winning the Medal of Honor, the highest personal military decoration in the United States. The way that society constructs its heroes may serve as a gauge of the values its members wish to emulate.

Commemoration has a strong link with freedom of expression – a freedom without which the national reconciliation process will stall. In his article, Germán Parra Gallego writes of this fundamental right by analyzing case law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and practice of Colombian domestic courts.<sup>17</sup> Also in this issue, Aaron Weah considers the memory of the Liberia conflict through discourse, perceptions and examination of memorials, and discusses the recommendations issued by the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed at preserving the memory of the conflict. His article further delves into constructive and destructive patterns of memory transmission in the Liberian context.

Historical narratives have a major impact on the perceptions that shape the environment in which aid workers operate and in which IHL will be complied with (or not). In many cases, humanitarian negotiations can only succeed if participants fully appreciate all the memory issues at stake, whether they are dealing with States or non-State armed groups. This may seem obvious when it comes to religious wars or when the parties to conflicts invoke centuries-old – or millennium-old – arguments, as in the Israeli–Palestinian and Balkan conflicts. Yet aid workers are rarely given training in history or anthropology. Pierre Ryter, tapping into his experience as an ICRC head of delegation in such places as Iran, Turkey and China, argues that the ICRC – an organization rooted in European culture – must understand the memory of these regional and global powers if it is to find its way in a multipolar world.

15 See Tim McCormack, “Australian Red Cross Leadership in the Promotion of International Humanitarian Law”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 96, No. 895–896, 2014, p. 972.

16 See: [www.icrc.org/fr/doc/resources/documents/news-release/2013/05-27-algeria-abdelkader-foundation.htm](http://www.icrc.org/fr/doc/resources/documents/news-release/2013/05-27-algeria-abdelkader-foundation.htm).

17 Germán Parra Gallego, “The Role of Freedom of Expression in the Construction of Historical Memory”, in this issue of the *Review*.

Another social science that humanitarian organizations should be careful in using is history. In his article for this issue, Cédric Cotter explores the way in which ICRC presidents have combined their personal experience with the history of the ICRC in their writings, capturing the essence of the institution (if sometimes framing its history in their own terms). Through Dr Cotter's article, we see that the ICRC itself may sometimes use a particular vision of its past to shape its future.

## Memorials, museums and cultural property: How to remember?

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Than Nguyen writes: "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."<sup>18</sup> Recent incidents involving the statue of General Robert E. Lee and other Confederate military figures in Charlottesville, Virginia, and elsewhere in the Southern United States, bear this out, revealing a fracture in American society that has not healed more than 150 years after the US Civil War.<sup>19</sup>

Cultural memory can be viewed as something that needs to be protected both in times of war and once it has come to an end. Of course, IHL already protects religious and cultural property. In 2016, the International Criminal Court sentenced a man for demolishing mausoleums in Timbuktu, Mali – the first ever conviction by an international tribunal for the war crime of destroying cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup> The *Review* has addressed the theme of protecting cultural property, most recently in the context of the Syrian conflict.<sup>21</sup> In this issue, Helen Walasek revisits the topic, writing about the destruction and reconstruction of cultural heritage after the war in Bosnia.

Nations physically manifest their war memory in the form of memorials, which necessarily reflect a certain perspective on history. Among the most famous may be the memorial wall that forms part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, a long black wall engraved with the names of Americans who died in that war. Other major monuments also come to mind, such as the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Yet there are also countless commemorative plaques, monuments to the dead, military cemeteries, statues, street names and so on which many of us walk by every day without even noticing. Danielle

18 Viet Than Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, 2016, p. 4.

19 For example, see Jacey Fortin, "The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville's Storm", *The New York Times*, 13 August 2017, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html).

20 International Criminal Court, *The Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi*, Case No. ICC-01/12-01/15, Judgement and Sentence, 27 September 2016, available at: [www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2016\\_07244.PDF](http://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2016_07244.PDF).

21 See Ross Burns, "Weaponizing Monuments", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No. 906, 2017; Polina Levina Mahnad, "Protecting Cultural Property in Syria: New Opportunities for States to Enhance Compliance with International Law?", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No. 906, 2017.

Drozdewski, Emma Waterton and Shanti Sumartojo explore official narratives of memory of past wars that weave through our everyday cultural experience.

For those who do take notice of these monuments and sometimes intentionally visit them, is it a matter of voyeurism or contemplation? Massacre and mourning sites are attracting an ever-growing number of visitors – for instance, the memorial and museum located on the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, which is now on the UNESCO World Heritage List, had a record 2.1 million visitors in 2017.<sup>22</sup> Historian Annette Becker guides us on a visit to sites of memory and massacre in Rwanda, decoding the multifaceted role of memory and sharing her thoughts on the practice of “dark tourism”. Elsewhere in this issue, Annaïg Lefeuvre explains the history behind the Drancy Memorial – a key site in the memory of the Holocaust in France – and the choices that had to be made when it was being built. These two articles point to the ways in which historians and exhibition designers, in a break from official history, are putting victims, whether civilian or military, back at the centre of memorialization processes. This approach is taken by various museums, such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva,<sup>23</sup> the Shokeikan Museum for Wounded Soldiers in Tokyo<sup>24</sup> and the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo.<sup>25</sup> In recent years, the *Review* has put together exhibitions at the Humanitarium in Geneva on the topics that we addresses in these pages.<sup>26</sup> Through these channels, memory becomes a way of healing, reconciling, humanizing and rewriting what Boris Cyrulnik calls the “collective narrative” – the story that will help determine how society views our suffering.

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The ICRC has found that IHL violations can often stem from perceptions of history: the desire to avenge past crimes or injustices, or a feeling of victimization that justifies abuses.<sup>27</sup> IHL violations in turn leave a permanent trace in people’s collective memory and perpetuate the cycle of violence. But just as memory is often used to stir up hatred, it can also be employed by humanitarian organizations to advance IHL, driven by a growing awareness of past atrocities. By remembering what came before, the international community can translate the too-often-repeated slogan “Never again!” into concrete action. This is not

22 Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, “2,1 Million Visitors at the Memorial in 2017”, 3 January 2018, available at: [auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/2-1-million-visitors-at-the-memorial-in-2017,1292.html](https://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/2-1-million-visitors-at-the-memorial-in-2017,1292.html).

23 See: [www.redcrossmuseum.ch/en/](http://www.redcrossmuseum.ch/en/).

24 See: [www.shokeikan.go.jp/sub\\_menu/english\\_page.html](http://www.shokeikan.go.jp/sub_menu/english_page.html).

25 See: [www.warchildhood.org](http://www.warchildhood.org).

26 For example, the exhibition “War in Cities”; see: [www.icrc.org/en/event/war-in-cities-exhibition-on-urban-warfare](http://www.icrc.org/en/event/war-in-cities-exhibition-on-urban-warfare).

27 “The person who commits a reprehensible act often sees himself not as a torturer but as a victim. He feels himself to be a victim, believes himself to be a victim and is told that he is a victim, all of which somehow gives him the right to kill or to commit atrocities.” Daniel Muñoz-Rojas and Jean-Jacques Frésard, *The Roots of Behaviour in War: Understanding and Preventing IHL Violations*, ICRC, Geneva, 2004, p. 9. For an updated study, see ICRC, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, Geneva, 2018.



without precedent. A direct line can be drawn, for example, from the trauma of the Second World War to the adoption of the Geneva Conventions in 1949.<sup>28</sup> More recently, the international campaign that led to the creation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was propelled by the memories of the victims of the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>29</sup>

For those who have experienced war and violence in their flesh or in their heart, forgetting is impossible – that much is apparent in a number of articles that the *Review* has already published. Hibakusha, who survived the atomic bomb, told the *Review* their stories seventy years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>30</sup> Estela Barnes de Carlotto, the president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo association, told us about her forty-year fight to locate her grandson, who had been abducted soon after he was born during the dictatorship in Argentina.<sup>31</sup> Citizens of Aleppo told their stories.<sup>32</sup> Christoph Hensch, who was wounded and left for dead during the 1996 attack in Novi Atagi in Chechnya in which six ICRC employees were killed, shared with us his twenty-year struggle to overcome his physical and psychological trauma.<sup>33</sup> Never were their words tinged with hatred or a desire for vengeance. Instead, they chose to speak out for the common good. They told us their stories so that we could spread them widely as warnings and lessons for the future.

Sharing the stories of those who have experienced armed conflict is not enough. History has shown that the lessons it delivers are rarely learned, as aid workers know all too well. Humanitarian organizations face the daunting task of strengthening the mechanisms that underpin people’s resilience and treating the trauma suffered by victims of armed conflicts and other catastrophes. Individuals and societies alike must learn to stand firm when confronted with discourses of hatred and revenge. Humanitarian aid workers, by sharing their own experiences and by giving affected populations a chance to speak, also have a role to play in constructing a new memory of war – not a memory of victors or of vengeance and violence glorified, but a memory of the human cost of war and, above all, a memory of the courage of those whose humanity shines forth amid the chaos.

28 See, for example, Boyd van Dijk, “‘The Great Humanitarian’: The Soviet Union, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Geneva Conventions of 1949”, *Law and History Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2019.

29 See the first-person accounts published in the issue of the *Review* devoted to “The Human Cost of Nuclear Weapons”: “After the Atomic Bomb: *Hibakusha* Tell Their Stories”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 899, 2015.

30 Testimony of Mr Sadao Yamamoto, in *ibid.*, p. 514.

31 “Interview with Estela Barnes de Carlotto”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No. 905, 2017.

32 “Life in a War-Torn City: Residents of Aleppo Tell Their Stories”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 98, No. 901, 2016.

33 Christoph Hensch, “Twenty Years after Novye Atagi: A Call to Care for the Carers”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 98, No. 901, 2016.

