

Centre for Nonviolent Action  
Sarajevo | Belgrade

# Nothing but misery

Marking ummarked sites of suffering

Nenad Vukosavljević





Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA)

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This text presents reflections on actions to mark unmarked sites of suffering in Bosnia and Herzegovina related to the war period from 1991 to 1995: how we arrived at the idea to mark unmarked sites of suffering in Bosnia and Herzegovina, how the process developed, the difficulties we encountered and the future prospects for developing these actions.

The text is the result of individual interviews with members of the ONMS Team conducted in the summer of 2019.





NEOBILJEŽENO  
**MJESTO STRADANJA**

NA OVOM MJESTU SU, U PROTEKLOM RATU, NAD LJUDIMA VRŠENA NELJUDSKA DJELA.  
NE PREPUŠTAJUĆI TE DOGAĐAJE ZABORAVU, SOLIDARIŠEMO SE SA SVIM ŽRTVAMA  
DA SE NIKADA I NIKOME NE PONOVI



## **Description of Activities. Briefly on CNA activities in related fields**

Marking unmarked sites of suffering (abbreviated as ONMS) entails putting up temporary signs that say:

**unmarked**

**SITE OF SUFFERING**

**At this site, during the past war, people were subjected to inhuman acts.**

**By not letting these events be forgotten, we stand in solidarity with all victims.**

**May it never happen again to anyone.**

Numerous sites of massacres, suffering and torture across BiH are unmarked because local authorities oppose having signs at sites of suffering where the victims were people who do not belong to the majority in the municipality. With rare and notable exceptions, selective empathy only for victims from one's own people is a common trait among all the constitutive peoples in BiH (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats). Readily pointing out individual examples of multiethnicity among members of armed forces in BiH does not change this core issue, instead, it seeks to create an illusion that the war was not ethnically motivated.

The Centre for Nonviolent Action | Sarajevo - Belgrade (CNA) has sought to contribute to constructing an inclusive and non-selective culture of memory in BiH in different ways:

- by investigating sites of suffering and sites of memory (since 2010) gathered in a database and published online at [kulturasjecanja.org](http://kulturasjecanja.org) (published in 2016)
- with the publication "[War of Memories](#)"
- with the exhibition "[War of Memories](#)" that has been touring the region for years
- through informal education programmes to develop social capacity for peacebuilding
- through exchanges and learning from the experience of other countries, and systematising the gathered knowledge
- with joint commemorative actions of veterans from all armed forces that participated in the war in BiH
- with actions to mark unmarked sites of suffering (ONMS)

ONMS Team: Amer Delić (CNA), Čedomir Glavaš, Ajdin Kamber, Dalmir Mišković and Tamara Zrnović (CNA).



## List of marked sites (updated 11/2019)

- Vilina vlas Hotel, Višegrad
- Mehmed-paša Sokolović Bridge – “Old Bridge”, Višegrad
- NK Iskra Stadium, Bugojno
- Silos in Tarčin, Hadžići
- Silos in Kuačuni, Busovača
- The Museums “Battle for the Wounded at Neretva”, Jablanica
- Former military agricultural cooperative Sušica, Vlasenica
- Agricultural cooperative Kravica, Bratunac
- Pilica Culture Centre, Zvornik
- Former police station, Srebrenica
- Military facilities in Dretelj, Čapljina
- Tobacco station, Široki Brijeg
- Hotel Una, Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi
- Trnopolje, Prijedor
- Powder factory in Ćoralići, Cazin
- Former Nepeka farm, Velika Kladuša
- Former Dubrava farm, Velika Kladuša
- Former Radoč Hotel, Bužim
- Primary school in Kamenica, Drvar
- Primary School Ivan Goran Kovačić, Livno
- Dobrovoljačka Street, Sarajevo
- Plant nursery, Rogatica
- Batković, Bijeljina
- Former JNA barracks, Brčko
- Primary School Boće, Brčko
- Warehouse in Gornji Zovik, Brčko
- Warehouse and stadium in Crkvina, Bosanski Šamac
- Music School, Zenica
- Former JNA barracks and Ahmet Fetahagić Army of RBiH barracks, Visoko
- Railway station in Podlugovi, Ilijaš
- Kayak Club, Bosanski Brod
- Bosna sock factory, Bosanski Brod
- “GIK” construction warehouse, Bosanski Brod
- Silos in Polje, Derventa
- Primary School Poljari, Derventa
- “Franjo Herljević” Hunting Lodge”, Zavidovići
- “13th Kilometre”, Zavidovići
- Football stadium, Bratunac
- Old Culture Centre, Pale
- “Karaman House”, Miljevina, Foča
- Sports Hall “Partizan”, Foča
- Shacks in Buk Bijela, Foča
- Heliodrome, Mostar
- Koštana Hospital, Stolac
- Primary School Potoci, Mostar
- Ćućurak Hill, Potoci, Mostar
- Village of Crkvina, Goražde
- Skenderove kuće, Potoci, Mostar
- Vojno, Mostar
- “Šumarstvo” and “Autotrans” buildings, Vareš
- Vocational School, Vareš
- Motel “Sretno”, Kakanj
- Bravnice, Jajce
- Auxiliary building, Police Station, Prijedor
- Football stadium in Ljubija, Prijedor
- Community Centre Miska Glava, Prijedor
- Kipe, Lubija mine, Prijedor
- Korićanske stijene, Kneževo
- Culture Centre, Vitez
- “Black House”, Kruščica, Vitez
- Dubravica Primary School, Vitez
- Social Centre in Počulice, Vitez
- Prekaja Primary School, Drvar
- Site behind the “Motel”, Bosanski Petrovac
- Former forest estate Kozila, Drinić
- Agricultural estate Manjača, Banja Luka

- Grabovica Primary School, Kotor Varoš
- Mostina Hunting Lodge, Čajniče
- “Veliki park”, Sarajevo
- Kazani, Sarajevo
- Pensions “kod Sonje” and “Bunker”, Vogošć
- Correctional Facility, Butmir (Kula), Ilidža
- “Musala” Sports Hall, Konjic
- Bijeli brijeg football stadium, Mostar
- Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Mostar
- Fourth Primary School, Mostar
- Lušci Palanka, Sanski Most
- Zdena, Sanski Most
- Former primary school and former community centre in Rizvanovići, Prijedor
- Mlakve Stadium, Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi
- Lisac pit, Krupa na Uni

## Background and Development

As an informal activist group associated with the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), and with the support and participation of CNA members, the ONMS team has been marking unmarked sites of suffering since 2015.

The core idea dates back to the 2011 Basic Training in Peacebuilding, where a participant explained how there was a stadium in his town that had been used during the war as a detention camp for captured civilians and soldiers and where his father was imprisoned and abused. He said he wanted to organise an action to put up a large sign in front of the stadium saying how the site was a detention camp, photograph it and share the photos on social media. Following the training, CNA offered its support to help organise this action, but nothing came of it. The idea was formulated as a proposal for possible actions offered to the group of participants at the 2014 Training for Trainers in Peacebuilding. A group of four people came together around the idea and, with advisory and material support from CNA, started fleshing it out and preparing the first actions.

The desired outcome of the action was to show solidarity with victims across division lines within Bosnian-Herzegovinian society and to point out the unfair and selective approach to victims depending on their nationality, or the nationality of the perpetrators of the crimes against them.

Since CNA did not have the capacity to implement these actions independently, we offered our support to the group of activists in the initial stages and left open the possibility for them to decide on how to further develop the action or establish a separate organisation. It was also left up to the informal group to decide how much support they needed from CNA, because we wanted to ensure their autonomy while providing the necessary assistance. In addition to advice on how to mark the sites, research them, how to communicate with the media and some advice on organising, CNA also provided material support in the form of office space and operating resources, as well as modest sums of compensation for participants in the actions.



## The Beginning, First Actions

Actions with stickers saying “Unmarked SITE OF SUFFERING. At this site, during the past war, people were subjected to inhuman acts. By not letting these events be forgotten, we stand in solidarity with all victims. May it never happen again to anyone.”

About the first action:

- *The first action was in Višegrad and central Bosnia. We selected sites we knew about and knew how to reach. Then we continued, region by region, to do the most we could in one action.*
- *You feel fantastic when you make an idea a reality. I worry about the team, I'm the eldest, so there's a dose of anxiety.*
- *First action: Jablanica. I didn't have my walking stick yet. We went to the museum. And Amer asks the guide, "Were Serbs and Croats imprisoned here during the war?" and he says, "No." "What do you mean, no?" "Well, there were some who weren't loyal."*

Knowing the Bosnian-Herzegovinian context and the usual mechanism for diminishing victims belonging to other groups, or at least considering them second-rate compared to victims belonging



to their own group, it was clear to everyone that these actions came with some big risks. The group of activists was worried most of all that they may be exposed to physical attacks and that the police may stop and question them, harass them, etc. During the fourth action, the group was intercepted by the police in Rogatica, who were alerted by a concerned citizen, and taken to the police station for questioning. The team explained what they were doing, and the equipment they had, the stickers in Cyrillic and Latin script, and the ethnic mix of the group saw them come out of the police station with advice to notify the police of future actions and to “be careful out there”.

The first action was a successful pilot. During the two days, the team marked and photographed six sites of suffering and prepared posts for social networks. The posts drew quite a bit of attention, but there were also many negative comments, because some people saw posts about sites of suffering inflicted by their armies in the usual mode of contributing to a competition over who was the greater victim and whose victims were more important. The activists had this to say: *We get attacked when people don't see the whole picture of what we're doing.* As the actions spread to cover more territory, including sites of suffering irrespective of the origin of the victims, some of the followers on social networks that had rebuked the team earlier started to post comments supportive of the idea and the number of opponents decreased.

All the actions start off with a feeling of fear, excitement, anticipation, foreboding, increased adrenaline, some kind of euphoria, but also a feeling of pride for not succumbing to the fear and for doing something commendable. The commendations came not just from the support of CNA, but also as the circle of support expanded with each new step. Still, it should be noted that the actions and their preparation come with significant emotional burden that everyone handles in their own way. The actions to mark sites are themselves crammed into two to three days, out of a desire to do the most in the least amount of time, which further exacerbates the pressure. The experience has been summed up as follows: *The action itself: adrenaline, we consider 1600 variations, tension, we assign roles, good atmosphere. We discuss the site, we act quickly when we get there out of fear of physical assault.*

The information gathered about the events at the site of suffering make you imagine the dread that such sites can drag up. Sometimes the reality in the field can make things even worse: *Amer and I were hit hard by Vilina Vlas. It was harrowing. You walk into this neglected building and you feel like they've just washed down the blood, that everything else is still the same...* It's hard to stay level, but they know that fear keeps them cautious and protects them, so they say: *There is always a dose of anxiety, a buzz. The most important thing is to stay in control, resist panicking. There was more apprehension at the start. Now there's less. But you still feel nervous. There are all sorts of crazy people out there. And they're all armed. Someone might come after us with a gun. And then what?*

Despite fears that they may be attacked, there were situations when the activists themselves were perceived as threats: *My expectation was: a guerrilla action in enemy territory, publish the photo and that's that. I expected to encounter more resistance in the field. In Jablanica, the museum staff ran away when they saw the sign, just so we wouldn't ask them anything.* Some of the marked sites are in towns, others are remote. Talking about the different feelings brought up by the different surroundings, they say: *It's stressful, tense, there's fear. With sites in towns, it's stressful because there are so many people around, and it's easiest with abandoned buildings. When we research the sites, it can get difficult, so we fend it off with humour.*

They have different responses when asked about their personal motivation to carry out these actions. **Amer Delić**, a war veteran, says: *As a war veteran, I want to show what war brings. Nothing*



but misery. **Dalmir Mišković**, who grew up in Livno during the war, describes his motivation as follows: *I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I was attracted by the adrenaline rush of visiting sites of suffering, where crimes were committed... I had a vision about a small role I would play, helping with the social networks side of things, because I had some experience there...* **Tamara Zrnović** was born in Sarajevo and became a refugee as a child when her family escaped to where the ethnic group they belong to was in the majority. She describes her motivation as follows: *From the perspective of my narrative, it was important for me to honour the victims where members of VRS were the perpetrators, because my father was in the VRS. My motivation is also to build different memories.* **Ajdin Kamber** found out about the actions from the media, reported on them as a journalist, and then joined the team. He has this to say: *I saw the information somewhere, I think on Facebook, and I liked the idea right away. I contacted them because I wanted to do a story. It ended up with me getting involved.* **Čedomir Glavaš** escaped with his family during the war from the Sarajevo suburb of Hadžići and today lives in Bratunac in eastern Bosnia: *In '99 I finished secondary school. My best friend from school, her uncle was a missing person. It's important for me to find closure, to find the missing, to mark the sites of suffering.*

Since the first actions were organised to mark well-known unmarked sites of suffering, there was no clear sense of how important preparation was, so advice to that effect seemed to hamper the activist approach. This changed after the second action when, despite preparing and fact checking, an error was made in marking the Culture Centre in Pale. Namely, credible information confirmed by two sources about abuse that took place at the Culture Centre in Pale was not incorrect in itself.





The error was that, quite unexpectedly, this small and remote mountainside town had an old and a new Culture Centre, and the new Culture Centre was marked by mistake. A seven-day discussion on social networks ensued, including complete denial of the existence of any such site in Pale, but ultimately the error was revealed and at the next opportunity, the team returned to Pale to remedy its mistake. Without cooperation and support from victims of abuse in Pale, the error would have been almost impossible to identify and remedy.

## **Actions and Reactions**

### **The Media**

Marking the Music School in Zenica, whose building was used during the war as a detention and torture site, gave rise to media reports saying that **the police had started an investigation into the marking** of the Music School as a site of suffering. Some media outlets covering this news also stated that the site did serve as a place where prisoners were held during the war. More than twenty years after the war, the common reaction to news about the marking of a site of suffering tends to follow this sequence: Who dared to do this? We must find them! The police should find them and the court should punish those who mark hidden and almost forgotten sites of crimes. The bizarre reality is that this is where the sequence ends, there is no initiative to investigate the crimes and circumstances of the suffering that was inflicted at the site. In this case, the media reflect the stream of consciousness of an average citizen, concerned over the possibility that the final sum of crimes committed by members of their group might increase. But, even so, the media (incidentally) increased the visibility of the actions, because more people found out about them.

Improving media coverage and improving the quality of information prepared for the media was achieved when reporter Ajdin Kamber joined the team. He made a number of **video reports** about our actions. This came about spontaneously when he wanted to do a video about the actions for the media outlet he was working for. As it turned out, he is an activist at heart and gladly accepted our invitation to become part of the team. In addition, expanding the network of collaborators and supporters provided a diversity of perspectives and people who could authentically send a message to the public that these actions were of great social importance.

### **Social Networks Users**

Having experienced challenges about sites of suffering on social networks, and because of the error made with respect to the location of the Culture Centre in Pale, we realised that more thorough research would be needed. In addition to **double-checking the sites themselves** and the relevant events, we also research the wider wartime context in the region where the action is being implemented/prepared, including researching media reports and electronic court archives (ICTY and the war crimes section of the Court of BiH) and speaking with individuals who have information on the relevant events.

We have also launched continuous research into unmarked sites of suffering in BiH and gather information into a **database** that serves as the basis for planning future actions. In addition to this,



we have developed a set of rules for addressing disparaging comments and hate speech on Facebook and Twitter, and the team actively engages in discussions through comments to posts and in response to queries we have received. The number of followers on social networks is constantly increasing and is currently 2341 on Facebook, 218 on Twitter and 154 on Instagram. Perhaps the most unusual turnabout caused by the actions is in the perspective of one of the followers who saw the initial actions as directed against his people, only to later publicly give his support, but what makes this turnabout especially poignant is the fact that this particular follower is currently being tried for war crimes by the Court of BiH.

### **War Veterans and Victims' Associations**

Local partners were key for numerous actions that followed. They were most often war veterans that CNA has cooperated with before and they became key both for researching and for implementing the actions because many sites are hard to reach and hard to find without someone who is very familiar with the area.

Some war veterans were victims of torture when they were captured and detained in camps, so they also belong to the group of war victims. War veterans helped us establish contacts with victims' associations, both for the purpose of gathering information and for seeking support, and some members of victims' associations participated in the actions to mark sites. People from victims' associations find it strange that someone is marking sites of suffering of victims from their own group and that they do this for others, and this makes them distrustful because they fear being manipulated. Still, as a rule, those who accept the offer of cooperation usually want to continue it and support the overall idea of marking all sites of atrocities. This development of cooperation, given the initial distrust, was unexpected for both sides. They said: *The turning point was when women from RS came to Bravnice near Jajce, when we realised we could talk to everyone.*

Some of the contacts were made thanks to private connections of people from the ONMS team: *When we were thinking about going to Konjic, I asked my friend who had been imprisoned in the school as a child to come with us. She said: "I know what happened, but I don't want to go." Later, when she saw what we were doing, she said, "Well, maybe I could."* **Cooperation with war veterans**, and seeking support from associations of disabled war veterans and **associations of victims** has become **standard practice** before each action.

### **Public Authorities**

Although at the beginning we were not looking to establish cooperation with local authorities, who were mostly perceived as a potential threat, positive interactions with the police and other supportive reactions led us to try to secure the support of local authorities for our actions to mark sites. Thus, in addition with our established practice of notifying the police in advance of our planned actions to put up temporary markers, we also contact representatives of local authorities.

Our experience has been varied: *We had excellent support from local authorities in Foča and Vareš. Generally, if we manage to organise a meeting with them beforehand, it turns out well.*

## Evaluation

The extent to which the implemented actions contribute to achieving the set objectives and their impact is indicated by a host of individual events: *The turning point came when people started contacting us with information and asking us to mark a site they knew about. The next crucial step was when a man contacted us to tell us about an unmarked site where members of his people were victims, but then also told us he knew of another unmarked site where members of his people had been the perpetrators. This was the first time that someone told us about a site of suffering where others were the victims.* Something that had initially seemed **unimaginable**, for someone to support marking a site for others in his own community, **was inspired by the example set by the ONMS team and became a reality.**

The scope of intertwined contacts, resources and capacities from CNA's various peacebuilding programmes created an added value that surpasses the sum of individual impacts and that, combined with the educated, encouraging and thoughtful approach of the ONMS team, made this unique activity possible. The aim is not to make someone feel threatened or diminished, the aim is not media attention for self-promotion, the aim is to avoid any potentially negative effects on people's lives and contribute to an atmosphere of understanding, respect and cooperation. One other example of how things are intertwined is the following story: *In Novi Grad (RS), we did not manage to establish cooperation with disabled war veterans, but then at our student training, I run into the grandson of a veteran from Novi Grad and after the workshop where we presented the activities of ONMS, he tells me, "Give me the sticker, I'll mark the site."*





An internal evaluation of three years of activities, taking into account the broader context and impact of implemented actions, and the planning of future activities were undertaken at the start of 2019 and significantly contributed to making our work more systematic, both in terms of gathering data, documenting actions and developing plans for the future, including an interactive map and website for actions to mark sites.

## Current Reach and Perspectives

What happens with marked sites, with the signs that are set up?

At some sites that were marked, the one in Vitez for example, the first passer-by tore down the sign, while in Bravnice near Jajce, the sign has stayed up for years. Following the commemoration organised in Branicevo with war veterans, unknown persons affixed the sign and the wreath that was laid to the tree, so they became a kind of permanent display. The photos made during actions and used in social media campaigns have spread so much that some portals now use them to illustrate articles about sites of suffering.

Essentially, this alternative form of marking through a commemoration or by setting up a sign means that the site is no longer unmarked, it has been saved from the clutches of oblivion and embedded in virtual memory, documented with photographs and video testimonies of people or in writing. The planned website will archive past activities and provide a platform to bring together all the relevant information in one place. The existing database of unmarked sites of suffering that was published on the [kulturasjecanja](#) website a few years ago will thus be upgraded, significantly expanded and enhanced in terms of visibility and involvement of numerous stakeholders in its creation. Actions to mark sites have reinforced relations and trust with victims' associations that used to be mistrustful of activist groups such as ONMS and organisations such as CNA. This shift is not only important because of its potential for cooperation in the future, it is also a step forward in our present.

Apart from victims' associations, contacts were also established with local authorities, whose support is regularly sought and, according to the team, has never been categorically refused to date. They would either find support from individuals in local government or would be quietly ignored, but there were no attacks or public denunciations. There are ideas to initiate cooperation with sympathetic authorities in individual municipalities in order to develop permanent memorialisation together with associations of victims and war veterans. Time will tell to what extent the cooperation between peace activists and victims' associations, local authorities and war veterans' associations can create space for non-selective, fair and appropriate marking of sites of suffering and establish it as a common practice instead of a far-fetched idea.

As of November 2019, we have marked 81 sites of suffering and looking back, we believe there is reason to be proud. From the initial idea of one-off guerrilla actions, the natural course of events led to including war veterans and war victims and their associations. While developing the actions to mark sites was based on using the network of CNA partners from previous activities, now contacts and trust built through ONMS activities also run in the other direction and are used to conceive and implement other CNA actions. The gathered information and contacts have already been used to implement



activities of mutual visits by war veterans, and the organic connection is reinforced by the fact that these actions with war veterans build trust and help establish cooperation with local authorities, thus opening new spaces that can be used in the future to secure approval for permanent memorials at some of the unmarked sites of suffering. This hazy far-off goal, for local communities to recognise the need and show an interest in paying equal respect to the suffering of others, thus becomes imaginable. The course for local community political leaders to cross into these uncharted waters, precarious because it carries the risk of lack of understanding and resistance to the idea of respecting victims on the enemy side, is being charted precisely by these joint actions of former enemies, including war veterans and the mixed ONMS team, creating an atmosphere of solidarity and general benefit for communities.

Though it practically goes without saying, the core team is made up of activists educated in peacebuilding through CNA peace education programmes, including dialogue and action planning trainings that CNA organises for war veterans who, in turn, provide strong support to the development of ONMS activities. These actions would not have been possible without the peace education that many fail to understand and therefore underestimate. The capacity for constructive action and connecting people across segregation lines is not something “good” people are born with, it is something that has to be learnt, practised and developed.

The experience of support, solidarity, gratitude and empathy spread through ONMS actions shows us that we can, that we have the power to step out of the state of segregation that creates a false sense of security, that we know how and that we will not give up on building peace. Essentially, there is no alternative.

