Imagining the Bosnian War through Comics:

Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde*

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the way in which comics, a medium typically understood to be "low-brow," has been used to create serious representations of nonfiction by using Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia* as a case study. It will be argued that *Safe Area*, although written in the genre of graphic narrative, rivals depictions of the Bosnian War found in academic writing. In addition to its overall representation of the Bosnian War, it is the most comprehensive account of the plight of Gorazde, one of six UN-deemed safe areas, which has been overshadowed by events that transpired in Sarajevo and Srebrenica. Sacco is able to take the same themes used by journalists, academics, and public figures, and use them in a different way to add new dimensions and levels of understanding to the conflict in Bosnia and the safe haven of Gorazde. By blending history and memory, the past and the present, word and image, Sacco's work exhibits depth and dimension that is lacking in both academic and journalistic depictions of the same events. By comparing traditional academic works as well as popular representations of the Bosnian War, this thesis seeks to contribute to a larger body of work that discusses the utility and function of the graphic narrative as a sophisticated, yet mainstream source of knowledge.

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Introduction:

Until very recently, the medium of comics has infrequently received the attention of academic scholarship. Since the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1986, however, the graphic narrative has continued to gain credibility as a legitimate way to depict nonfiction and is increasingly the subject of academic inquiry. *Maus* was a revolutionary work that used the medium of comics to depict the plight of Spiegelman's father during the Holocaust. Comics as a medium has not generally been observed as a form that lends itself to representing the complexities of real or actual events. Many cartoonists have followed in the footsteps of Spiegelman by using comics to depict actual events, most notably Joe Sacco. Sacco is well known in literary, journalistic, and cartooning circles alike for his impressive works of illustrated nonfiction that depict conflicts in places like Iraq, Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya and more. This thesis will examine just one of those works: *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, which depicts the plight of the lesser-known enclave of Gorazde during the Bosnian War.

Sacco's book is the exception, rather than the rule regarding the depiction of the conflict in Bosnia and is unmatched because of its content and style. Moreover, compared to the coverage of other cities deemed by the UN as "safe zones" such as Sarajevo and Srebrenica, Gorazde is relatively unknown and unrepresented. Aside from being used as an example of the failure and incompetence of the United Nations in "keeping" peace, Gorazde and its history is sorely lacking in the historiography of Bosnia, specifically regarding the conflict that consumed the country in the 1990's. Due to this gap in literary works on the subject, the conflict and history of Gorazde is explained most comprehensively in the graphic narrative by Joe Sacco, and not a traditional scholarly work; therefore, one can argue that *Safe Area Gorazde* represents not only a fascinating way of dealing with the conflict in Bosnia in the 1990s, but it is also one of the most definitive

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works on Gorazde simply because it recognizes it as a legitimate area of focus in distinction to mainstream media and academic writing.

What is more impressive than the medium of this work by Sacco is how it contrasts itself from the way journalists, politicians, and scholars represent the same conflict. Sacco's book takes a less apocalyptic and less speculative approach to the conflict. Although much of *Safe Area* is comprised of the testimonies of those living in Gorazde at the time, it is not based on rumor and hearsay. Sacco corroborates and bolsters the stories of his interlocutors with facts and figures in order to ensure the accuracy of the book; so much so that there is a small reference page at the end that allows readers verify the information and further explore the topic. Rather than using the fashionable framework of "ancient hatreds" or Huntingtonian arguments of a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and Christianity, Sacco uses a mixture of genres to give a concise and in-depth coverage of Gorazde as it was experienced by the inhabitants, as opposed to what was read into or projected onto it by external parties. Safe Area is comprised of historical context beginning in WWII, oral testimonies, and first-hand accounts that are bolstered by the consistent presence of hand-drawn comics. By using a thoughtful interplay between word and image, Sacco is able to tell, or rather show, a story with multiple and layered perspectives, including his own. The reader is constantly aware of filters that the information is flowing through. His bias is not hidden, and therefore is taken into account when impressions are forming of the conflict. Additionally, because Sacco presents his findings in the traditionally low-brow medium of comics, his work reaches audiences that may not necessarily have access to or interest in scholarly works on the Bosnian War.

By exploring the three main themes of history, memory, and suffering that are commonly used when discussing this conflict, this thesis will compare Sacco's depiction of the Bosnian War to

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both popular and academic depictions. This thesis will argue that Sacco's work provides a sophisticated and comprehensive overview of the Bosnian War, with special emphasis on the enclave of Gorazde and is above the level typically presented in traditional journalism and mass media. While not without its faults, Sacco's work serves as an easily accessible foundation of knowledge, and when compared to traditional scholarship, it proves to contribute to a complete picture with mass appeal. As opposed to traditional academic writing, which can be dry and deter readers due to its heavy theory and vocabulary, *Safe Area* offers a rival depiction and critique of the Bosnian War via Gorazde, yet functions under the guise of entertainment as it is often sold in bookstores next to popular works such as *Batman* and *Sin City*.

What does Joe Sacco's work add to the historiography and conversation about the conflict in Bosnia? How is Sacco's work different than what has been previously written about the safe area of Gorazde and Bosnia in general? How does the medium of comics or graphic narrative represent the conflict differently than traditional sources? How does Sacco's work compare to other mainstream or popular representations of the conflict in Bosnia, such as films, journalism, and literature? These are questions that this thesis will explore and answer.

By comparing traditional academic works as well as popular representations of the Bosnian War, this paper seeks to contribute to a larger body of work that discusses the utility and function of the graphic narrative as a sophisticated, yet mainstream source of knowledge. I intend to use these comparisons to demonstrate how Sacco's work, although a graphic narrative, touches on the same themes as those presented in academia and presents a more sophisticated and complete image of the Bosnian War than is traditionally found in popular representations. My intention is to use Joe Sacco's *Safe area Gorazde* as a case study in order to illustrate these points.

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What follows this introduction is a chapter devoted to background information on the author of *Safe Area Gorazde*, Joe Sacco, as well as the genre in which he writes, the graphic narrative. After that, I briefly mention the breakup of Yugoslavia and give context to the UN-ordered safe areas and explain where Gorazde fits into the conversation about so-called safe areas. Chapter two deals with the way in which history is used as a framework for discussing the Bosnian War and the dismembering of Yugoslavia, and how Sacco's work fits into that discussion. It will be demonstrated that while for the most part Sacco is able to illustrate the same important contextual references of the past, there are important distinctions to be made, for example, what Sacco does *not* illustrate. *Safe Area* is tactful in its contextual references to things such as Yugoslavia's recent past, but does so without implying that the Bosnian war was a continuation of previous conflicts. Unlike so many academics, however, Sacco rightly avoids problematic pleas for legitimization by referencing the Holocaust which proves to be a major point of deviation. Chapter three will explore the role that memory played in the conflict and in representations of that conflict. This chapter highlights the challenges that memory brings to any given account and emphasizes a very particular kind of memory that emerged during the conflict, Yugo-nostalgia. *Safe Area* proves to be on par with its depiction of these common themes in relation to the Bosnian War. The fourth and final chapter will interrogate the way in which violence was accentuated in the representations of the Bosnian War. This chapter will bring examples and comparisons from popular depictions, such as film in order to highlight the ethical way in which Sacco deals with graphic imagery and traumatic events. Rather than producing images that are meant to be understood as "real" or representing reality, the images in *Safe Area* depict gruesome events without venturing into voyeurism or denying the highly stylized and artificial medium within which they are created.

Chapter 1: Background Information

Joe Sacco

Joe Sacco is a journalist by trade but has learned to mix his craft with the medium of comics to create what he calls "comics journalism." Originally born in Malta, Sacco and his family came to the United States when he was still a child. Sacco graduated with a degree in journalism from the University of Oregon. In the early and mid-1990's, Sacco decided to take his journalistic training on assignment, beginning in the Middle East, and then Bosnia, which also gave him the material needed to create his largest and most acclaimed works. *Palestine*, one of his first graphic narratives, chronicles life in the Occupied Territories. His book, with an introduction written by the late literary scholar Edward Said, received an American Book Award. Sacco eventually added to his work on Palestine with the publication of *Footnotes in Gaza* in 2009, in which he investigates an incident in 1956 in the city of Rafah where over 100 Palestinians were killed by Israeli Soldiers. In an interview with W.J.T. Mitchell, Sacco explained that his compulsion to go to Palestine and write about it was because he "was furious at American journalists, and the American style of journalism in which [he] had been trained."[1] Sacco explained that even when people gave the "facts," a clear picture was still not visible.[2] It was a similar compulsion that drove Sacco to travel to Bosnia and write about his experiences and the people he encountered along the way.

Sacco published three book-length comics about his experience in Bosnia during the mid-1990's, each highlighting different aspects of the war: *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003); *War's End: Profiles from Bosnia* 1995-1996 (2005); and *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* (2000). For his book *Safe Area Gorazde*, Sacco received the Will Eisner Award. In *The*

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[1] Sacco and Mitchell, "Public Conversation," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no.3 (Spring 2014): 54.
[2] Ibid.

Fixer, Sacco follows a self-proclaimed Serb nationalist named Neven as he recounts his life, specifically the siege of his hometown Sarajevo. Neven is an anomaly who, as a Serb, joined the Muslim-dominated Green Berets in order to defend his city. *The Fixer* gives insight into the violence perpetrated by Muslims in Sarajevo as they formed paramilitary groups to protect their hometown. *War's End* is a bit different than Sacco's other works on Bosnia. It is comprised of two separate stories, each published prior to being compiled into book form. The first story, "Soba," follows a man (named Soba) in Sarajevo who is a local celebrity of sorts, championed as an artist-soldier. Soba struggles with what appears to be PTSD and the slow transition away from a life of warfare. All of Sacco's work blend word and image to give a robust portrayal of various aspects of life in Bosnia during the war. In all of the mentioned works by Sacco, the process of production is similar. Sacco goes on location and interviews people during or just after times of heightened tension or conflict. He then, in his graphic narratives, blends history and memory into the story in order to contextualize the events being discussed while still relaying an "eyewitness" account. While these works in combination undoubtedly offer a multifaceted view of the Bosnian War, each book is sizable in length and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address all of them and will therefore focus solely on *Safe Area Gorazde*.

While the genre of the graphic narrative is a far-reaching one, its audience can only be surmised. Fortunately, Sacco is a very public figure who interviews often which minimizes the need for others to speak in his place. When asked about who he believes his audience is, Sacco answered:

> In some cases I think it's people who don't know anything about the topic, but sort of want to know a little bit, and they're just kind of intrigued by the medium as a way of telling it, or a way of getting inside some topic: Oh, it's a comic book about that, OK, I'll read that. They don't want to read Edward Said or Noam Chomsky. That's part of it… My goal is to make those topics interesting. I want people to be interested like

> I'm interested, and I think comics by their nature are entertaining, or they can be, or they should be, really. So, that's kind of the idea: I don't want to be boring.[3]

While it is difficult to gauge the popularity of this book, it is telling that *Safe Area* was rereleased as a special edition on its 10th anniversary. International acceptance is even more difficult to grasp, especially in the former Yugoslavia. One online author, evidently in an attempt to counter some negative criticisms fledged by other writers, stated: "Let's make it clear immediately, "Safe Area Gorazde" is a great comic."[4] The review is thorough and overall positive.

Graphic Narrative

The medium in which Sacco works must clearly be identified and defined before his work can be discussed. The medium of comics, as well as the social critique that they often offer, is not a new one: comics have a rich history that reaches back even before the advent of the broadsheet and weekly comic strip segments. Some have suggested that traces of this medium are present in the writing of the ancient Egyptians, who used an interplay between images and hieroglyphics to tell stories.[5] As Sean Carleton notes in "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness," there are multiple names for and multiple types of comics. These types include but are not limited to: "'floppies," "periodicals," "pamphlets," "sequential art," "graphic novels," and "graphic histories.'"[6] In "Graphic Novels or Novel Graphics?" Elaine Martin notes that "[c]omic books, which have a seventy-year history in the US, introduced a new subgenre in the late 1970s: the

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[3] Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, Joe Sacco, *January Interview Magazine*, June 2003, http://januarymagazine.com/profiles/jsacco.html

[4] He continues by saying: "Sacco has invested a tremendous effort in researching historical materials that were needed to clarify the background of the war, he cited crimes that happened in second world war from the Serbian, Croatian and Muslim side, through Tito's dictatorship and of suppression of national consciousness of individual nationalities in Yugoslavia, all to the vampire awakening of nationalism in the late eighties." Markos, http://www.stripovi.com/recenzije/null-n-a-safe-area-gorazde/191/, 2004. Translated by Lana Krvopic.

[5] Elaine Martin, "Graphic Novels or Novel Graphics?: The Evolution of an Iconoclastic Genre," *The Comparatist* 35 (May 2011): 170.

[6] Sean Carleton, "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness," *Labour-Le Travail* 73 (n.d.): 51.

graphic novel."[7] As will be discussed, the term "graphic novel" can be problematic, and "[d]efinitions vary widely, but common characteristics include multilayered narrative, a black/white format… [auto]biography or auto/biographical elements," and they typically "treat serious topics or are aimed at an adult audience and present a socio-political critique."[8] It is through this layering and critical content that comics as a medium—and the graphic narrative as a genre—is able to be subversive, as they are often deceptively simple on the surface but hold profound meaning that is found as the layers are exposed. The subversive capabilities of this genre are what allows Sacco to be visibly critical of things like the exploitative tendencies of journalists, the UN's lackluster performance as peacekeepers, and the arbitrary qualities of US-brokered deals.

Art Spiegelman's magnum opus, *Maus* (1986) is generally heralded as the work that launched comics into a new dimension. *Maus* was originally a two-part book that illustrated a long-term conversation between Spiegelman and his father Vladek. Vladek was a Polish Jew who was interned at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. *Maus* has been an inspiration to generations of cartoonists that followed, as his work demonstrated the diverse ways in which the medium of comics could be used. One of the most notable features of *Maus* is the way Spiegelman chose to represent the various groups involved. Throughout the book, Jews were drawn as mice, Poles as pigs, and Nazis as cats. Comics allowed Spiegelman to use fictitious depictions to add extra layers of meaning. For his work, Spiegelman received a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, but he also struggled with the daunting task of getting *Maus* "moved from the fiction to the nonfiction best-seller list" of the *New York Times*.[9] This successful struggle to have his work recognized as nonfiction facilitated the emergence of comics as a medium to depict factual events as it improved

[7] Martin, "Graphic Novels or Novel Graphics?," 170.
[8] Ibid, 171.
[9] Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *Modern Language Association* 123, no.2 (March 2008): 456-457.

the credibility of the genre. It is in the shadow of Spiegelman that Sacco wrote *Safe Area Gorazde* in 2000.

The function of the graphic narrative in academia has primarily been explored by the work of literary scholar Hillary Chute. Chute uses graphic narratives to interrogate the way history is transmitted to readers of graphic narratives as well as the way memory and trauma are represented in those narratives. The genre of graphic narrative is increasingly employed to recreate lived experiences in the medium of comics in order to give viewers/readers a nontraditional perspective. Chute's definition of the graphic narrative is what I use to categorize the work of Sacco. Often times the term "graphic novel" is used to describe these kinds of works, but as Chute notes, this term "is often a misnomer" as the term novel implies that the work is fiction.[10] This is not to say, however, that graphic novels do not have the ability to touch on very real issues, for example *Watchmen* or *V for Vendetta*. Instead, Chute argues that the term "graphic narrative" is more accurate as it "accommodate[s] modes other than fiction" and is "a book-length work in the medium of comics."[11] It is this distinction that separates the works of Sacco and others like Marjane Satrapi, Art Spiegelman, and even Howard Zinn from that of cartoonists who use the medium to illustrate fiction.[12] To be sure, many authors use the medium of comics because it suits their personal skillsets. Others like Howard Zinn, however, collaborated with illustrators in order to create their graphic narratives. That a well-established historian such as Zinn would elect to create such a work speaks to its capabilities.

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[10] Ibid, 453.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Marjane Satrapi is the author of the popular graphic narrative-turned film *Persepolis*, which details her life as a young woman growing up in post-revolutionary Iran; in 2010 Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* was adapted into a graphic narrative entitled *A People's History of American Empire*, which chronicles empirical endeavors from colonization up until the 2003 Iraq war.

Several authors have used Sacco's work as an example of what the graphic narrative is capable of, but there is little work that tests the historicity of Sacco's work against traditional academic scholarship. Terri Tomsky discusses how representations of traumatic events can increase or decrease in their worth—monetary or otherwise—as they migrate from place to place, thus creating a "trauma economy" as "the movement of memory must always occur within a material framework."[13] In order to frame this argument, Tomsky uses Said's "travelling theory" which "describe[s] the reception and reformulation of ideas as they are uprooted from an original historical and geographical context and propelled across place and time"[14] by substituting "ideas" with memory and trauma. Sacco is the example that Tomsky uses, as he illustrated the traumatic way that the breakup of Yugoslavia affected Bosnia. His illustrations were then circulated, consumed, and reproduced.

The genre of graphic narrative cannot be discussed without referencing the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, who has written extensively about the relationship between word and image. Mitchell argues that this relationship is "a basic division in the human experience of representations, presentations, and symbols. We might call this division the relation between the seeable and the sayable, display and discourse, showing and telling."[15] Indeed, there is a fine line between what can be said and what can be shown, especially when the content is sensitive in nature. Much of what is portrayed in graphic narrative is traumatic and can easily cross the line of appropriateness. For example, Sacco interviews people who have witnessed horrific acts of violence and aggression like murder, rape, and genital mutilation. What Sacco must decide is how to portray such acts—in

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[13] Terri Tomsky, "From Sarajevo to 9/11: Travelling Memory and the Trauma Economy," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (October 2011): 50.
[14] Ibid.
[15] [15] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Word and Image" in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 47.

word, image, or both. Graphic narrative allows for a blending of speech and spectacle which enables the authors to "[show] while [they] tell, illustrating [their] claims with powerful examples, making the listener *see* and not merely *hear* the orator's point.[16] Through comics, Sacco can submerge his readers into Gorazde, as it was when he and his characters/interviewees experienced it.

To get a better understanding of the relationship between word and image, I will draw upon the work of W.J.T. Mitchell and use it to analyze the visual component of Sacco's work. Mitchell's work is often referenced in studies of graphic narratives, as he has extensively theorized the relationship between words and images. Mitchell argues that word and image is really "a dialectical trope because it resists stabilization as a binary opposition, shifting and transforming itself from one conceptual level to another."[17] The relationship between word and image can be complimentary or contradictory and free to change at any given moment. These characteristics are what make the genre of graphic narrative so dynamic, because it thrives off of this relationship between speech and spectacle. The presentation of words and images that move the reader across the page and through time is a major contributing factor as to why Sacco's work is an exceptional representation of the Bosnian War. Mitchell recently interviewed Sacco about his work, which gives tremendous insight to the reception of Sacco in the world of academia, as well as addresses unanswered questions regarding Sacco's methods and approaches to his work.[18]

Currently, the genre of the graphic is expanding and becoming more far-reaching than ever. With books ranging from the history of U.S.-Middle East relations, to a series of books aimed at introducing complex ideas and individuals, such as the highly revered but difficult to comprehend

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[16] Ibid 49-50.
[17] Ibid, 53.
[18] Mitchell and Sacco, "Public Conversation," 54.

Michael Foucault all the way to the concept of semiotics, with the help of an abundance of visual aids.[19]

The Breakup of Yugoslavia and Coverage of Gorazde

When Josep "Tito" Broz, the leader of Communist Partisans during WWII and of Yugoslavia, died in 1980 a power vacuum ensued. With the absence of a strong and unifying figure the federation of Yugoslav nations began to break apart. In 1991 Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia asserted their independence from the federation. During this time "the Serbian and Croatian presidents, Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman repectively, were contemplating the partition of Bosnia as a solution to their territorial ambitions."[20] These ambitions of division left some areas particularly vulnerable to conflict and expulsions, which led to the creation of "safe areas."[21]

In 1993 the United Nations declared a total of six safe areas or safe havens that would be placed under the protection of the United Nations Protection Force, or UNPROFOR. These areas included Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Foca, Tuzla, Bihac, and Gorazde. All of the safe areas were located in eastern Bosnia relatively close to the border of Serbia, with the exception of Tuzla, which was in the western region, near the border of Croatia. The hope was that having safe areas would keep intact the Muslim majority population, as these enclaves were seen as prime targets for land grabs. The implementation of these safe areas has been the cause of heavy critique of the UN and its effectiveness in international intervention. It was estimated that a total of 34,000 peacekeepers

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[19] This is just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. For more information, see Jean-Pierre Filiu and David B., *Best of Enemies: A History of US and Middle East Relations, Part One: 1773-1953*, (London: Self Made Hero, 2012); Jean-Pierre Filiu and David B., *Best of Enemies: A History of US and Middle East Relations, Part Two: 1953-1984* (London: Self Made Hero, 2014); Chris Horrocks, *Introducing Foucault: A Graphic Guide* (Royston: Icon Books Ltd., 2004); Paul Cobley, *Introducing Semiotics: A Graphic Guide*, (London: Icon Books Ltd., 2010).

[20] Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms and Ger Duijzings, The *New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

[21] For a thorough analysis of the breakup of Yugoslavia as it pertains to Bosnia, see Burg and Shoup, *The War in Bosnia: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention,* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

would be needed to protect all six areas successfully. The UN secretary general, however, lowered that number to 17,000. But in reality only a mere 1,200 peacekeepers were sent to protect the enclaves.[22] While each safe area was significant, attention and coverage was primarily given to Sarajevo and Srebrenica. The siege of Sarajevo was seen an unravelling of longtime tolerance and coexistence between various ethno-religious groups, while genocide was perpetrated in Srebrenica. These two very significant events cast a long shadow over the other safe areas, resulting in a minimal amount of literature written about these other areas.

Most of the writings that mention Gorazde are short newspaper articles that report about the conflict, or larger articles whose main goal is not to discuss Gorazde but the overall failure of the "West" to intercede during the Bosnian War. For example, Mujeeb R. Khan briefly touches upon Gorazde only to build up his argument that Bosnian Muslims have been forgotten or ignored by the rest of Europe and the "West" because of their religion and that there has long been an attitude of indifference directed at Muslims in the Balkans. Similarly, Sheila Zulfiqar Ahmed uses Gorazde as an example of the incompetence and "utter failure" of the United Nations and their alleged "safe zones."[23] Like most of the publications that mention the enclave of Gorazde, these two articles do not focus on the city but merely use it as a tool to argue their points. The works of Khan and Ahmed are also representative of the controversial nature of the Bosnian conflict, as they both observe the trend of framing their work in a "clash of civilizations" attitude, something that is not present in Sacco's work.

Gorazde is also mentioned in the works of Danielle Sremac, Steven Burg and Paul Shoup, as they use different interpretations of the same events to explain what transpired in Bosnia in the 1990's.

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[22] Sheila Zulfiqar Ahmed, "The UN's Role in the Bosnian Crisis: A Critique," *Pakistan Horizon* 51 (April 1998): 86.
[23] Ibid, 83.

In *War of Words*, Sremac argues that the US was overly eager to intercede on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims, who had manipulated information to win the support of the US and UN. To argue this point, she briefly uses Gorazde as an example and recounts some of the events that took place there, such as the NATO airstrikes and what led to them. Burg and Shoup use the same information, but with different, almost opposite, interpretations in *The War in Bosnia*. They attempt to give a more even-handed account of what happened in Gorazde from March to April of 1994, but still fail to produce a thorough and complete analysis of the safe haven throughout the duration of the war.

Sacco's microscope on the safe area of Gorazde proves to be a window to the Bosnian War in general. He devotes over 200 pages to showing his readers the history, conflict, and ways of coping with the Bosnian War with meticulous attention to detail and accuracy. In the introduction to the bibliography, Sacco comments that he did not intend to create a complete history of Yugoslavia's breakup and the Bosnian War. However, it will be made clear that intentions aside, this is precisely what he has done.

Chapter 2: Use, Misuse, and Representations of History

In "Word and Image" W.J.T. Mitchell remarks that the relationship between the visual and the textual is a "division in the human experience of representations, presentations and symbols," or a "relation between the seeable and the sayable."[24] When placed together, visual and textual content have the ability to show and tell simultaneously by "illustrating its claims with powerful examples, making the listener *see* and not merely *hear* the orator's point."[25] Building off of the work of Mitchell and this relationship, literary scholar Hillary Chute "suggest[s] that the compounding between word and image has led to new possibilities for writing history that combine formal experimentation with an appeal to mass readerships. Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention."[26] Comics, more than any other medium, has the ability to present past, present and future seamlessly together in order to build a complete picture. This ability stems from the interplay between word and image. Additionally, as Chute asserts, graphic narrative possesses "an awareness of the limits of representation… through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely this insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement."[27] Like other cartoonists in this genre, Sacco has taken notice of this potential of comics and has used the medium to strive for the historically accurate yet creative representation of difficult events in contemporary history. Like other authors who attempt to represent the Bosnian War, Sacco relies heavily on history to give his characters context and deeper meaning.

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[24] Mitchell, "Word and Image," 47.
[25] Emphasis in original, ibid, 49-50.
[26] Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," 459.
[27] Ibid, 457.

Like most countries, Bosnia's history does not lack conflict. According to Burg and Shoup in their thorough account of the events that transpired in Bosnia during the break- up of Yugoslavia, there were evident factors that made way for conflict, including:

> a history of intergroup antagonism; a pattern of ethnic domination and/or inequality; the perception of contemporary intergroup competition as a zero-sum game; an electoral triumph or other change that brings nationalists forces to power, and the inadequacy of existing political arrangements for moderating or constraining their behaviors; the existence of competing, exclusivist claims to authority over territory; a pattern of settlement that lends itself only too easily to secession or partition; and the existence of outside sponsorship or support for extremist politics.[28]

Sacco briefly gives an overview of some of the violence that occurred during WWII and how groups began to form based on ethnic and nationalistic sentiments, primarily the Ustasha, Partisans and the Chetniks. Scenes from this chapter include the slitting of throats, mass murders, deportations and rapes. However, unlike most of what has been written about Bosnia and its history, this depiction does not imply a history of "ancient hatreds." By showing neighbors attempting to protect each other, and confusion over their turn against them, Sacco shows that the conflict in the 1990's was neither unique nor a natural progression from past events, but rather, it was purposefully "mobilized [through] identity groups".[29] This is evident in panels from *Safe Area Gorazde* that recount memories from before conflict broke out, and markers of identity were irrelevant to the formation of relationships with friends and neighbors. Many agree, including the Bosnians that Sacco interviews in his book, that living under the communist leader Marshall Tito was a better situation, since the identity that he pushed was a Yugoslav one and not one based on religion or ethnicity. After Tito passed away, and communism began to crumble, a power vacuum was created in Yugoslavia that provided an environment where the fears of the Yugoslav people were easily manipulated and preyed upon.

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[28] Burg and Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 4-5.

[29] Burg and Shoup argue that "The essence of ethnic conflict is the struggle between mobilized identity groups for greater power—whether it be for equality within an existing state, or the establishment of a fully independent national state" (*The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 4).
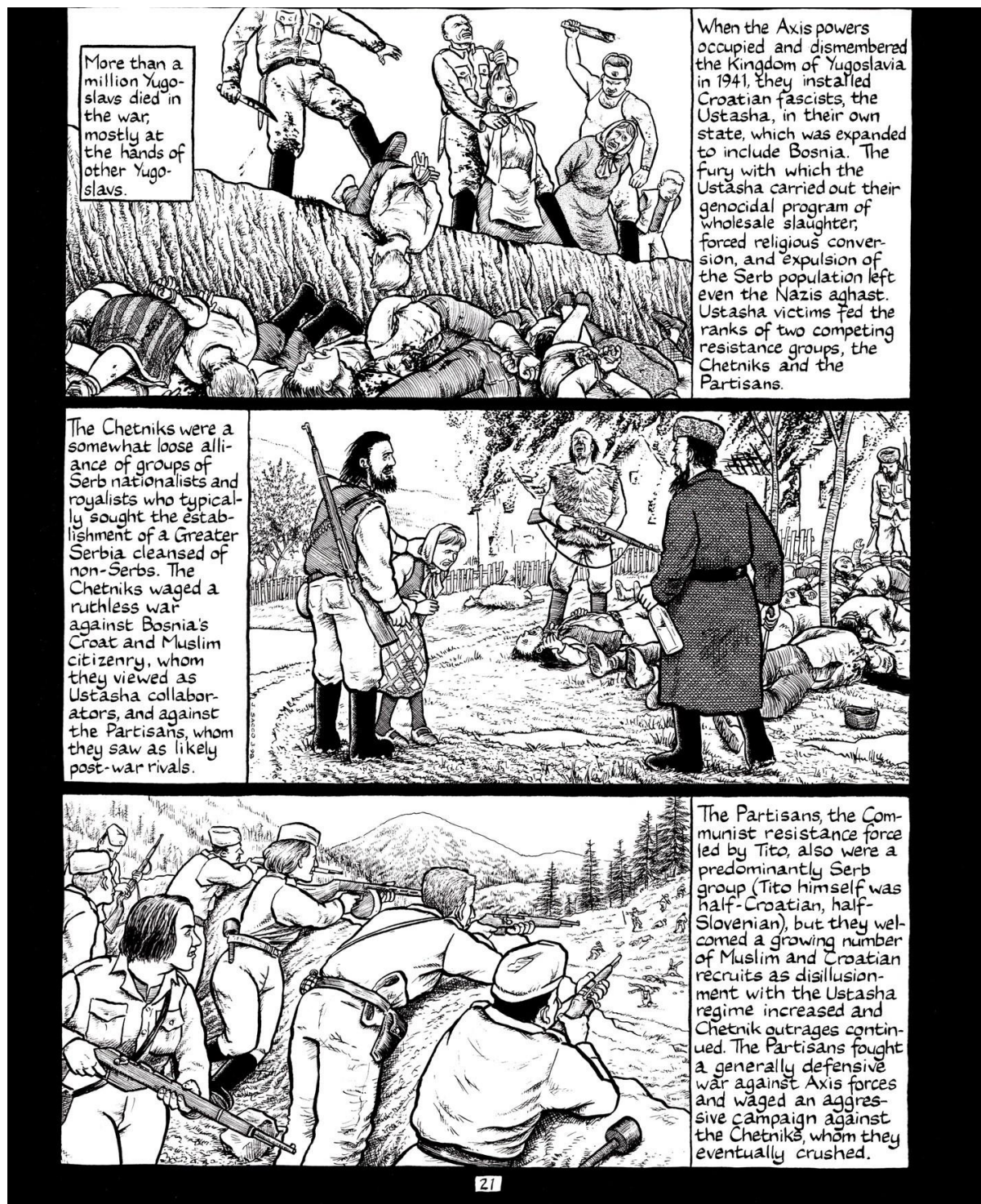
Figure 1 Sacco, 21.

Early on in *Safe Area Gorazde*, Sacco makes a point to review the events of World War II and

life under Tito in communist Yugoslavia to contextualize the conflict of the 1990s, which are

topics heavily referenced in the wealth of literature that exists about the breakup of Yugoslavia as well as the Bosnian War specifically. Sacco's references to WWII, as well as the characters in *Safe Area* through Sacco's mediation, diverge from a common trend in literature that seeks to establish a line of continuity between that conflict and the one that erupted in the 1990's. This alleged continuity can be a dangerous assumption, as Noel Malcolm warns that "to suppose that [the] Bosnian war was some sort of spontaneous continuation of the inter-ethnic fighting of the second world war is to read from the script prepared by Karadzic and Milosevic."[30] Sacco's illustrations suggest that all sides were guilty of atrocious acts during WWII, although his main character Edin emphasizes Muslim victimhood at the hands of Chetnik (Serb) aggressors. What these references to WWII do not do is to suggest that the same thing was happening again in that all sides were equally guilty. Given that Gorazde was a predominantly Muslim enclave, the version of the war that Sacco is told (and therefore illustrates to his readers) focuses on Muslim victimhood caused by Serb aggression. Interestingly, however, Sacco's work is lacking reference to a major event that has seemingly become the most notable trope in scholarly and popular work: the Holocaust. By not referencing the Holocaust Sacco breaks from the mainstream trends of representing the Bosnian War and arguing for its importance. Unlike other authors, however, Sacco only reaches as far back as WWII.

Some look back to the first Balkan Wars as proof for their argument that the Balkans have a history of violence or "ancient hatreds." This argument was used to justify non-intervention by Bill Clinton and the United States. Groups within Bosnia and other former Yugoslav nations also called out to the past to justify their actions or to gain support. For example, Serb nationals played on the fears of the people by recalling images of genocide and ethnic cleansing form

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[30] Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1996), 252.

WWII in order to demonize Croats and Muslims. Probably the most common use of history in what resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia was the argument that Muslims were the inheritors of the Ottoman-Turkish legacy, and were the last remnants of foreign oppression. Edin Hajdarpasic argues in his article "The Ottoman Legacy in South-eastern Europe," that "[s]ince the 1990's, escalating tensions across Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo invariably combined images of 'alien Turks', 'Muslims', and 'Ottomans' as synonymous categories that stood in contrast" to other Balkan peoples that were allegedly "native" to the land.[31] Sacco does not make the argument that Bosnia has been riddled with a history of violence and hatred, in fact, he does the opposite. Sacco states that "[s]ome of Bosnia's larger cities, like the capital Sarajevo, were particularly well mixed and enjoyed a rich and often touted spirit of tolerance."[32]

This chapter will explore and compare the ways in which Sacco uses and refrains from using certain historical references in his work in order to contextualize the Bosnian War and life in Gorazde. It will be demonstrated that Sacco's references and use of history are on par with credible scholars, yet because of the interplay between word and image, they are on the surface simplified and therefore more accessible and digestible. However, despite the apparent simplification, Sacco's work successfully represents the subtle nuances of the war while still retaining the mass appeal that characterizes the genre of graphic narrative.

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[31] Edin Hajdarpasic, "The Ottoman Legacy in South-eastern Europe," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 5 (September 2008): 717.
[32] Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000) 19.

The Worst thing to Happen on European Soil Since World War II

Like so many authors who write about the breakup of Yugoslavia, the editors of *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society* discuss the conflict of the 1990's by emphasizing that it was "the most deadly conflict in Europe since World War II."[33] Similarly, the authors of *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia* claim that the conflict exuded "a form of barbarism unmatched in Europe since World War II."[34] Although these statements may be true, as the conflict surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia was the most substantial conflict in Europe during the latter half of the twentieth century, they have been overemphasized and relied on too heavily in scholar's attempts to make the Bosnian War seem important, and therefore, legitimate their own research interests in the obscure field of Balkan studies. The Bosnian War, as well as the rest of the conflicts related to post-Yugoslav nation-building, is important in its own right, separate from WWII. Although Sacco references WWII early on, he does not mimic the sentiments of those who wish to stress the severity by lamenting that the conflict was the worst thing to happen to Europe since WWII.

Sacco is too uses WWII as a starting point for the explanation and depiction of the Bosnian War. He states that it was somewhat of a miracle that Serbs, Muslims and Croats had lived together peacefully more or less despite the "extraordinary bloodletting between them in World War II."[35] The primary purpose of Sacco's references to WWII seem to be meant to emphasize not that the Bosnian War was an extension of WWII, but rather the events of WWII were traumatic and not properly addressed and therefore remained intact in the memories of Bosnians. He does this by

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[33] Bougarel et al., *The New Bosnian Mosaic,* 5.
[34] Thomas Cushman and Stjepan G. Mestrovic, *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.
[35] Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*, 20.

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alternating narrative voices between his own, and that of Edin, his guide and translator. It is Sacco who comments on the miracle of "tolerance" after WWII, making sure to note that Muslims could be found fighting on all sides, but it is Edin who asserts that Muslims were the main target of violence during WWII.[36] In this way there is a distinction in the flow of information between what happened and what was perceived to have happened, as the two do not always align themselves. Additionally, Sacco is able to alternate seamlessly between scenes of the war (WWII) that are broad, or generic, and scenes that are specific to Edin and his family.

In the edited scholarly volume *The New Bosnian Mosaic*, the chapter by coeditor Ger Duijzings entitled "Commemorating Srebrenica," deals with the use of history and memory in pre-war and war-torn Bosnia. Some examples that the author touches upon are the ways in which Serbs "romanticized" their past conflicts with Muslims, or Turks. He is careful to "avoid drawing a straight line of causation from nationalist myths to ethnic violence and genocide, as some authors have done"[37]. This article deals heavily with the history and memory of WWII specifically, as its commemoration and memorialization facilitated conflict during the war of the 1990's[38]. The author's aim is to counter the oversimplification of WWII that is generally employed in nationalist narratives by focusing on a history "from below." Duijzings argues that

> One of the characteristics of post-war Bosnia is that there is a wide gap in terms of how Muslims and Serbs perceive the war which is underpinned by narratives produced by historians, journalists and politicians for 'consumption' in their own communities.[39]

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[36] Ibid, 22.
[37] Ger Duijzings, "Commemorating Srebrenica: Histories of Violence and the Politics of Memory in Eastern Bosnia," in *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories, and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms and Ger Duijzings eds. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007): 142.
[38] Ibid, 143.
[39] Ibid, 145.

These conflicting memories and depictions complicate the potential for unity within Bosnia. He recounts the atrocities committed by various sides during WWII and how their commemoration, or lack of, may have influenced behavior in the 1990's.

Duijzings relies heavily on WWII and the way it is perceived to make sense of the Bosnian War of the 1990's. One critique that can be made of Duijzings' work is that it often seems that he is attempting to overcorrect the depiction of Serbs as aggressors and Muslims as victims, to the point where their suffering is almost equated. The risk of using WWII for imagery and context in the 1990's is conflation between the two conflicts and viewing them and one continuous event. In this way, the suffering of Serbs during WWII is equated with and seen as a justification for the suffering of Bosnian Muslims in the 1990's. Similarly, Sacco relies on WWII and the recent history of Bosnia to contextualize the conflict for his readers, but he does so without implying that one conflict is a continuation of the other. Because of the way in which Sacco uses history in his depictions, a reader who has no prior knowledge of the region or the events that took place in the 1990's could read his work and walk away with a solid foundation of knowledge.

"Never again" is Happening Again

Appearing separately from WWII, the Holocaust has also been a heavily evoked theme when discussing and contextualizing the Bosnian War. Cushman and Mestrovic are quick to refer repeatedly to the Holocaust, comparing both events and reactions, as if it were a tool of legitimization.[40] They use a polarizing comparison of knowing versus not knowing. Although they follow a trend of using references to the Holocaust as a tool of contextualization and legitimation, they make it clear "that there was only one Holocaust" and did not intend "to imply an equation

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[40] Cushman and Mestrovic, *This Time We Knew*, 6.

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between the genocide in Bosnia and the Holocaust."[41] By doing so, they unintentionally contradict themselves. They implore their readers to make the connection between the two events, but at the same time suggest that one was more important than the other. Ed Vulliamy, a reporter for *the Guardian* during the Bosnian war, also used imagery from the Holocaust in his article "Bosnia: The Crime of Appeasement," in order to place guilt on the UN, Europe, and the US for their attitudes towards the suffering of the Bosnian Muslims.[42]

Although his reasoning is somewhat different, Robert M. Hayden makes a point to argue against the conflation of the Holocaust and the Bosnian War. Hayden postulates that during the Bosnian War the term "genocide" was used too liberally and often and contributed to a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Hayden is primarily concerned with the use of the term "genocide" and whether or not it occurred and the comparison between the conflict in the 1940's and the 1990's. According to Hayden, the acts that most closely resembled "genocide" in the 1990's occurred only after the term had been abused in political and journalistic rhetoric and that in fact the conflict in the 1940's was closer to genocide than what took place in the 1990's, although Hayden never concedes that "genocide" actually occurred.[43] In order to discourage the use of the trope of the Holocaust and WWII, Hayden inadvertently undermines his own argument by constantly comparing the two conflicts.

What is most striking is Hayden's continual references to the number of casualties of both the conflict in the 1940's and the 1990's. Multiple times Hayden notes that between 1941 and 1945

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[41] Ibid, 7.
[42] Vulliamy uses phrases like "final solution" and "Serbian pogrom" to describe the events that were taking place, particularly at the Omarska concentration camp. Ed Vulliamy, "Bosnia: The Crime of Appeasement," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 74 (January 1998): 73-91.
[43] Hayden instead refers to mass targeted killings, especially Srebrenica, as mass killings or massacres in order to absolve the conflict from the damaging and burdensome term of genocide. Robert M. Hayden, *From Yugoslavia to the Western Balkans: Studies of a European Disunion, 1991-2011*, (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2013), 138-141.

roughly 300,000 people were killed, and approximately 100,000 between the years 1992 and 1995.[44] These statistics are typically used to emphasize the number of Serbs who were targeted and killed in the recent history of Bosnia. The stress that Hayden places on numbers and percentages of those killed in 1941-1945 compared to those killed in 1992-1995 implies that greater numbers of dead deserve a greater amount of emphasis and importance. He refers to the casualties of the Bosnian War as the "lesser" of the two conflicts and comments on the "greater attention" paid to it which is presumed to be unwarranted.[45]

Hayden uses history as a means of comparison to imply that the Holocaust is the yardstick with which to measure all genocide and ethno/national/religious conflict. Even if invoked with the best of intentions, this comparison is futile because it leaves readers with the impression that nothing can ever or will ever be comparable to the Holocaust. If nothing is comparable to the Holocaust then the "specialness" of the Holocaust is reaffirmed while at the same time the severity of other genocides and mass killings are lessened.

By not referencing the Holocaust, Sacco has avoided the problems that arise for example in the works of Hayden, Cushman and Mestrovic. There is a hierarchy of suffering and ranking of importance that manifests itself when one catastrophic event is compared to another, for example the Holocaust compared to genocidal events that took place as Yugoslavia broke apart and distinct nations began to form as separate entities. To rely so heavily on the Holocaust in stressing the severity of the Bosnian War is to almost suggest that the latter is insignificant without the former. By omitting references to the Holocaust, Sacco has emphasized the distinct nature of the Bosnian

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[44] Ibid, 139.
[45] Ibid, 138.

War as well as suggested that it is significant in its own right and deserves its own proper representation.

Visualizing History

Although many pieces written about the Bosnian War use history as the backbone of their representation and analysis, few, if any, are able to move the reader back and forth through time in the same way that the medium of comics enables Sacco to do so. As his interlocutors recount their experiences in *Safe Area*, the reader is carried back and forth between past and present. This use of a nonlinear timeframe serves multiple functions. In a sense, it disorients the reader as they are almost certainly unaccustomed to a constant fluctuation in time. This disorientation can increase the discomfort and impact the reader experiences when exposed to some of the horrific images, because many times they are unexpected. In another sense, it serves as a constant indicator of actions and consequences, as the past certainly influences the present; even if that past was only months ago. The characters in *Safe Area* alternate between recounting their experiences in the war to their experiences in its aftermath.

The distinction is made obvious to the reader, as the past is always depicted with a black background while the present is depicted with a white background. It is somewhat like being present for the conversation and at the same time experiencing the event that the conversation is about. For example, Sacco alternates between the characters looking right at the reader, to the reader watching events unfold before their eyes. The chapter where Sacco's translator, Edin, is recounting scenes from WWII employs this type of depiction. The reader is given scenes of both Edin's telling his story as well as the actual events. This style of representation reads similarly to the way films show the audience a flashback into the past without disrupting the established flow of narration. In another section Edin recounts his role in the '94 offensive. Sacco juxtaposes two

images within the same frame to illustrate that it is Edin, and not Sacco, who is telling this story. In a small box Edin can be seen facing forward as he talks while the larger image shows Edin back in 1994 during the offensive, freezing in the winter snow. In one seamless image Sacco has given the reader both the past and the present.
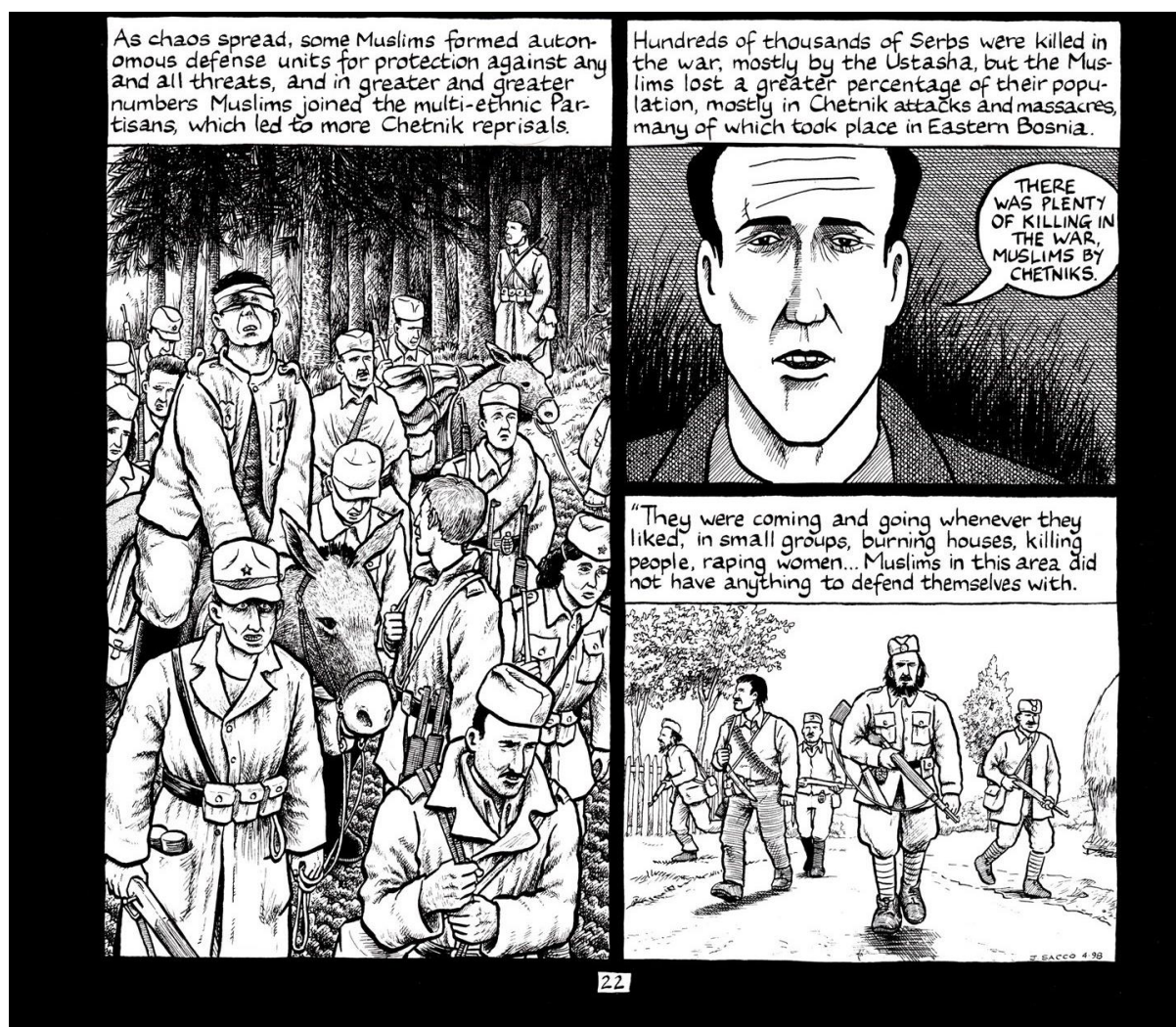
Figure 3: Sacco, 22

Conclusion

While many authors who write about the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War are content to abuse or overemphasize the Holocaust as a trope in order to legitimize their interests in the matter, Sacco has proven that the Bosnian War can be discussed without evoking a sense of guilt that "never again is happening again." Rather, *Safe Area* demonstrates that the Bosnian War and the breakup of Yugoslavia are significant in their own right and do not need to be ushered in on the coattails of the Holocaust in order to get the proper attention they deserve. Additionally, *Safe Area*'s use of the past to contextualize the present rivals that of academic works, yet avoids

implying a continuity of conflict that would absolve blame from those who participated in the conflict during the 1990s. Finally, the nonlinear time frame employed in *Safe Area* contributes to an effective depiction of the past's relationship to the present. The interplay between word and image gives a fresh and entertaining representation of the Bosnian War and alludes to what the genre of graphic narrative is capable of.

Chapter 3: Using Memory to Create a Narrative

It is often said that memory is fleeting. Memory is subjective. Memory can be fickle and unreliable. And yet, memory is the foundation of the sources that many use to build a body of historical knowledge. Memory can be both an asset to history as well as undermine its credibility and legitimacy. In academia, the use of memory as a base of knowledge can be somewhat contested and controversial. There are many problems and discrepancies that arise in connection with the use of memory, especially memory influenced by traumatic events. As Geoffrey Cubitt notes, memory as a discipline is not yet standardized, and as a result is rather amorphous and not always regulated, as different approaches yield different conceptions of memory.[46] With good reason, memory can be seen as unreliable or "untruthful" as it is inherently subjective. Coupled with the subjectivity of memory is the corruption that occurs when a memory is vocalized. When scholars study memory they are studying what is inside the mind, as it is remembered; however, memories must be articulated and brought from the interior to the exterior. During this process of articulation, varying degrees of corruption occur and must be taken into account.[47] Memory can also be corrupted by traumatic experiences. Dori Laub argues that if a traumatic memory is unarticulated, then the memory can be adversely affected. She states that "[t]he longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events."[48] Memory, if left unarticulated, can be altered or even deteriorate from its initial form.

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[46] Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2-3.

[47] Ibid, 96.

[48] Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 64.

The adverse effects of both transmitting and withholding memory are indicative of the volatile nature of memory. The volatility of memory also gives insight as to how it should be dealt with. Memories exist within a specific time and place and are constantly undergoing some kind of change or degradation, even if unnoticeable, and must be treated accordingly. However, as Cathy Caruth notes, "[t]he impossibility of a comprehensible story… does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth."[49] There is, as Robert Braun argues, "an unresolvable conflict… between the experience of an event and [the] narration of it."[50] Words can often fail to describe properly the events that people have endured, especially traumatic ones. This does not mean, however, that an attempt should not be made to describe properly the memory in order to gain insight and preserve the experiences. Although memory, especially memory influenced by trauma, has limitations, it still serves as a credible source of information. Braun states that "[a]s history overtakes memory, the latter is conquered and eradicated. Such a situation has warranted the preservation of memory by special spaces and events."[51] Sacco's work is one such "special" space that compliments history with memories not yet eradicated.

The Blending Memory and History

When discussing history and memory, it is important to note the differences between the two—the most significant being the difference between objective and subjective, respectively. Memory is selective and cannot be regulated in the same ways as an academic discipline such as history is regulated. History is more structured and scientific in its application. In theory, history can be confirmed, and as it does preserve the past, it also analyzes the past, considering actions and

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[49] Cathy Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* 154.
[50] Robert Braun, "The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 33, (May 1994) 174.
[51] Ibid, 176.

reactions. Memory, on the other hand, does not necessarily give one a "citable" knowledge, which is usually needed in academia in order to be credible.[52] This is not to say that if a memory cannot be "confirmed" then it is not "true." One simply needs to keep in mind the manifold nature of memory.

The most effective use of memory is when it is paired with history, which couples the "internal" view of memory with the "external" view of history.[53] This symbiosis between the two can be seen in Sacco's use of the past to contextualize the present. In order to explain some of the background of the conflict in Bosnia, he illustrates to his reader some of the history of the region, beginning in WWII, while simultaneously juxtaposing it against the story of his translator, Edin.[54] Additionally, Sacco's entire work would not have been possible without the memories of his interviewees. Because he came to Gorazde just as conflict was winding down, he did not personally experience the stories that he illustrates for his readers. Similar to the way Sacco uses WWII for context, he includes excerpts from the recent history of Yugoslavia and Bosnia so that his readers understand the conflict and how it escalated. For example, in the chapter entitled "The '94 Offensive" Sacco alternates between the speeches of former US president Bill Clinton and the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic while at the same time juxtaposing their political rhetoric to what was happening on the ground. Just as in other panels throughout Safe Area, Edin's story is included, with his image serving not only as a break between past and present but as a way to corroborate history with memory and vice versa.

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[52] Cubitt, 33, 36.
[53] Ibid, 35, 44.
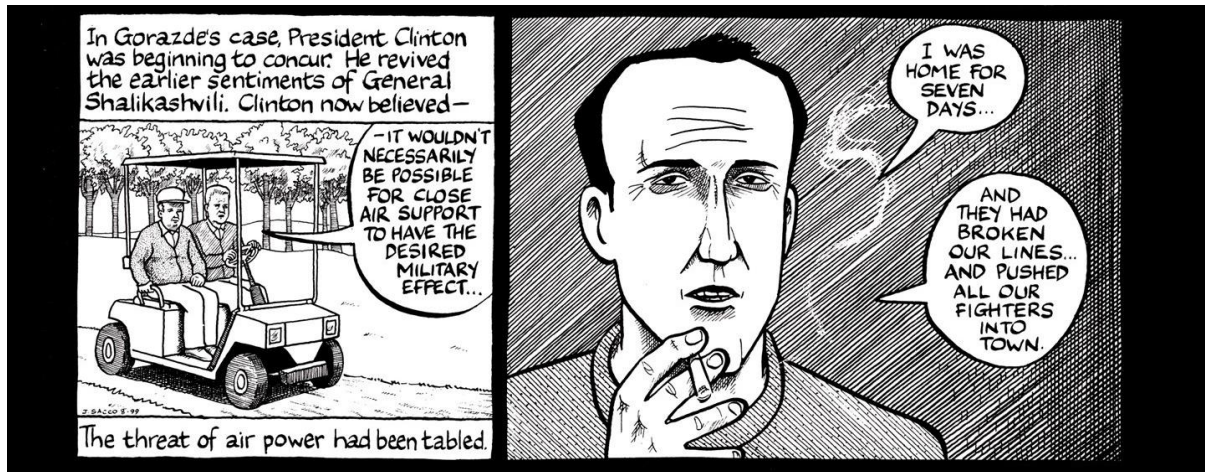[54] Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*, 18-23.

Figure 4: Sacco, 167.

A distinction is also made between the memories, in this case Edin's recollection of the '94 offensive, and research. Sacco is careful to always contain Edin's words within quotation marks so that the reader can distinguish between the lived experience and the information gathered to supplement the testimony, even when Edin is not pictured in the actual image. For example, in a series of images Sacco writes that "[o]n April 9 the Serbs captured the Gradina mountaintop above the east bank of Gorazde and now had direct line-of-sight into the town."[55] The description of the Serb offensive is coupled with images of a map drawn to scale as well as Serbs in the mountaintop drinking, smoking and saluting. The next image, however, features Edin talking as his personal experience is embedded in the larger conflict. In this way, Safe Area does not separate personal memories and experiences from that of the larger narrative that chronicles the conflict.

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[55] Ibid, 165.

Figure 5: Sacco, 165.

In *History and Memory*, Geoffrey Cubitt explains the relationship between memory and history as well as the critiques and praises for its uses. Cubitt argues that recently many disciplines have made a "turn to memory" and explains that for history specifically the "turn" makes sense since "history and memory are proximate concepts: they inhabit a similar mental territory."[56] In many respects it seems as if history and memory serve the same function, or work in tandem towards the same end goal: the preservation of the past as it pertains to the present. One thing that Cubitt points out early on in his work is that "Memory has no fixed, stable, unitary meaning to which we can invariably recur: it is always, and legitimately, a concept in flux and under review."[57] The lack of standardization and limits of memory can be overwhelming as well as liberating. Different disciplines use varying methodological approaches, and therefore yield results that are not always uniform or even compatible. Conversely, the openness in which memory can be applied leaves historians with ample options and room to be creative. Although he was trained as a journalist and cartoonist, and not an historian, Sacco demonstrates the open parameters that memory enables. Beginning with himself, Sacco tells his own story, his own experiences of being in Gorazde.

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[56] Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 4.

[57] Ibid, 8.

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Woven in between Sacco's autobiographical narrative are the memories of the people that he interviewed while covering the war.

With the limitations and benefits of memory in mind, Sacco's work can be better analyzed, and its contribution to the understanding of the Bosnian War and the benefit of textual and visual representation of memory can be better understood. Caruth contends that "[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."[58] In many ways the process of remembering and narrating traumatic events can be a therapeutic one that allows the trauma to be worked through. On the other hand, narrating trauma can be problematic. Caruth alleges that:

> The transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.[59]

One runs the risk of forgetting or losing the integrity of the original memory by articulating the event that is remembered. Relatedly, Cubitt stresses the selectivity of memory and the reality that no matter how much one may try, something will always be left out or prioritized over something else.[60] As Cubitt notes in *History and Memory*, no matter how hard one may try, something will always be left out when recounting memories or one memory will be given priority over another, therefore obscuring the original memory.[61] A similar occurrence happens during the process of narration. In the *Content of the Form*, Hayden White asserts that there is a "need or impulse to rank events with respect to their significance."[62] This ranking results in a selection of what is

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[58] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* 4-5.
[59] Ibid, 153.
[60] Ibid, 56, 97.
[61] Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 99.
[62] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 10.

present in the given narrative, with events and information either included or discarded. This problem again can be illustrated by reverting back to Sacco's work.

One chapter of *Safe Area Gorazde* features an interview with a woman named Munira who had spent time in Foca at a hospital for pregnant women, where rape frequently occurred. Munira recounts how she witnessed multiple women taken away but cannot or will not comment on her own experience. While the memory in question belongs to Munira, the story told prioritizes events that other people suffered.[63] Possibly the reason for this omission in her story has to do with the process of ranking events as important. White argues that this ranking is influenced by social structures.[64] In most societies rape is a topic that is taboo and is associated with disgrace and shame. Munira distances herself from the act in her story, and does not discuss whether or not she was directly affected by rape. This omission does not make her story any less "true" and does not detract from the larger story being told, even if her personal story is somewhat incomplete. Even if, as Cubitt states, that history is how "memory spills over into organized knowledge,"[65] the sacrifices and prioritizations made to create the "organized knowledge" must be taken into account as it is the job to make the most plausible narrative by analyzing sources and sequence of events.[66]

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[63] Sacco, 117-119.
[64] White, 10.
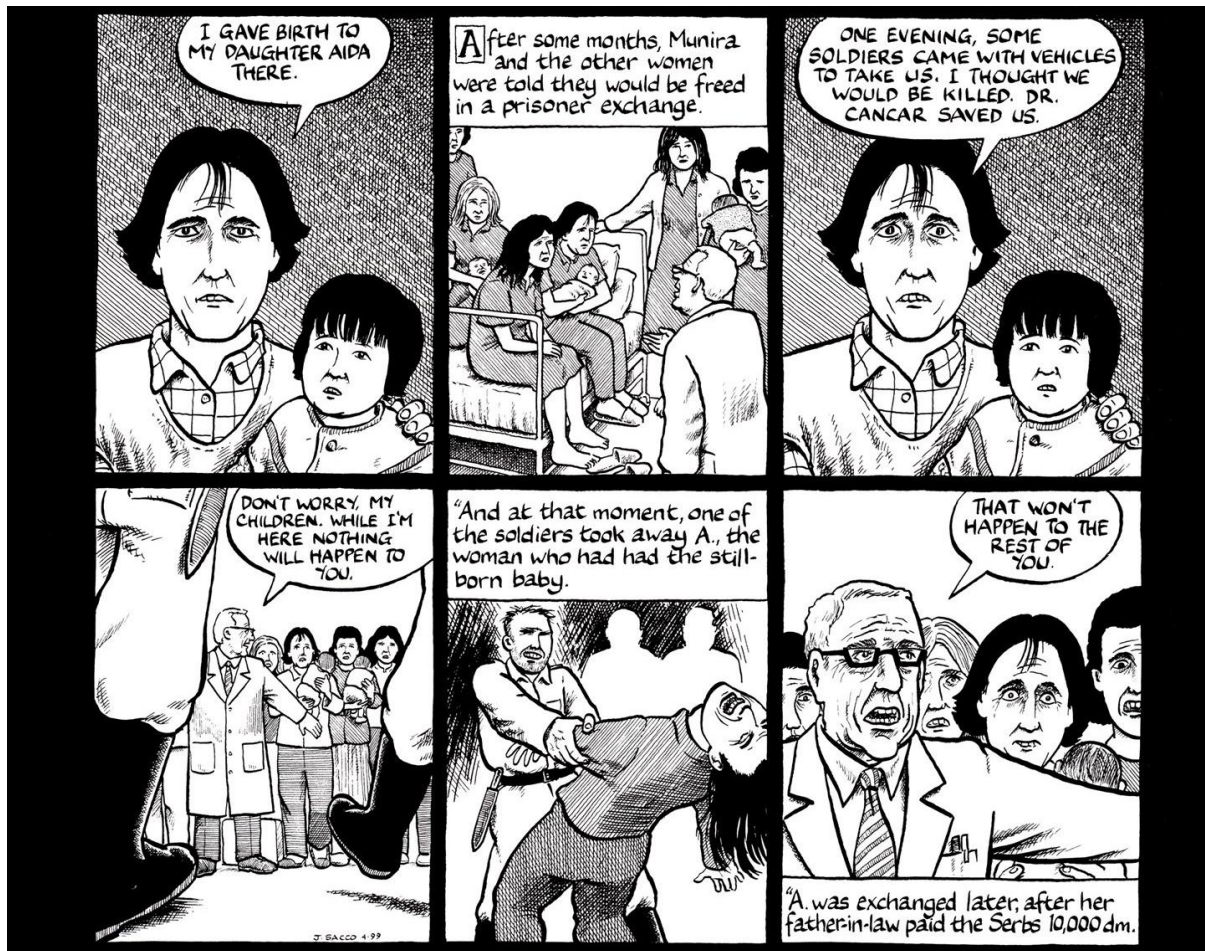[65] Cubitt, 30-31.
[66] White, 27.

Figure 6: Sacco, 118.

Yugo-nostalgia and Longing for the Past

As Yugoslavia continued to become fragmented and fighting escalated, it became increasingly common for people to express nostalgia regarding the past. Nostalgia, according to Zala Volcic, "offers an idealized version of an unattainable past that can stunt the cultural imagination by discounting and excluding real viable options for social change."[67] Volcic continues her assessment of nostalgia by claiming that it is "an obstacle to historical knowledge rather than a resuscitation of historical understanding."[68] This nostalgic remembrance expressed itself in many

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[67] Zala Volcic, "Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (March 2007): 25.
[68] Ibid, 25.

ways, but was typically characterized by a longing for a return to Tito's communist Yugoslavia, or at the very least a fond recollection of the recent past. What developed from this specific type of nostalgia in the former Yugoslavia was termed "Yugo-nostalgia" and is a topic that cannot be ignored when discussing not only the breakup of Yugoslavia but also the role that memory plays in our understanding of that breakup. This nostalgia towards Tito's Yugoslavia is still present today, although perhaps without the same intensity with which it appeared in the late 1980's and early 1990's.[69]

In "Miljenko Jergovic and (Yugo)Nostalgia," Cynthia Simmons sees Yugo-nostalgia "as the logical point of departure for studying the representation of the real and imagined past in Yugoslavia" and explains that there are two general understandings of Yugo-nostalgia: one negative and one positive.[70] The negative understanding is said to be a 'longing for and romanticizing of Tito's Yugoslavia of "brotherhood and unity"' while the positive is understood to be a way to "rectify the faulty memory of nationalists who misrepresented the Yugoslav experience."[71] Yugo-nostalgia features very prominently in depictions of the Bosnian War and the breakup of Yugoslavia in general, as times of heightened violence and conflict made the past appear more alluring and yet out of reach. Specifically, Yugo-nostalgia "functions in a paradoxical fashion, invoking a longing for the very past whose destruction engendered it," and "suggests that nostalgia is a self-contradictory phenomenon."[72] It is unlikely that this type of Yugo-specific nostalgia would have existed if it were not for the breakup of Yugoslavia itself.

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[69] A semi-recent article in Balkan Insight gives a glimpse into the present state of Yugo-Nostalgia in various former Yugoslav countries. Marija Ristic, "Yugo-Nostalgia Thrives at Tito Memorials," *Balkan Insight*, 25 June 2013, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/yugo-nostalgia-thrives-at-tito-memorials.
[70] Cynthia Simmons, "Miljenko Jergovic and (Yugo)Nostalgia," *Russian Literature* (2009): 458.
[71] Ibid, 458-459.
[72] Volcic, 26.

In many films about the breakup of Yugoslavia, there are typically scenes that depict this type of Yugo-nostalgia, where the past is remembered as a peaceful time of coexistence, usually between young Serbs and Muslims who are not affected by the distinctions between their ethno-religious labels. For example *Pretty Village Pretty Flame* (*Lepa Sela Lepo Gore*) opens with a scene showing the inauguration of the "brotherhood and unity tunnel" in 1971, as the partisan youth sing a song that glorifies Tito and his triumphant Yugoslavia. The next scene opens at the very same tunnel in 1980 with two young boys that are explained to be best friends; one Muslim and one Serb. The two friends later become enemies as the war reaches their town.

This dynamic is also illustrated in *Safe Area*, as the main character and translator Edin recounts living peacefully and happily with his Serb friends and neighbors, as opposed to the confusion and chaos experienced when neighbors began to flee and the fighting began. Edin expresses fondly his childhood memories of a time when terms like "Serb" and "Muslim" did not matter in his friendships, as if they were not markers of difference. These images of friendship and cooperation are typically juxtaposed at later points in the book with images that express confusion and disbelief when Serb neighbors flee or join in the fighting.
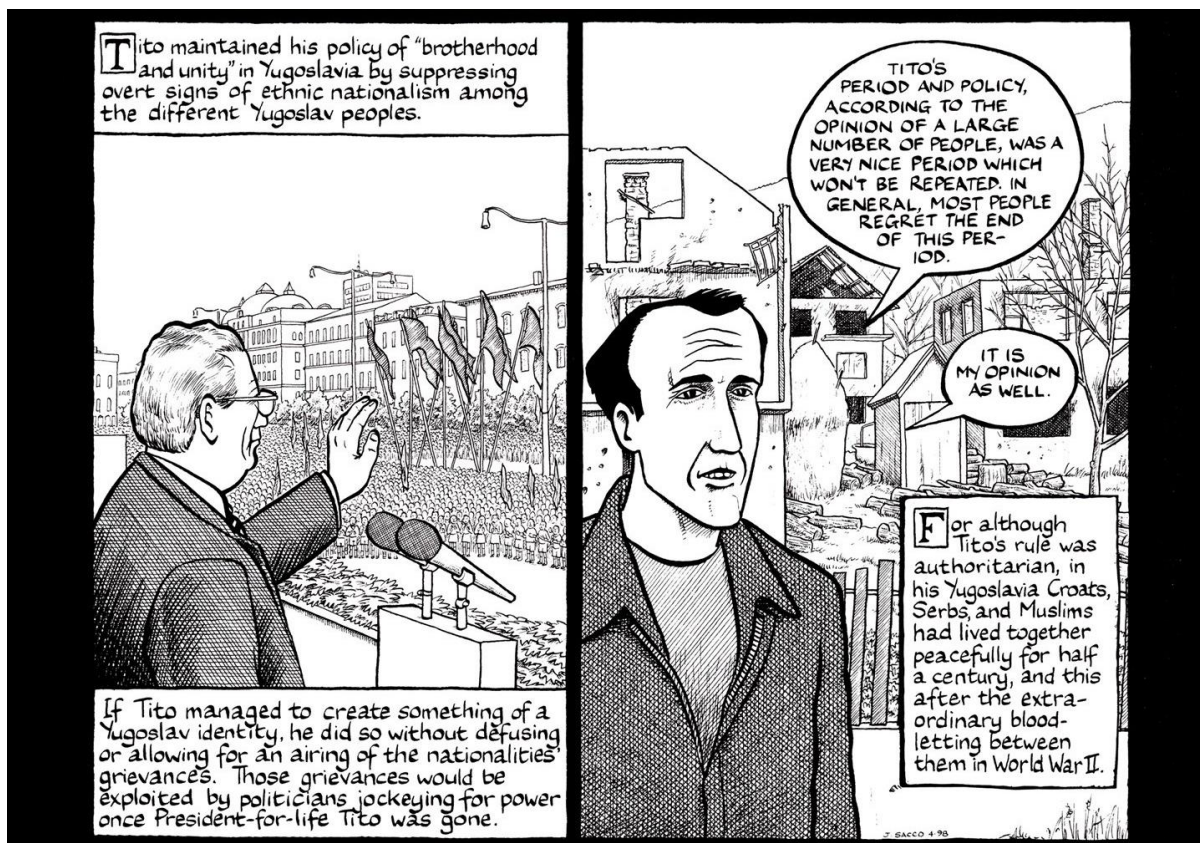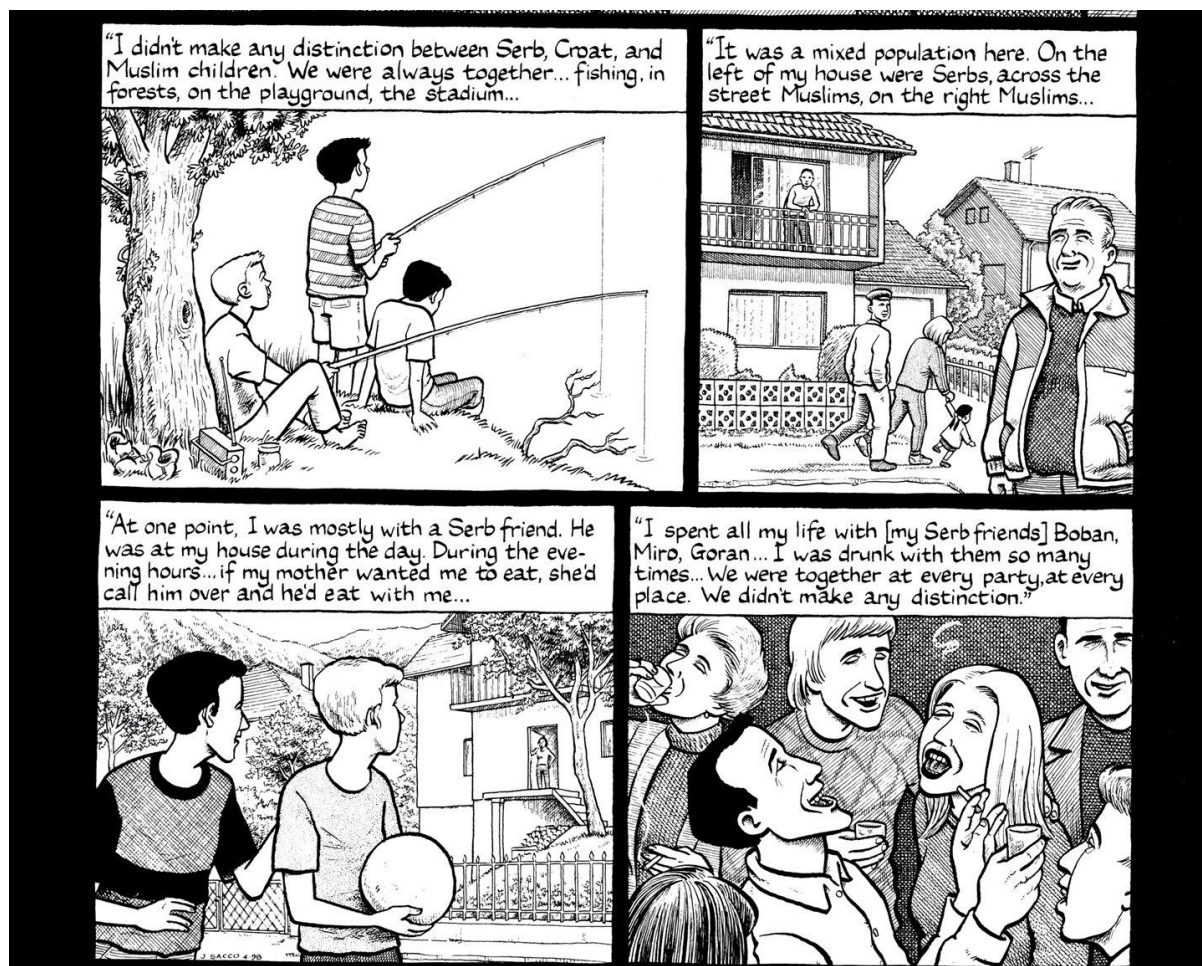
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Figure 7: Sacco, 20.

Figure 8: Sacco, 18.

Figure 9: Sacco, 77.

Countering "Yugo-nostalgia" with the Surfacing of Stifled Memories

In contrast to the often fondness in which Tito's Yugoslavia is remembered, there is also a growing

argument that seeks to expose the detrimental practices of memory politics that influenced the

fractures that occurred in the 1990's. While the famous slogan of "brotherhood and unity" can be

seen as emblematic of a time of relative peace and cooperation, it can also be seen as a means to

cover the difficult memories of Yugoslavia's past. After Tito's death, these memories surfaced in

society in an unprecedented manner. Robert M. Hayden, in his book *From Yugoslavia to the*

Western Balkans, calls this particular occurrence an example of "secret or hidden histories."[73]

Hayden asserts that:

> [I]n Yugoslavia in the 1980s and early 1990s, we can see the invocation and manipulation
> of hidden and oppositional histories from within and without the state socialist power structure. In both cases,
> "private knowledge" that had been long suppressed was used to challenge the versions of events that had
> been carefully constructed and officially approved during the communist period.[74]

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[73] Hayden, *From Yugoslavia to Western Balkans*, 26.
[74] Ibid.

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Until Tito's death, the communist Partisans had been championed as the liberators of Yugoslavia during WWII, especially when compared to the Ustasha and Chetniks. In reality, each of these groups committed acts against various Yugoslav peoples during WWII, but these acts were not properly addressed afterwards. Instead, atrocities committed by each group were covered under the guise of communist slogans that were meant to diffuse any remaining conflict. As Hayden notes, this "Partisan myth" existed almost as long as the Yugoslav federation, but "there had always been stories within Yugoslavia of partisan massacres," as the deeds of the Ustasha and Chetniks were relatively public.[75] This myth lead to the suffocation of memories, especially in the public sphere.

Duijzings argues that there was "little sensitivity to contradicting memories and different traumas," and that the history of WWII was heavily sanitized by the communists. "No emphasis was placed on the fact that this [WWII] had also been a brutal civil war, which in eastern Bosnia was mainly fought along ethnic lines."[76] Serbs, he demonstrates, were given more room to commemorate victims, while Muslims "had to forget theirs and were basically forced to turn away from the past."[77] His work gives much needed critical context to the memories and nostalgia of "brotherhood and unity" during the 1990's, which is a common topic in interviews as well as scholarship.

In *Safe Area*, Sacco alludes to this suffocation in one small frame, as he attempts to contextualize the current conflict. He states that "[i]f Tito managed to create something of a Yugoslav identity,

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[75] Ibid, 34.
[76] Duijzings, 148.
[77] Ibid, 149.

he did so without defusing or allowing for an airing of the nationalities' grievances. Those grievances would be exploited by politicians jockeying for power once President-for-life Tito was gone."[78] This quote is paired with an image of Tito greeting a crowd from a podium. As Sacco continues to depict the grievances in question, primarily Chetnik and Ustasha activities, the reader understands the severity of these actions and that forgetting them would not be an easy task.

One major flaw in Sacco's work regarding the memory of Tito and the past is the way he depicts the Partisans. Although they only play a minor role in the overall book, Sacco makes the mistake of portraying them in a favorable fashion, especially compared to the Ustasha and Chetniks. He states that "[t]he Partisans fought a generally defensive war against Axis forces and waged an aggressive campaign against the Chetniks, whom they eventually crushed."[79] While what Sacco states is true, the images couple with the text present a very clear image of the three groups in question. The Ustasha and Chetniks are each illustrated committing acts of violence and aggression. The Partisans, however, are drawn as being "defensive," firing at aggressors from a trench. In addition, the Partisans are represented as welcoming women, who are in the trenches alongside men, as opposed to the Ustasha and Chetniks who are murdering women.

In this way, Sacco perpetuates the "Partisan myth," even if inadvertently. He acknowledges at the same time that the past was not addressed, but still does not correct this lack of representation. This observation is not intended to discredit Sacco's work, but instead to serve as an example of how easy it can be to view Yugoslavia under the influence of Yugo-nostalgia, and how difficult it can be to create a depiction that addresses all perspectives.

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[78] Sacco, 20.
[79] Ibid, 21.

Conclusion

Due to its nature, memory must be understood to be subjective and at times incomplete, as it cannot possibly account for every experience. Memory can also be limited or impeded depending on the nature of the memories. If these limitations can be acknowledged, then memory has the ability to inform history with real "experiences" so that a more accurate and comprehensive picture can be portrayed. *Safe Area* exemplifies a work that has struck a balance between confirmable facts and personal memories. Additionally, Sacco is able to illustrate how memory of the past influences the understanding of the present, as Yugo-nostalgia created a fondness for the past and a disbelief of the present.

Chapter 4: Representations of Violence, Suffering, and "Real Life"

Violence and suffering seem to be the characteristics most central in the focus on the Bosnian War. It has become, apparently, impossible to discuss or represent the conflict without evoking images of rape, genital mutilation, genocide and mass murders. While these crimes certainly took place throughout the war, the images have been used as tools to appeal to at the most foreign intervention, and at the very least, sympathy. Spectators have taken seemingly every advantage to capitalize on these images, as is made evident by the plethora of written work, as well as films on the subject. Cushman and Mestrovic contend that "the West has played an important role in the Balkan War: the role of voyeur."[80] Writers such as Susan Sontag and Jean Baudrillard have become outspoken critics of this voyeurism, although their perspectives differ greatly. The entertainment industry has made a profit from graphic representations of the Bosnian War with Hollywood Blockbusters like *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) and *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011). These films have become commonplace yet are contested depictions of the Bosnian War, and they take full advantage of the impact that images of violence and suffering have on an audience.

Safe Area often straddles the line between informative and entertainment, and does make effective use of gripping images to convey the tragic story of Gorazde and the Bosnian War. It will be argued here, however, that Sacco does not attempt to capitalize or exploit the personal information that he was privy to as a result of his fieldwork. Unlike films on the subject, which are generally meant to be understood as representations of "how things were," comics function as a medium that can depict the events and emotions without claiming a total "realistic" recreation of what happened. The medium creates a distance with "real life" while at the same time impacts the readers greatly

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[80] Cushman and Mestrovic, 3.

with a seemingly unlikely "heavy" content in such a "light" form. To be sure, many of the images in *Safe Area* are gruesome and shocking, as Sacco has painstakingly illustrated scenes of mass murder, decomposing bodies, genital mutilation, and rape. Yet his images differ greatly in comparison to what films offer, and these differences will be made explicit in the following chapter. In addition, the themes he covers as well as the way they are handled often expand upon what is written about the conflict in academic circles.

Profiting from the Suffering of Others

Arthur and Joan Kleinman, in "Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," contend that "[t]here is no single way to suffer," and that "there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering."[81] If this is true, then it is logical to assume that there is no single way to depict suffering. When depicting suffering, it can be easy to venture beyond the limits of ethical representation and into the exploitative. Those limits can be even more ambiguous when the representation in question is intended for a wide audience and mass production, such as those found in films and literature. The question regarding intention is always present; are the producer's intentions to illuminate an audience or to turn a profit? In reference to what they call "professional appropriations," primarily meaning journalism, Arthur and Joan Kleinman lament that "experience is being used as a commodity, and through this cultural representation of suffering, experience is being remade, thinned out, and distorted."[82] Ironically, experience is what is needed to create a compelling account of any event, no matter what it is intended for. This experience is why reporters are drawn to the location of events and to those who were there to endure the suffering.

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[81] Arthur and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," *Daedalus* 125 (Winter 1996): 2.
[82] Ibid.

It can be problematic at times to safeguard Sacco from the same criticisms that are applied to journalists, as he considers himself to be a "comics journalist." According to Susan Sontag, journalists are a sort of "professional, specialized tourists," and that it is a "modern experience" to be an observer or "spectator" of terrible things happening abroad.[83] She contends that there has developed an "iconography of suffering" and that the desire to see these images of suffering borders on the pornographic.[84] Sontag, along with Arthur and Joan Kleinman, maintain that there is a demand for images of suffering, and they have therefore become a commodity. Their purpose is, subsequently, no longer just to inform a population and allow for greater understanding of events that have transpired across time and space. "Watching and reading about suffering, especially suffering that exists somewhere else, has… become a form of entertainment."[85] This desire and demand for images of suffering influences the stories that journalists seek out and repot, as "war was and still is the most irresistible—and picturesque—news."[86] In this regard, Sacco has separated himself from the mainstream of journalistic endeavors.

Although technically trained as a journalist, Sacco has no qualms with expressing distaste for traditional or mainstream journalism, both explicitly and implicitly. When asked by W.J.T. Mitchell why he felt compelled to seek out conflict areas and report on them in the form of comics, Sacco answered:

> I was furious at American journalists, and the American style of journalism in which I had been trained. I realized that you could write "facts" about something and still not tell what is really going on. It is that sort of anger or indignation that drove me towards that subject and others… I was looking for an outlet and that was comics—I was already doing comics and I thought, well, I'm a cartoonist, so how do I put this together? Well, go and do comics about these things.[87]

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[83] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 16.
[84] Sontag, 36.
[85] Kleinman, 8.
[86] Sontag, 43.
[87] Mitchell and Sacco, *Public Conversation*, 54.

In *Safe Area*, Sacco comments several times on the position that journalists held in Bosnia. According to him, journalists would pour in and out of Sarajevo and Gorazde on the UN safe roads, often staying in what were considered to be luxurious accommodations as the rest of the cities were in shambles. Once a desirable soundbite or story was acquired, they would make their way back to safety. Additionally, the portrayal of journalists does not leave readers with a positive view, as the author quotes hearing remarks such as "I wish Gorazde would go away."[88] All the while, Sacco acknowledges his complicity in maintaining the status quo, stating that "[i]n my world there were certain privileges. I was a guest of the Bosnian war."[89]

For as much as *Safe Area* shows Sacco as a typical American journalist, something he admittedly despises, it also shows how Sacco sets himself apart for the mainstream. As opposed to the droves of reporters that rolled in and out with the tides of UN convoys, Sacco moved out of his hotel and in with a local and stayed over an extended period of time to immerse himself in the conflict and its aftermath. Other contrasts are made evident when Sacco chronicles the various ways that journalists interacted with the residents of Gorazde. In one panel a reporter can be seen interviewing residents for her story, broken up by an image of her checking the time, presumably to make sure she would catch the convoy back and not have to stay the night in the "safe area." Another depiction, just a single image, shows a reporter staging a scene to get some desirable footage. Sacco notes that the reporters "needed journalism <u>now</u>, for the top of the hour, and a few were not above inducing some quickie action themselves."[90] The image shows a reporter throwing a handful of candy on the ground for a small crowd of children to fight over. The reporter is pictured in detail, from his selection of cameras down to the several pockets on his jacket. The

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[88] Sacco, 4.
[89] Ibid, 130.
[90] Ibid, 131.

children, on the other hand, are pictured only as faceless silhouettes. The contrast in the illustration of the reporter to that of the children is striking. While the message is not explicit, it is nevertheless understood that the story was more important than the actual people in that story, as their faces are not worth picturing. Regarding other journalists, Sacco commented that "they don't allow for those humanizing moments that actually reveal the people they are talking to as human… It is not like you have to find them. They are there all the time."[91] Although *Safe Area* is not about Sacco per se, it is telling that he is very transparent about his position as a journalist. He acknowledges that he is the filter with which his audience is exposed to Gorazde and the Bosnian War.[92]

Figure 10: Sacco, 130.

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[91] Mitchell and Sacco, "Public Conversation," 57.
[92] In regards as to why he features himself so prominently, as well as the relationships he develops, Sacco states: "to me being truthful about my role as a journalist, the filter that I am, the fact that I'm a Westerner in a foreign situation—all of that is ethical." Ibid, 68.

Figure 11: Sacco, 131.

One of the most provoking criticisms of journalism and the way in which it creates representations comes from French social theorist, Jean Baudrillard. He alleges that postmodern society has facilitated the creation of a "hyperreality" that is "characterized by the detachment of symbols from their social contexts and references," and that consequently, "audiences have lost the ability to distinguish simulacra from the real world phenomena they are meant to represent."[93] With specific reference to the Bosnian War, Baudrillard has argued that this hyperreality was exacerbated by "media and humanitarian agencies, who simply reinforce the incomprehensibility of the world's attitude towards them [Bosnians]."[94] The outside forces that created reports and representations of the Bosnian War only further perpetuated a distinction between those who experienced the war and those who came to witness the war. The witnesses of war felt that they "should" do something, while those actually experiencing felt the "need" to do something.[95]

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[93] Cushman and Mestrovic, 79.
[94] Jean Baudrillard, "No Pity for Sarajevo," in *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*, eds. Thomas Cushman and Stjepan Mestrovic (New York, NYU Press, 1996), 81.
[95] Ibid, 80.

To this effect, Baudrillard sees people like Sontag as playing a somewhat condescending role in the production of representations, saying that "she [Sontag] must have a better idea than they [Bosnians] of what reality is, since she chose them to incarnate this reality."[96] Baudrillard notes the arbitrary way in which "reality" is selected, created, and disseminated. In this way, Sontag has inadvertently become part of the problem that she criticizes. She laments the exploitation of images of suffering, while at the same time is an authority regarding which images are chosen to depict this suffering. Sacco addresses this problem of representation in his public conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell by stating:

> [I]n the end you realize you are setting the tone for what people are going to remember about this event. I mean there are a lot of people who are going to think of Schindler's List as that was how the Holocaust was somehow… You realize this: there is a real, dangerous, powerful thing about representing something, because that becomes a final word in a way.[97]

Sacco, then, does not attempt to create a representation that claims to depict an actual reality, but rather one that captures the truth about the event in question. Part of the function of the medium of comics is to create a distance between images that are intended to depict a "real" event as it "actually" happened, such as films and photographs. Instead, the medium is able to focus on giving readers a truthful account without the assumption that it is meant to stand in for the real thing.

A pointed comparison can be made here to the film *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) regarding "realistic" representations, specifically pertaining to the Bosnian War. The film was shot in Sarajevo shortly after the ceasefire was enacted in 1996 and follows a small tribe of reporters as they perform their duty to stay alive while finding stories for the evening news. What sets this film apart from other cinematic representations of the Bosnian War is that its attempts to depict reality reaches further and are therefore more evident. Many of the scenes in the film are actually footage

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[96] Ibid, 81.
[97] Mitchell and Sacco, 61.

from journalists and reporters who were on the scene during the siege, and it is often difficult to distinguish the staged film footage with that of the actual footage.[98] This technique, although perhaps practiced under the guise of good intentions, creates an ambiguous line between real and scripted events. By creating a film about the Bosnian War that ventures into documentary-like imagery, the producers have deceived the viewer into believing that what they have just witnessed in the theater is comparable to what was experienced during the actual siege of Sarajevo.

Steering Away from Voyeuristic Depictions

The press and scholarly coverage of Bosnia, particularly in regards to the genocide at Srebrenica, was almost pornographic in its infatuation with the violence, rape, and ethnic cleansing that occurred. Of course, these topics could not be avoided in the coverage, and the emphasis placed on them varied in each representation. Vulliamy uses graphic imagery of violence as he recounts events that took place at the Omarska concentration camp, "a place where a prisoner was forced to bite the testicles off a fellow inmate who, as he died of pain, had a large pigeon stuffed into his mouth to stifle his screams."[99] The use of these images in Vulliamy's article is to illicit a response of disgust and shame from his readers, as his article is a chronicle of his perceived failure on behalf of the "West." Sacco was presented with the challenge of how to represent violence in his graphic narrative, and for what purpose.

While *Safe Area* shows a variety of violence, one might be shocked at how minimal the occurrence of rape is throughout the book. Possibly one reason for this is that rape is an incredibly difficult and personal subject that people often do not talk about. Although Sacco befriended some residents

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[98] Janet Maslin, "Dangers and Jitters of Life in Sarajevo," review of Welcome to Sarajevo by Angelina Jolie, *New York Times*, November 26, 1997.

[99] Vulliamy, "Bosnia," 74.

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of Gorazde, he was still a foreign journalist. In Innocence and Victimhood, Elissa Helms remarks that she too experienced difficulty discussing rape with residents. She notes that "it seemed that people knew the rapes where happening but they were not talked about much," and that she "never heard anyone but foreign visitors mention the rapes. Some refugees confirmed that they knew about them but only when [she] had gathered the courage to ask."[100] If she, someone familiar with Bosnian culture and language had a hard time, it is reasonable to assume that Sacco, a foreign man, would have a difficult time as well.

Perhaps the reason that rape is not a larger issue in *Safe Area* is that it was not something that occurred frequently in Gorazde. Hayden argues that rape is used when peaceful coexistence is not going to be an option, because it creates hatred and an enemy. He states that "rape makes continued coexistence impossible."[101] He continues by claiming that:

> Rape is unacceptable when the lesson is only to display dominance over people with whom the group is asserting dominance expects to keep on living. When the lesson is to show that life together is finished, however, rape is an extremely effective tool for conveying this message.[102]

His emphasis is particularly stressed on arbitrary borders, which definitely applies to Bosnia, as Serbs were encroaching from the east to consolidate territory. So perhaps rape does not feature in Sacco's work because the people of Gorazde still could imagine life with Serbs after the conflict. When Sacco asked some residents of Gorazde if they could ever live with the Serbs again, they gave an array of answers, but the general consensus was that it might be possible but it would take time.[103]

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[100] Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia and Hercegovina*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 82.
[101] Robert M. Hayden, "Rape and Rape Avoidance in Ethno-National Conflicts: Sexual Violence in Liminalized States," *American Anthropologist* 102 (March 2000): 31.
[102] Ibid, 32.
[103] Sacco, 160-161.

Sacco's interview with Munira, while showing some aspects of the rape that occurred, focuses primarily on Munira herself, the person.[104] Safe Area alternates between scenes of Munira telling her story, child in arms, and images of the story she is actually telling. There are several images of women kicking and screaming as Serb soldiers pull them from their hospital room. The actual act of rape is never shown, but its aftermath is exposed as a woman is pictured curled in a bed with her back to the wall as four half-dressed Serb soldiers gather around a table laughing, drinking, and smoking. While the images that allude to rape in *Safe Area* undoubtedly fail to capture the struggle and emotions of such a heinous act, they also do not exploit the act merely to mortify the reader. This particular representation is successful, however, because the images and words are each partial in content, but when blended together create an effective and ethical depiction of rape that does not exploit or sensationalize the act or the victims. Sacco is still able to capture the seriousness of the act without objectifying or taking advantage of the situation.
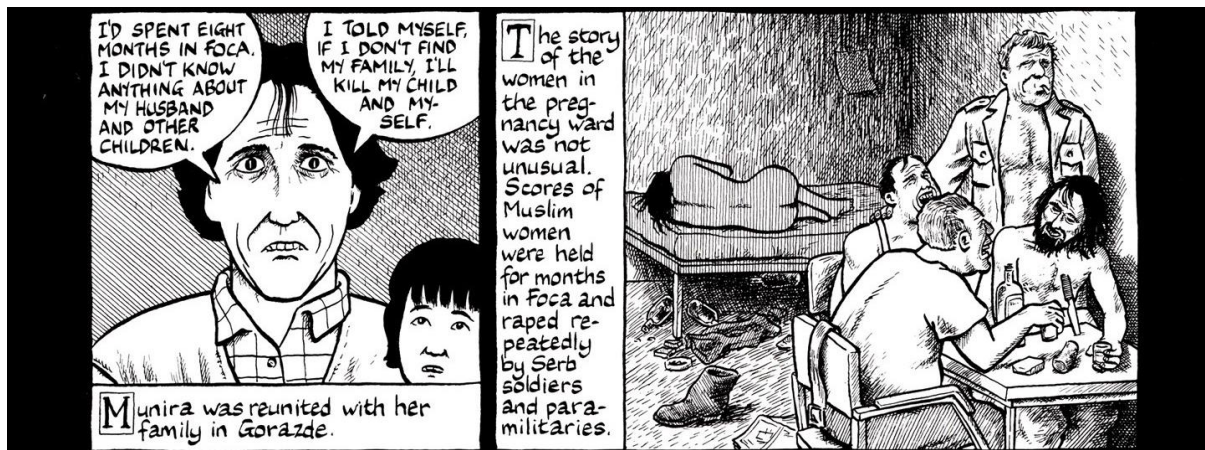

Figure 12: Sacco, 119.

This depiction of rape is a stark contrast to others, for example the films *As if I am not there* and the controversial *In the Land of Blood and Honey*. The act of rape is essentially romanticized in

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[104] For Munira's story, see Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*, 117-119.

Angelina Jolie's directorial debut, *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011). In the film, a Muslim woman, Ajla, falls in love with her Serb rapist, Danijel, whom she dated briefly before the fighting started in Sarajevo. The woman is rounded up and taken prisoner along with others. Immediately upon arriving at the detainment center a Serb soldier grabs a woman from the group and proceeds to rape her while the others must watch. Just as Ajla is chosen to be the next victim, Danijel comes to her rescue and saves her by claiming ownership over her. In her remaining time as a prisoner she is considered to be Danijel's property and is treated fairly well in comparison to the other women. At one point she is released but volunteers to stay with Danijel, where she is eventually raped repeatedly.

As if I am not there (2009) presents another problematic depiction of rape. The film is based on famed Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic's 1999 book of the same name. Samira, a young school teacher from Sarajevo, moves to a small town in eastern Bosnia in order to take a teaching position. Shortly after, conflict makes its way to her and she is taken prisoner along with a group of other women from the town. She is raped repeatedly until she decides to use her feminine wiles in order to gain favor with a young officer. She then becomes exclusively involved with him, which ends up saving her life as he eventually allows her to leave. Both of these films attempt to show the severity and inhumanity that characterize the act of rape. However, because each film depicts a woman who essentially has an intimate relationship with her rapist, influenced by survival instincts or otherwise, they have inadvertently humanized the perpetrators of rape and have therefore lessened the impact on the audience. Additionally, rape scenes feature so prominently in each film that viewers are basically overexposed and possibly desensitized.

With an overwhelming amount of graphic images the audience risks becoming desensitized, which would presumably undermine the purpose of showing such images. Arthur and Joan Kleinman

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contend that the "appropriation of images of such serious forms of suffering… has desensitized the viewer."[105] Sontag says that "shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off."[106] But perhaps because Sacco's images never pretend to be "real," just truthful, they do not run the same risk. It is shocking to see a comic depict something like throats being slit and bodies being dumped into a river, to be sure, but it could never compare to witnessing such events in reality, or in a form that is commonly understood to represent reality such as film and photography.

According to Sontag, "it is passivity that dulls feelings."[107] However, Sacco's work, like the genre in general, requires active participation of its readers. Mitchell notes that "[o]ne of the greatest misunderstandings of the comics medium… is that people think that comics are "easy reading," that you can skim through them quickly and take it all in."[108] The reader must engage with the text. Jared Gardner contends that "[e]ven in the most simplistic narratives, the reader is required to fill in the space between the frames with the missing action. Thus all comics are necessarily collaborative texts between the imagination of the author/artist and the imagination of the reader who must complete the narrative."[109] It is not intended to suggest that audiences of different mediums such as film do not actively engage with the work, but it is not always required of them to do so. Films often spell out so much of the plot that a noncritical viewer could understand the film without question. Comics, on the other hand, require an engagement that is continual. For this reason, the medium does not allow for a dulling of feelings brought on by passivity.

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[105] Kleinman, 9.
[106] Sontag, 73.
[107] Ibid, 91.
[108] Mitchell and Sacco, 60.
[109] Jared Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 800.

Regaining a Sense of Normalcy after the Suffering

The Bosnian War did not end after the actual fighting had subsided. The lives of Bosnians kept going, as they grappled with gaining a sense of normalcy while picking up the pieces of life that were shattered by conflict. For many, however, interest in the plight of Bosnians diminished greatly along with the physical fighting. Images of Bosnians in search of foods not available for years, blue jeans, and cigarettes are typically overshadowed by more violent and graphic ones. This overshadowing obscures the entirety of the picture that must be presented in order for an audience to even begin to grasp the harsh realities that were brought on by the Bosnian War. While some authors, such as Ivana Macek, have attempted to illuminate aspects of "everyday life," it is Sacco's *Safe Area* that attempts a complete depiction of life effected by war: before, during, and after.

In "Imitation of Life" the author, Ivana Macek, attempts to depict what she calls the "process of negotiating normality" in war-torn Sarajevo. She states that it is the daily, lived experiences that shape normality, and that the concept of normality is constantly subject to the possibility of change, especially as daily life changes. Conflict, she argues, typically occurs gradually, which allows people to make continual minor adjustments to their perception of "normal" life.[110] Even after the armed conflict had ceased, the struggles of coping with everyday life in Sarajevo did not. During the siege the inhabitants were subjected to inconsistencies and inconveniences that interfered with even the most basic of tasks, for example not having electricity and water in order to do laundry. This did not end when the bullets were no longer being fired. Macek argues that because of this,

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[110] Ivana Macek, "'Imitation of Life': Negotiating Normality in Sarajevo under Siege," in *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories, and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Xavier Bougarel Elissa Helms and Ger Duijzings eds. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007): 40.

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"the message that slowly but surely engraved itself into the people was that they had no power over their lives. Consequently, they started feeling that their lives were worthless."[111]

Figure 13: Sacco, 49.

In connection to the work of Sacco, many comparisons can be made. Sacco does a wonderful job of illustrating the struggles and seemingly unimaginable amounts of work that went into daily life just after the conflict in Bosnia had declined. From the dangerous and laborious burden of collecting firewood, to the rudimentary river contraptions created to harness electricity, and surely some sense of normalcy. Macek discusses the shame associated with the people in Sarajevo not being able to live life as they had previously.[112] Also, she notes that many people were shamed or humiliated from receiving aid from foreigners.[113] In contrast, Sacco shows the pride and excitement that the inhabitants of Gorazde experienced when the blue road opened up and brought

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[111] Ibid, 43.
[112] For example, Macek discusses the simple act of making an acceptable cup of coffee, and how her hosts were seemingly embarrassed at their inability to get ahold of quality ingredients in order to offer such a basic refreshment. Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 44.

in basic necessities that had been nearly impossible to acquire previously. Things like flour and oil were sought after through potentially perilous endeavors through Serb-held territory before they were made available by the UN convoys.[114] His hosts were able to make dishes that had essentially become delicacies due to the lack of ingredients most people could acquire, such as bananas for cake.

Sacco illustrates the suffering and joy of access to essential goods in one single, yet large image. After arriving in Gorazde and deciding to move out of the journalist-ridden hotel, Sacco is invited to the house of a local to eat, drink, and better acquaint himself. At the house party Sacco is offered pizza, made by a woman named Nina. The foreground of the image shows Nina happily serving the dish to her guests, fresh from the oven as steam is visible rising off the top. The background of the image is much darker, as it alludes to the perilous journey of "white death." The image shows a side-by-side of how food made its way into Gorazde; by a convoy of UN trucks, or by foot through the freezing wilderness. Sacco comments that the trucks were "an easier way to bring food to the table, Nina could tell you, than humping it yourself through enemy lines and winter mountains… which she'd done five times… her pop had frozen to death up there on that same trail."[115] As Sacco and his newly-found friends are at a party enjoying themselves, he tells the reader that they should skip the topic for now. He later returns to the topic in full detail, as he

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[114] Sacco devotes a chapter to illustrating the dangers of trekking through the "white death" through Serb-held lands on to the Bosnian army-held area of Grebak. The journey received its name because it was traveled in the snowy winter, at night only, which exposed those brave enough to make the trip to conditions where frostbite and death were very real risks. Although the journey was dangerous, for many it was a necessity since Gorazde was essentially cutoff from the rest of Bosnia. The only ones who moved freely were UN troops, who brought journalists and food, but their visits were sporadic after having been ambushed in July of 1992. After this reality is explained in excruciating detail, it is clear to the reader why residents of Gorazde take so much joy in the availability of basic things like flour and sugar. Sacco, 133-147.
[115] Ibid, 10.

devotes an entire chapter to the stories of those who had no choice but to risk their lives in extreme conditions just to get the basic necessities they needed to survive.

Another attempt to regain a sense of normalcy in everyday activities that Macek does not highlight is that pertaining to social activities. *Safe Area* alternates between images of the past and the present. As discussed previously, the images of the past were used to give the reader context as well as explain what had happened to Bosnia as Yugoslavia broke apart. The images of the present, however, deal with a much different topic, namely, negotiating the present. As Sacco follows his translator Edin around town, they interact with other locals and reporters in various new coffee shops and discotheques that have begun to emerge after the conflict subsided. At one point Sacco

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stops by the local cultural center, where two women were preparing to perform a puppet show. One of the women comments that "such an activity is a matter of survival for me."[116] On the following page Sacco explains that since the people of Gorazde were cut off from the rest of the world, they would press him for any information they could on topics ranging from sports to films.

Figure 15: Sacco, 74.

Similar to Sacco is the degree of reflexivity that Macek includes in her work, as her research brought her Sarajevo during the siege. It is not until the author is shot at—allegedly right in front of UN soldiers—that she began to understand the plight of the people of Sarajevo on a more personal level. [117]Macek had an understandably emotional reaction, and appeared to equate herself to the victims of the siege. Sacco entered Gorazde just as the physical conflict had ended, and thus was not subjected to the same danger as Macek. He did, however, experience to an extent the same living conditions, such as cold weather without electricity. Sacco, unlike Macek, is very transparent about his position in the safe area, constantly informing the reader that he had the privilege of mobility. If fighting resumed, things became dangerous, or he simply could not tolerate

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[116] Sacco, 74.
[117] Macek, 52-53.

life in Gorazde any longer he had the ability to leave. Because of this, he was somewhat of an attraction in the town, and was the physical embodiment of mobility and freedom.

Conclusion

While it is easy to exploit images of violence and suffering and desensitize and audience in the process, *Safe Area* has avoided both. Sacco's dissatisfaction with American-style journalism has motivated him to move beyond reporting just the "facts" and on to humanizing depictions of those who have been caught in the crossfires of conflict. He criticizes the exploitative tactics that journalist employ in order to get a story worthy of the evening news. Although images of violence were unavoidable, *Safe Area* exposes readers to images that will not desensitize. The active participation that comics require keeps readers from becoming passive observers of the plight of Gorazde.

Conclusion

The war in Bosnia is a controversial topic that has received much attention in academia, the press, and popular representations. What has received less attention is the plight of the so-called safe areas outside of Srebrenica and Sarajevo. Joe Sacco was able to take a relatively unknown area and create an in-depth account of Gorazde in the medium of comics. Sacco is able to take the same themes used by journalists, academics, and public figures, and use them in a different way to add new dimensions and levels of understanding to the conflict in Bosnia and the safe haven of Gorazde. By blending history and memory, the past and the present, Sacco's work exhibits depth and dimension that is lacking in both academic and journalistic depictions of the same events. Sacco has created a full-length book in the medium of comics in order to correct the lack of attention that Gorazde has received.

*Safe Area Goraz*de shows both the escalation and reaction to nationalistic and ethnocentric sentiments as various groups struggled to fill the power vacuum created by the death of Marshall Tito and the collapse of communism by depicting the deterioration of neighbor relationships between Serbs and Muslims in Gorazde. By using comics instead of a more traditional medium, Joe Sacco has made a dynamic contribution to the depiction and understanding of the conflict in Gorazde and how the people affected by that conflict tried to cope and move on with their lives. While his book has been relatively successful, his compulsion to write and illustrate stems from the desire for people to know what happened without being intimidated by the big names and big words of well-established academics.

The medium of comics has come a long way as it has sunsequently paved the way for the genre of graphic narrative to emerge in contemporary society. No longer are comics limited to the depiction of fictional events. Graphic narrative allows for a nontraditional depiction of real events and memories. Since the publication of Art Spiegelmen's *Maus*, comics have become more prominent as a medium of nonfiction content.

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