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# **HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND RADICALISATION**

**How Can Intergenerational Transmission of Collective  
Traumas Contribute to (Group) Radicalisation?**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we attempt to build upon existing theoretical and empirical knowledge stemming from criminology, conflict and peace studies, and radicalisation/extremism studies, among others, in order to explore the (potential) role of historical trauma in (collective/group) radicalisation. Historical trauma is objective, altered, or imagined trauma that occurred in the (more or less distant) past and is shared by a group of people (i.e., is one of the markers of their group identity across generations). Radicalisation refers to a process of acquiring more and more extreme political, religious, or social ideologies, and becoming more prone to endorsing any form of (violent) extreme behaviour to achieve one's goals. The intergenerational transmission of collective trauma can arguably have a significant role in the radicalisation of future generations who consider themselves historically victimized by "the Other". The aim of this paper is to explore how the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma may contribute to (group) radicalisation.

The paper, therefore, introduces a (thus far relatively neglected) intergenerational perspective in radicalisation studies. In order to do so, we first briefly address the existing knowledge on individual and collective radicalisation. Thereafter, we discuss individual and collective trauma and describe their consequences and manifestations. Then, we turn the attention to scholarship on the intergenerational transmission of the legacies of political violence, focusing in particular on the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma, i.e., historical trauma. The final section synthesizes our arguments and makes a couple of (tentative) claims on how historical trauma can potentially contribute to the radicalisation of present and future generations. This paper does not present conclusive evidence nor policy recommendations. Its main aim is to open new doors for further discussions and the future exploration of (violent) radicalisation, trauma, and their intergenerational consequences.

## RADICALISATION

Radicalisation is an ambiguous, still evolving, contested, and vague concept.<sup>1</sup> The term "radicalisation" emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the social movements studies.<sup>2</sup> Radicalisation has been described as a process from normative (i.e., socially acceptable in a certain context e.g., "centrist", "ordinary", "mainstream", "normal", "moderate") ideas and/or behaviours to extreme ones. There is no radical singularity. What is normative in the present or a single society may be radical in the future or for another society. Radicalisation can involve individual or collective actors, including state actors, and entails the cognitive adoption of an extremist ideology. It can result in advocating, endorsing or adopting violent (extreme) behaviours to impose one's ideas on others.<sup>3</sup> Radicalisation is therefore a process by which the individual and/or the collective become increasingly extremist in their political, religious, or social ideologies, and more prone to endorsing any form of (violent) extreme behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Thus, an endpoint of radicalisation<sup>5</sup> is inconclusive and can be violent.<sup>6</sup> Depending on the context, and social, political, and legal circumstances, such violence can be constructed as violent extremism,<sup>7</sup> terrorism<sup>8</sup> or an atrocity (e.g., genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing).<sup>9</sup> In this policy paper, we refer to all these violent manifestations of the radicalisation as political violence.

We therefore understand radicalisation as a gradual, nonlinear, and dynamic process resulting in the acceptance of political violence as a possible and/or legitimate course of action. In this sense, radicalisation is a shift from the absence of a state of violence towards accepting violent forms of collective and/or individual actions designed to achieve social, political and/or ideological goals.

In the past two decades, the study of radicalisation has been primarily embedded in a securitisation framework and has dealt with high-income countries, Western democracies, and Muslims.<sup>10</sup> After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America in 2001, the field of radicalisation studies emerged and expanded. It focuses predominantly on so-called “jihadist” radicalisation; researchers try to discern individual characteristics of “(violent) extremist”<sup>11</sup> and individual pathways<sup>12</sup> into radicalisation. On a collective level, scholars mainly focus on the radical networks and relational dynamics of groups.<sup>13</sup>

There is a consensus among scholars that radicalisation is an individualized process, a result of complex<sup>14</sup> multicausal and multilevel factors and dynamics; it involves emotional,<sup>15</sup> relational,<sup>16</sup> cognitive, and behavioural dimensions.<sup>17</sup> Having said that, the radicalisation process has been modelled in various ways.<sup>18</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko proposed a three-tier radicalisation model - individual, group and mass/societal – emphasising experiences involving strong emotions such as anger and hate. On *an individual level*, radicalisation occurs through (i) a personal grievance involving strong unpleasant emotions such as anger, or as a method of revenge for an infliction of pain on oneself or loved one/another, (ii) a group grievance such as outrage for an injustice against a larger group or relevant others, (iii) a “slippery slope”, gradual radicalisation, or progression to more extremist beliefs and behaviours. However, radicalization can also occur/be reinforced (iv) as a result of love, and helping relevant others who are radicalised, (v) seeking status, (vi) escaping from personal problems, and social disconnectedness (i.e., “unfreezing”, “cognitive opening”). *Group level* radicalisation, according to McCauley and Moskalenko, occurs through (i) group polarization and (ii) group competition that can be either internal (i.e., a competition for a status of being “most radical”), for ingroup support (i.e., a competition for survival) or with the state. Furthermore, (iii) group isolation can strengthen/accelerate the path to radicalisation when the individual, group and/or mass/societal factors mutually reinforce each other. *Mass level* radicalisation is framed in a cognitive dimension: as public opinion endorsing (i) Manichaeic dualist views and public acceptance that the “Other” is bad and a threat, which provides fertile ground for (ii) the mobilization of opinions and martyrdom. In addition, (iii) state overreactions to a terrorist threat leads to mobilization for support of new acts of terrorism and the creation of new threats, thus enabling the cycles of political violence. There is no hierarchical relationship between the three levels and they can interact in various ways.<sup>19</sup>

Among other notable theoretical models,<sup>20</sup> the “3N approach” put forward by Kruglanski et al. sees the radicalisation process as a quest for significance. It is based on individual motivation (needs), the ideological justification of violence (narratives), and group processes (networks). When ideology (that justifies political violence), promoted by a charismatic leader and social connections (that promote extreme ideology), is combined with personal and group grievance, the quest can end in extreme cognition and behaviour. In other words, a perceived sense of



humiliation pushes the need to search, create and/or restore significance. Ideology or a shared narrative point to the “perpetrator” as a source of humiliation and legitimises violent political action. Group processes strengthen the ideological influence and enable the fusion of individual and group identities, and increase the risk for externalization through political violence.<sup>21</sup> As noted by the United Nations, radicalisation does not occur in a vacuum:

“Narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored and aspirations are being crushed.”<sup>22</sup>

Hafez and Mullins emphasize the importance of separating the justification of violence for political goals (i.e., a radicalisation of ideas) from participation in political violence (i.e., a radicalisation of behaviour). They argue that four factors are important in group radicalisation: grievance (e.g., discrimination), networks (e.g., friendship and family connections), ideology (i.e., for justification of violence), and an enabling environment (e.g., training camp, internet).<sup>23</sup> However, a violent radical belief does not very often result in a violent radical action.<sup>24</sup> Although it is plausible that an extreme beliefs that are violent lead to political violence, beliefs are very often weakened by other extraneous factors, such as competing norms, culture and habits. And if an extreme belief that is violent is seen as political violence in itself, a “war on metaphors” could include ideas such as a counter-radicalisation strategy.<sup>25</sup>

To conceptually distinguish between the radicalisation of ideas and radicalisation of actions, Moskalenko and McCauley developed the so-called two pyramids model.<sup>26</sup> Each pyramid depicts different levels/stages of individual radicalisation. The bottom of the “radicalisation ideas pyramid” is occupied by individuals who are neutral in terms of a political cause at the bottom, followed by sympathizers, then those who believe in the political cause but do not justify violence, followed by those who justify violence in defence for the cause, and at the top of the pyramid are those who feel a moral obligation to use violence in defence of the cause. The bottom of “the action radicalisation pyramid” is formed by individuals who are inert to a group or a cause, followed by activists, then individuals engaged in legal political action for the cause, then radicalised individuals, those involved in illegal political action for the cause, and at the top of the action radicalisation pyramid are terrorists who use illegal actions against civilians. Both pyramids are, however, very fluid in terms of processes and no hierarchical relationship or straightforward progression through individual levels exists.

In contrast to individual radicalisation, collective processes of radicalisation, their relevance and salience for radicalising individuals seem to be relatively neglected. Several studies addressing such collective dimensions of radicalisation discuss radical milieus (i.e., immediate social environment for clandestine groups, made of various settings and places e.g., subculture, community),<sup>27</sup> social interaction,<sup>28</sup> such as group-polarization, group isolation and competition between different groups,<sup>29</sup> social exclusion, marginalisation, and alienation.<sup>30</sup> Similar to the radicalization models briefly outlined above, researchers of collective violent radicalisation also emphasise the importance of group identity,<sup>31</sup> (collective) grievances,<sup>32</sup> and ideology.<sup>33</sup> Although

numerous causes and/or triggers of radicalisation relating to a collective/group level have been identified in scholarship, and can (individually, cumulatively, reciprocally and/or otherwise) explain a recourse to political violence, research on potential links between collective trauma and radicalisation has been scattered and scarce. Additionally, radicalisation can also be, in one way or another, linked to the intergenerational transmission of trauma that occurs in families and more broadly with(in) groups/collectives. Trauma transmitted within families and broader social groups can form a breeding ground for radicalisation.<sup>34</sup>

This discussion paper, therefore, explores the role of *collective trauma* in radicalisation, focusing primarily on its *potential to nurture violent radicalisation across generations*. By synthesizing knowledge on – three relatively contested concepts – trauma, radicalisation and intergenerational transmission, we consider whether and how collective trauma, transmitted across generations as historical trauma, can contribute towards our understanding of radicalisation.

## TRAUMA IN INDIVIDUALS AND COLLECTIVES

### (i) Personal Trauma

Although there is no universally accepted definition of trauma, it is used in psychology as a concept and clinical diagnosis denoting a rupture in one's psychic well-being. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV-TR, trauma can arise from a psychological or physical injury to a person that threatens their physical or psychological existence,<sup>35</sup> while the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 defines traumatic events less inclusively as actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, thus excluding stressful events without immediate threat to life or physical injury.<sup>36</sup> Individuals can experience multiple, prolonged and/or repeated traumas throughout the life course.<sup>37</sup> As a result, individuals can have a unique constellation of reactions to traumatic events, referred to as "complex traumatic stress". A traumatic experience may begin in early childhood and disrupt the development and formation of the self due to a lack of safety and stability. Equally essential to mention is that trauma and mental disorders can overlap.<sup>38</sup>

Very often trauma is characterized by the loss of a sense of security that is followed by the experience of (extreme) helplessness and disempowerment.<sup>39</sup> It is a metamorphosis of the psyche that affects a sense of the self, the devastation of one's core identity, and a shattering of core beliefs.<sup>40</sup> Danieli argued that exposure to trauma might cause a rupture in one's routine, demanding coping and adaptation. A shock or rupture can be caused by a (series of) specific event(s) but may also be persistent or chronic, especially in (prone-to-)conflict areas.<sup>41</sup> Traumatic events therefore do not necessarily need to be experienced directly,<sup>42</sup> and may unfold indirectly, e.g., via the media.<sup>43</sup> Trauma can have lifelong or long-term effects (e.g., anxiety, mental health issues).<sup>44</sup> Abundant evidence suggests that trauma-associated mental representations may last through a lifetime<sup>45</sup> and be transmitted to the next generation(s) in various ways.<sup>46</sup>

Most people who experience traumatic events do not commit future acts of violence. However, in some cases, exposure to traumatic events (such as abuse or political violence) can be a



risk factor for future violence.<sup>47</sup> Perpetrators of political violence such as terrorism can have histories of childhood abuse, with pervasive traumas and perceptions of (ingroup) injustice and humiliation.<sup>48</sup> Exposure to political violence may result in experiences of grief, fear, shock, anxiety, shame, guilt or self-blame, anger, hostility, rage and resentment, emotional numbness, difficulties in recollection, and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>49</sup> A personal trauma can be related to greater openness to illegal and violent activism.<sup>50</sup> Previous research has shown that “lone-wolf terrorists” (i.e., those who do not belong to terror networks nor controlled by any) were more likely than not traumatized or suffering from mental illness.<sup>51</sup> Thus a past individual trauma can also arguably be seen as a factor in radicalisation<sup>52</sup> and a push factor for joining radical groups, which in turn can provide support, understanding, and compassion for individuals dealing with trauma-induced emotions.<sup>53</sup> Trauma, therefore, is not only a potential factor in radicalisation per se, it can also be seen as a marker of vulnerability, or a possible source of motivation to adopt a radical ideology.<sup>54</sup>

## (ii) Collective Trauma

Collective trauma is a relational consequence of a traumatic event in which a social group is victimized *en masse*, for instance through killing, torture or persecution.<sup>55</sup> Hence, collective trauma is a psychological reaction to a traumatic event that can be experienced by a group of individuals<sup>56</sup> or that encompasses an entire society or nation. Some examples of such phenomena - which entail collective victimization and thus might lead to collective trauma - are pandemics, famines, natural disasters, mass shootings, terrorism, war, or atrocities. Alexander et al. argued, however, that events are not inherently traumatic as trauma is socially mediated attribution constructed as an event unfolds, before the event occurs or after the event is concluded.<sup>57</sup> Such collective traumatic experiences may arouse collective sentiments and enable the transformation of group/societal behaviour and culture.<sup>58</sup> Collective trauma is not a reflection of individual suffering or actual traumatic events; instead, it is based largely on a symbolic reconstruction and social imagination. Self-perceived collective harm is represented in the collective memory of the group<sup>59</sup> and becomes a shared knowledge that is usually collectively constructed through communicative social functions. In that sense, group narratives play an important role.

Narratives are stories that make sense of and connect (past) collective event(s) to contemporary circumstances. Such collective narratives mould past (experiences) into coherent stories with contemporary interpretations and aspirations. Collective narratives are expressed within public discourse and form part of shared group identity. As such, collective narratives are socially constructed in a fashion that coherently interrelate a sequence of historical and current events and shapes collective memory by relying on narrative elements (e.g., persons, actions, spatiality and temporality). Collective narratives can be (partially) factual (based on actual historical events) and/or mythical or combine the two: facts with myths. Collective narratives of trauma can be threefold: collective narratives of loss and despair,<sup>60</sup> collective narratives of victimhood,<sup>61</sup> and collective narratives of guilt and shame.<sup>62</sup> Collective traumatic experiences are therefore representations of historical losses of population, land, and culture<sup>63</sup> or oppressions; and are a shared emotional - conscious and unconscious - reaction that can lead to a positive or negative

shared group identity (framed around collective trauma). Collective trauma can occur through a single event, sustained period, or repeatedly. Some groups can only be victimized, while others can be both victims and victimizers.

Collective victimisation can affect all group members independent of their direct traumatic experience and may include (more or less temporarily and spatially distant) traumatic events. For this reason, collective trauma has enormous potential to cause a large-scale shift in the way people behave, reason, and feel (especially toward “the Other”), even if they did not experience the traumatic event personally. Individuals can define themselves as group members by searching for an inner quest for purpose/meaning and depersonalisation.<sup>64</sup> They can share and adopt, among other things, group narratives and emotions as their own, including self-perceived collective victimhood (i.e., perception and subjective state). These collective experiences encoded in collective memory and emphasised by collective narratives can be adopted/internalized by individual members of the group as the main reference frame for (objective, altered or imagined) traumatic experiences from the past.<sup>65</sup> Individual and collective narratives can overlap in various ways of narrative engagement and identity construction. Individuals can (partially) adopt or challenge collective narratives. Collective narratives are therefore part of emotional discourse related to identity, belonging and otherness.<sup>66</sup>

Collective emotions conveyed through group narratives can be positive or negative, and often include collective angst; a mistrust of “the Other”. Through collective narratives, intergroup relations can gradually transform from “us and them” to “us versus them”. Evocation of collective traumas and conspiracy theories are often used by elites and other individuals to strengthen collective angst.<sup>67</sup> However, individuals may also shape alternative beliefs on collective victimisation. Inclusive beliefs such as those based on similarities with experiences of outgroup victimisation enable solidarity/cohesion, a desire for reconciliation, and prosocial behaviour on behalf of the outgroup victims.<sup>68</sup>

Similar to other (actual or socially constructed) legacies of political violence, collective trauma can also be transmitted across generations and influence how collectives (and individuals) experience the present, perceive the future, and construct inter-group relations.

## **INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA**

Intergenerational transmission refers to the phenomenon that characteristics or behaviours are seen in both parents and their children. In the last few decades, criminologists have studied intergenerational continuity in individual antisocial behaviour within families, and a substantive body of knowledge has developed on conventional crime.<sup>69</sup> Research conducted within the cycle of violence theory<sup>70</sup> has clarified that antisocial and violent behaviour can transfer over multiple generations. Victim or perpetrator experiences may shape their behaviour later in life and that of the next generations.<sup>71</sup> Also, in the context of political violence, the existing literature, scattered across diverse disciplines and diverse post-violence contexts, demonstrates the existence of the intergenerational transmission of various and oftentimes confounded legacies



of political violence. Using the cycle of violence theory scholars investigated the pathways from political violence to interpersonal violence<sup>72</sup> or possible relationship with outbreaks of community violence and war. Existing studies show that in post-conflict contexts children are at risk of growing up with communal adversities and in polarized communities. Young generations can be prone to violence and anti-social behaviour, but also experience a variety of other problems, such as frustration, guilt, anger, an economic downfall, or social exclusion.<sup>73</sup> The existing research, therefore, reveals a range of intergenerational legacies of past political violence, transmitted by four main mechanisms within families and communities: biological (epigenetic),<sup>74</sup> psychological (attachment/trauma), familial (family composition and parenting) and societal (community relationships, narratives, representations). The intergenerational transmission of trauma (and other mental health problems) from parents who experienced episodes of political violence to their children and potentially grand-children have been studied quite extensively.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, collective trauma can cross generations and can leave “legac[ies] of chronic trauma and unresolved grief”.<sup>76</sup>

Historical trauma can be defined as the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma and its consequences. Historical trauma is a group’s transfer of burdens and effects of past traumatic experiences from one generation to the next.<sup>77</sup> Historical trauma is objective, altered, or imagined trauma that occurred in the (more or less distant) past and is shared by a group of people across generations. Past trauma can affect group members who do not have any direct traumatic experience, possibly leading them to experience trauma-related symptoms.<sup>78</sup> Such a legacy of collective traumatic events can persist over generations and encompass psychological and social reactions.<sup>79</sup> Research on political violence survivors (e.g., relating to the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the internment of Japanese-American during World War Two, and colonization of indigenous peoples) confirmed the reoccurrence of collective trauma among generations that did not directly experience victimization.<sup>80</sup>

Historical trauma functions as a narrative, emotional, and mental model that has personal and public representations in the present. Mohatt et al. argued that historical trauma can be best understood as a form of public narrative.<sup>81</sup> Public narrative representations of historical suffering operate through stories, socially endorsed memory, and internal connections between the past and the present-day experience. Emotional identifications with ancestral suffering can affect everyday life, identity, and health.<sup>82</sup> Almost any group can have a shared mental representation of a past traumatic event, defined as suffering losses and/or an experience of helplessness, shame and humiliation. These collective memories of traumatic events can become inseparable dimensions of one’s group identity, which may (or may not) be visible in everyday life. Hence, identity groups (e.g., political, ethnic, class, religious, race) can harness a traumatic event from the past and perennially mourn over it. Such historical trauma is also referred to as chosen trauma.<sup>83</sup> Among group members, chosen trauma can reactivate a feeling of entitlement in regaining what their ancestors lost centuries ago (i.e., entitlement ideology); it is a narcissistic reorganization of a group accompanied by hostile prejudice for the descendants of their ancestor’s, or through shared displacement, current enemy. An entitlement ideology can remain dormant for some time, but political leaders and malignant propaganda can inflame it.<sup>84</sup>

Historical trauma is transmitted across generations through various mechanisms (i.e., psychological, physiological, environmental and social) and can occur on multiple levels:<sup>85</sup> interpersonal (i.e., peer to peer interaction), within families (e.g., altered parenting, loss of relevant others or exposure to stressors), in a community (i.e., the impact of a disturbance of social networks, and safety and solidarity), and nationally (e.g., suppression of culture, a threat to the continuity of nation).<sup>86</sup> At these different levels, transmission occurs through “narratives, memories, moral imperatives, relational models, and embodied modes of being-in-the-world to one’s descendants ... (and) involves imparting shared traumatic experiences resulting from histories of racism, genocide, persecution, dispossession, colonialism, and other collective losses and suffering”.<sup>87</sup> Transmission begins in families, through what is being communicated as well as what is not (explicitly or directly communicated).<sup>88</sup> Family members are extremely important carriers of historical trauma; by way of their upbringing and through stories and silences, children learn about the groups’ past suffering.<sup>89</sup> Children can be persuaded that the harm occurred and internalize the victim identity. Trauma can disable a parent’s physical and/or psychological responsiveness to their children. Such children can grow up in a stressful environment (e.g., exposure to child abuse and neglect) and display chronic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which may lead to cycles of trauma in the next generation(s).<sup>90</sup>

Interactions with significant others (e.g., peers, extended family) can have a similar effect and strengthen identity formation and a sense of collective victimisation. Through the educational system, children become further aware of the past victimisation and/or bravery of ingroup members. In schools, educational programmes and textbooks can communicate various narratives which represent the ingroup’s past suffering.<sup>91</sup> The media (i.e., various channels of communication, e.g., newspapers, television, internet) can further reinforce the transmission of collective trauma. Politicians, prominent group members (e.g., religious leaders), and/or militarized groups leaders can (re-)evoke and/or enhance (more or less spatially and temporally distant) trauma to recruit or mobilize ingroup members, and/or to establish or preserve power.

Besides which, various cultural products such as art, commemorations and memorial days, holidays, and museums related to the violent past can integrate and further historical trauma. Social movements and organisations - through rituals and language practices that enable solidarity based on a shared traumatic event - can further reinforce intergenerational transmission. Communities, especially when an ingroup is the majority, can also further strengthen historical trauma beliefs through youth-elder interaction. In all spheres, explicit and implicit messages can shape the understanding of historical ingroups’ collective victimisation.

An enormous body of knowledge has been gathered on intergenerational transmission of trauma in families and communities, addressing traumatic experiences among indigenous communities in Australia and Canada, war (grand-)children in Germany, and among the Jewish diaspora, to name a few.<sup>92</sup> Several illustrative examples can be made. Survivors of the Holodomor - a mass starvation of millions of Ukrainians from 1932 to 1933 - passed collective trauma to the third generation who has experienced various emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress, anger) and adverse behaviours (e.g., risky health behaviours, social hostility). The third generation has never



experienced the same horrors as their ancestors, but has lived in “survivor mode”.<sup>93</sup> Descendants of displaced Palestinians during the Nakba of 1948 has experienced poor health, lower socioeconomic status, and higher stress levels when compared to families who were not displaced.<sup>94</sup> The experience of human, land, and culture loss has remained present among Indigenous Americans in various ways including, high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, and alcoholism.<sup>95</sup> Offspring of Canadian Indigenous peoples who had been in residential schools and were removed from their community/family have been more exposed to sexual violence, trauma, involvement in child welfare, illicit substance abuse, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.<sup>96</sup> The experience of slavery among African-Americans combined with current racial discrimination has been linked to uncontrollable hyperarousal, feelings of alienation, a perception of fear and threat from others and negative future prospects.<sup>97</sup> Colonial political violence,<sup>98</sup> such as the system of child removal in Australia, is related to emotional and psychological wounding, and socio-pathological outcomes in subsequent generations such as drug or alcohol abuse, an inability to constructively deal with the future, social and emotional marginalization, and acts of domestic or sexual violence. Increased substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) and physical violence (domestic violence) can be a result of a slow and silent change in social norms which lead to a decline in traditional relations within affected families.<sup>99</sup> The intergenerational effects of the Holocaust have been studied very extensively in the field of trauma studies and over the longest period of time.<sup>100</sup> Studies reported the presence of trauma in the third generation of Holocaust survivors<sup>101</sup> and discussed various ways of how trauma can skip a generation(s).<sup>102</sup> Similar findings were confirmed among Armenian genocide descendants.<sup>103</sup> Generations who were not directly affected by the war and/or political violence reported numerous issues such as the feeling of emptiness, consequences from a silencing of the past, and questions related to an untold or hidden past. Because of (un)conscious trauma, feelings of fear, guilt, and responsibility, and/or a need for reconciliation emerges in a subsequent generation.

Although research on intergenerational consequences of collective traumatic events is rich, there is a complete lack of cross-disciplinary exchange with the fields of radicalisation studies and violent extremism studies; even though radicalisation risk factors, on a collective and individual level, clearly overlap with legacies of past collective traumas as identified in the scholarship. Large-scale shocks from the (distant) past have the potential to play a role in the radicalisation of collectives and/or individuals in the present (and the future), and can therefore foster a cycle of violence (i.e., cyclical victimisation and revenge).

## **HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND (GROUP) RADICALIZATION**

As we demonstrated above, collective victimisation (i.e., an objective state and process) has been considered a major source of collective trauma and can arguably lead to further conflict and political violence.<sup>104</sup> And since collective trauma transfers across generations, it leaves the potential for cycles of violence to continue turning.

Collective trauma is driven by emotions of grief, fear, anger and self-pity. Those who have previously been victimised can become perpetrators, for example, by wanting to revenge<sup>105</sup>

or by using violence as “self-defence” against the (objective or imagined) threat of future victimisation.<sup>106</sup> The radicalisation of the ingroup depends on how they understand the (objective or imagined) collective victimisation of the (distant) past, to what extent past victimisation is related to the ingroups’ identity, and whether (or not) the outgroup is homogenously perceived as hostile and labelled as a threat/enemy (i.e., delegitimized/devaluated/dehumanised).<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the framing and content of the historical trauma narrative matters. Fear of, and humiliation by “Others” who are identified as the (past) enemy and a current threat can trigger collective, and in turn individual, radicalisation.<sup>108</sup>

An ingroup’s victimisation and resulting collective trauma can have a powerful impact on emotions and beliefs regarding the outgroup by giving rise to destructive attitudes, affective responses, and behavioural tendencies. A direct, as much as indirect or transmitted, experience of collective victimisation can induce emotional affective responses such as anger, distress, and humiliation. Humiliation can lead to support for violence and revenge and reduce support for compromises and peace/reconciliation.<sup>109</sup> Collective victimisation and collective victimhood narratives can elicit a sense of anger that is related to political intolerance, moral outrage, and derogation of an outgroup. In general, historically victimized groups - when reminded of an ingroup’s victimization - are less likely to address responsibility for the ingroup’s political violence and show less empathy for the outgroup’s suffering.<sup>110</sup> In this way, a victim beliefs can lead to radicalisation and cycles of violence, especially when moral justifications and the legitimization of harm against the outgroup are included in the discourses.<sup>111</sup> By (re-)shaping interpretations of historical events, such collective narratives of past grievances can contribute to radicalisation and the mobilisation of groups to participate in political violence.<sup>112</sup> Emerging communication technology plays an increasingly important role in radicalisation and mobilisation. As briefly touched upon above, historical trauma can also be transmitted and reinforced via social structures and symbols.<sup>113</sup>

Therefore, collective/historical trauma can be related to radicalisation through the endorsement of conflict-supporting narratives<sup>114</sup> that justify involvement in the conflict, delineate threats to the ingroup, delegitimize/devalue/dehumanize<sup>115</sup> the outgroup, glorify the image of the ingroup, present the ingroup as the sole victim, to encourage the mobilization of [one’s] patriotism and emphasize the importance of maintaining unity in the face of an external threat.<sup>116</sup> In the call for preemptive violence against the outgroup, an emphasis on past collective trauma and victimhood can promote radicalisation and provide justifications of future violence; such as references to the (distant) past suffering and grievances inflicted by the outgroup.<sup>117</sup> Constructions and perceptions of the outgroup as a former (objective, altered or imagined) culprit and victimizer, as well as the current (existential) threat, can be an important ingredient in (group) radicalisation processes.<sup>118</sup>

Historical trauma is often inseparable from collective identity and collective memory. Collective identity, culture, and symbols create or strengthen repositories for shared feelings and positive self-representation that provide collective strengths and cohesion. Identities (e.g., political, ethnic, religious, class, racial, gender) however, are fluid and flexible. They are open for



instrumentalization and radicalisation through the amplification of an ingroup's specific identity markers via historical trauma narratives. Identity markers – collective narratives, collective emotions, and mental representations – can mutually reinforce each other by incorporating conflict-supporting rhetoric.<sup>119</sup> The interplay of identity markers provides a fertile ground for radicalisation that can potentially lead to political violence. They can also have various social functions such as strengthening ingroup identities, solidarity/cohesiveness, and mobilization. Especially in times of crises (such as war, natural disasters, economic or political crises, social upheavals), such identity markers related to past (even ancient) victimization can be represented as direct experiences and framed as a unique suffering. The role of leaders and the leader-follower interactions are also important elements of the whole process. The (re-)activation of historical trauma in a generation that does not have an actual memory of the traumatic event can be used by leaders to fuel entitlement ideologies for mobilization and radicalisation.<sup>120</sup> Thus, leaders can “utilize” historical trauma for group radicalisation and to provide inspiration and/or operational direction.<sup>121</sup> Extreme situations can enable suppressed narratives to become dominant, which can further strengthen group radicalisation. It is precisely the lack of a direct experience with collective violence, as paradoxical as it may seem, that arguably increases the risk of new generations to be radicalized. When identity markers emphasize historical trauma, they can feed group radicalisation and lead to possible cycle(s) of violence.

Therefore, historical trauma is a socially mediated attribution that may arouse collective sentiments and induce the transformation of group/societal behaviour and culture. Any historical trauma is publicly displayed through collective narratives, that affect collective emotions and form collective mental models which relate own group's (mythological or not) suffering from (distant) past to the present. Historical trauma narratives, especially myths, can be used to convert history into nature and emphasize the uniqueness of an ingroup's particular historical moment of collective victimhood; this can in turn trigger or contribute to processes of radicalisation among descendants. Fear for the ingroup's existence can enable conscious and unconscious connections between mental representations of collective trauma from the (distant) past, and perception of an outgroup as a contemporary threat, none of which has to be based in reality or facts. Therefore, collective representations of historical traumas can be yet another ingredient in a poisonous cocktail of risk factors with the potential to further radicalisation, particularly on a group level.

## **HISTORICAL TRAUMA AS (GROUP) RADICALISATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: POTENTIAL (UN)LEASHED**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an exemplary case of how collective traumas can move across generations and play a role in radicalising the coming generations.<sup>122</sup> A prominent example of how invocations of (distant) historical trauma can strengthen group radicalization, which can eventually lead to mass-scale political violence, is the use of the Serbian collective victimization in the 1389 Kosovo Battle as one of the main markers of Serbian identity prior to the 1990's Yugoslav wars. The former president of Yugoslavia and later Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, along with his associates used historical trauma in public narratives to evoke emotions and mental representations of loss and humiliation by “the Other”. In the campaign to awaken Serbian

nationalism, a sense of victimization was used through, among other things, the symbolic reincarnation of the martyr Prince Lazar who was killed by the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo. By carrying his remains through Yugoslavia, Serbs were made to grieve his defeat by acting in the present, which would reverse the ancient (though continuing) helplessness, humiliation, and shame. Narratives, rituals, and the media justified their right to revenge against the ancient enemy, the Ottomans, who were mentally represented in the contemporary group, Muslims (today's Bosniaks).<sup>123</sup> Renaud de La Brosse's found that from July 1988 to March 1991, the media published more than 4,000 articles awakening historical traumas, and television broadcasts of the anniversary were the ultimate trigger for large-scale atrocities.<sup>124</sup> The collective trauma of the past became an event in the present, a contemporary ethnic group became ancient enemies – the “Other” – objects of dehumanization. This, among other historical traumas, radicalised the group and contributed to the subsequent mass violence.

The potential of historical traumas to feed radicalization in the Balkans, however, is not limited to history. Currently, a young generation which has not directly experienced the most recent Balkan wars, has reached adulthood. Our fieldwork experience with families and communities in Bosnia indicates that historical traumas remain omnipresent, complex, multi-faceted, and mutually opposing. Each ethnic group, i.e., Bosniaks, (Bosnian) Serbs, and (Bosnian) Croats, has its own trauma from the (more or less distant) past which is being emphasised in public collective narratives, in stories that are told to children by their parents, represented in public symbols, commemorated in annual ceremonies and group-exclusive, competitive memorials, and, to some extent, integrated in school curricula.<sup>125</sup> The 1992-1995 war left visible and invisible scars in Bosnian society. Facing the deep unhealed wounds of the (distant) past, and fresh wounds from recent traumatic, but not actually experienced, past, new generations have grown up in families and environments that have made them more or less vulnerable or resilient to the potential effects of historical trauma. As a post-war generation respondent metaphorically argued it is all about “what your (grand)parents have left for you, whether it is a ‘crumb’ or a ‘snack’ (...) whom they ‘poisoned’ (with historical trauma)”.<sup>126</sup>

Each group has tendency to present its own victimhood as superior, exclusive, unique, and caused by “the Other”. Such collective narratives of historical traumas - of a group's extreme suffering in the (distant) past at the hands of another group(s) - are made central to each group's identity, and deeply entrenched in the social fabric of political and social life, making intergroup relations fragile. As one child born after the 1992-1995 war noted “[p]olitics is producing a lot of negative tensions, for my generation and generations to come”.<sup>127</sup> Instead of trying to understand and reconcile the complex landscape of past inter-group victimization and perpetratorship, the historical trauma narratives are adversarial, one-sided, and exclusionary. Youth who did not experience the violence are, however, confronted with representations of the intermingled - distant or recent - past violence, suffering and blame, on an almost daily basis; in families, in the news, walking down the streets in towns and villages, and in schools. Ethnonationalism, as another respondent noted, “is being nurtured both in families and educational institutions” by younger Bosnians subordinating to their ethnic group, and depriving this demographic of a relationship with other ethnicities.<sup>128</sup> Such largely selective and competitive histories and their



representations offer almost no space for reflection or critical engagement. In addition, inter-ethnic encounters in current-day Bosnia are largely limited, compared to pre-1990's.<sup>129</sup> This inter-ethnic isolation and ethnically largely homogenous environment is another by-product of the 1992-1995 war, as noted by a post-war generation respondent:

“the problem is that one (ethnic) majority lives in one place, and they have not been in contact with other people (other ethnic groups)... they are encapsulated within (one ethnic group), therefore there is an issue with those places (where majority members of other ethnic groups live)”.<sup>130</sup>

The social and political ecosystem, especially leaders and media, exploit narratives, emotions, and mental representations of past violence and historical enemies.- In combination with a relative lack of inter-ethnic encounters and inter-ethnic communication about the historical traumas, this creates a conspiracy of silence<sup>131</sup> in which the post-war generations have been growing up. This conspiracy of silence can further contribute to (re)producing the fear of “the unknown”, and fuel xenophobic perceptions about the “Other” among post-war generations. For example, when inter-group experiences of war are not fully communicated (e.g., in families, communities or in official/public representations of the past) “voids” are created, which can be filled, among other things, by extremist narratives based in historical traumas, and advocated for by certain leaders and in the media.<sup>132</sup> As Lijtmaer stresses: “[w]hat haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others”.<sup>133</sup>

In such a social and political landscape, individuals can be more prone to adopt and normalize extreme beliefs, and endorse/justify violence and extreme actions, in particular if they strongly identify with their “own” ethnic group.<sup>134</sup> Collective narratives of victimhood, particularly if they are omnipresent and frequently repeated, can therefore evoke in youngsters various unpleasant emotions such as anger, humiliation, distrust of “the Other”, a sense of grievance, injustice, alienation or powerlessness.<sup>135</sup> As radicalisation literature has aptly demonstrated, these are breeding grounds for potential radicalisation.

A multiplicity of mechanisms, which are mutually reinforcing, can lead to youth unquestioningly adopting collective trauma narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in turn their potential further radicalisation. For example, growing up in families that exclusively adopt and emphasise historical trauma narratives and/or live in and interact within an ecosystem (e.g., school, peers, work), where the ingroup is in an absolute majority, can structure a youth's understanding of collective identity, memory, and trauma. In turn, youngsters can inherit vulnerability markers for radicalisation. As a respondent that belongs to a new generation born after the war (1992-1995) emphasized:

“we [youth] are not large-minded, (...) have narrow views (...) do not have respect toward the opinions of others (other ethnic groups) (...) we [youth] are still co-cooned (embedded or closed within one ethnic group), we [youth] go from one extreme to another (...) we are thought to be quiet, not to question, we are indoctrinated that only my truth is right (...)”.<sup>136</sup>

Ethno-national political leaders create, sustain, and normalize the historical trauma discourse (based on emotions e.g., grievance, love for one's identity/group, fear of the outgroup) that further enhances an atmosphere of inter-group competition, isolation, and distrust. Moreover, specific public events (e.g., the anniversary of an atrocity) or (real or imagined) extraordinary situations (e.g., war, societal upheaval) can place the responsibility for an ingroups past suffering on a specific outgroup, and consequently also feed narratives about an existential threat to the ingroup.

If the current public and private discourse is radicalised by frequent references to the (distant) past and one's own group's exclusive suffering at the hands of "the Other", young individuals will grow up in an environment where extreme views are more or less normalized. The violent past is selectively instrumentalized to serve present day needs and future aspirations, almost as if the past, present, and future have merged in one timeless bubble. Historical trauma creates and shapes the current intergroup distrust, makes the past ingroup grievances salient in the present day, and further isolates ingroups from members of outgroups. Such an environment can be a breeding ground for youth radicalisation.

As another young respondent aptly summed up:

"the individuals who do not have any experience or do not remember the war (post-war generation) are driven and triggered by the issues of (the past) war to a greater extent than the war generation (...) the war generation usually says things like 'never to be repeated' (the war), while we (post-war generation) act as though the war is still going on."<sup>137</sup>



## CONCLUSION

By integrating knowledge from atrocity criminology, intergenerational criminology, trauma, and research on radicalisation, this paper aims to spark discussions among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers for further research and strategies to prevent and/or counter radicalisation and eventual political violence. It explored how historical trauma can play a role in the radicalisation of future generations. It therefore introduced intergenerational perspectives, which have only relatively recently started to emerge in radicalisation studies.<sup>138</sup> Our paper is not intended to offer solutions or present conclusive evidence or claims, but rather to push the current thinking on the topic of radicalisation and to open new doors for further exploration and discussions.

Given the scarcity of existing (theoretical and empirical) research on the topic, however, the paper has inevitable limitations. First, there is a lack of empirical insights on the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma that potentially radicalises subsequent generations. As a consequence of the scarce knowledge on trauma, radicalisation, and intergenerational transmission, our synthesis is largely theoretical, necessarily selective, and speculative. Future research should aim to systematically integrate current theoretical knowledge and attempt to generate empirical evidence and knowledge on this matter. Second, it is important to realize that historical trauma is not the only (meta-)causal explanation of radicalisation. Although a focus on historical traumas can enhance a better understanding of vulnerability and motivations that can lead to radicalisation, an exploration of many other phenomena and factors on an individual, group, or societal level, and their interactions, is necessary to further our understanding of youth radicalisation.

Although this paper does not offer conclusive findings, several insights for policy makers are offered. Narratives and symbolic representations of collective past suffering, particularly if exclusionary, rigid and one-sided, can distort mental representations of the past and the present, and elicit unpleasant emotions that can eventually be a risk for radicalisation. Any policy regarding the prevention and countering of youth radicalisation has to take a holistic and multilayered approach and integrate a focus on the intergenerational effects of narratives, emotions, and symbolic and mental representations of the collective past.

Any collective narrative about the past that is selective, rigid, based on labelling an outgroup as a perpetrator, in support of conflict, and endorses myths, can nurture an environment conducive to youth radicalisation. Prevention and counter radicalisation policies can therefore also endorse and include creative means aimed at promoting critical reflections of the past by promoting inclusive narratives about past suffering, identity, and outgroups. Alternative and more nuanced narratives and symbolic representations of the past need to attract youth and (re-)calibrate their internal reflection and understanding of the historical trauma. Triggering pleasant emotions (e.g., by telling jokes) can facilitate a prevention/countering strategy.<sup>139</sup> For example, emerging communication technology can be utilized to deliver carefully designed symbols/messages (e.g., memes) or narratives that elicit a nuanced understanding of an

ingroup's past suffering, and cater to potentially unpleasant emotions. In other words, to be effective, counter-narratives and symbols need to evoke (pleasant) emotions related to identity, belonging, and otherness. Intergroup emotional sensibility has to be addressed in any countering/preventing radicalisation action. While leaders and the presence of mythologized historical trauma in public spaces (e.g., institutions, memorials, street names) can radicalise and lead to political violence, more attention should be directed to family and peer influence. Collective trauma is attached to collective identity and collective memory; it is, however, nurtured in the family and peer interactions. Thus, enhancing intergroup solidarity e.g., through intergroup family exchanges or mediation, economy, sport, education, or any other informal societal practice e.g., joint celebrations or mourning of certain historical events, can further promote cognitive reflections on each group's history, openness to different views, and understanding of "the Other", which in turn can alter potential unpleasant emotions generated by the historical trauma. To further buffer emotional intergenerational effects of historical trauma, present-day collective identity should be disentangled from the past. Measures taken by relevant actors need to address grievances and emotions regarding an ingroup's past suffering (e.g., fear that the historical trauma will be repeated), and promote a future-oriented outlook based on a reflective, open, interactive, and, as much as possible, detached view of the (traumatic) past.

A socially constructed blueprint for the creation of alternative and counternarratives for intergenerational radicalisation based on collective trauma lies in understanding and giving meaning to historical events and facts: not only what they mean intrinsically, but also how they affect our emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and everyday life. The roots of political violence should not (only) be traced to pathology or ideology, but in an authentic inability to think (i.e., critically about certain things) that can be found among intelligent people as well.<sup>140</sup> As Hannah Arendt noted, there is "the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil" especially in times of crisis.<sup>141</sup> In today's world of flux, pandemonium, evolving agencies, and rapid social change, countering and preventing political violence needs to be based on the formation or transformation of a failed conscience, and development of the ability or willingness to (critically) think, reflect, and feel.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Radicalism and radicalisation have different genealogies. First is political movement within liberal or egalitarian democratic tradition, while the second has its roots in supremacist authoritarian tradition. Schmid, A.P. (2014). *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, 1-29.
- 2 E.g., della Porta D. and Tarrow, S. (1986). Unwanted Children: Political Violence and the Cycle of Protest in Italy, 1966-1973. *European Journal of Political Research*, 14, 607-632.
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- 4 Extremism is always a relational concept and opposite from normative beliefs and/or behaviour. Violent extremism refers to the acts of violence that are associated with or have justification by an extremist religious, social or political ideology. It is a broad concept that can refer to any kind of violence, including terrorism and atrocity crimes, that are perceived and/or constructed as extreme.
- 5 Deradicalization and disengagement are opposite concepts from radicalisation. First refers to a cognitive change that results in rejection of violent extremist ideology and embracement of non-violence. Second is a behavioural change that reduces the risk for involvement and engagement in violent extremist action. While counter-radicalisation refers to policies and programmes that address conditions and deter violent extremism. See e.g., Horgan, J. (2009). Deradicalization or disengagement? A process in need of clarity and a counterterrorism initiative in need of evaluation. *International Journal of Social Psychology*, 24(2), 291-298; Bjørge, T. and Horgan, J. (2009). *Leaving terrorism behind: Individual and collective disengagement*. Routledge; Feddes, A. R., Mann, L., and Doosje, B. (2013). *Scientific Approach to Formulate Indicators and Responses to Radicalisation*. Empirical study. SAFIRE; Schmid A.P., (2013). *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. ICCT Research Paper.
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- 61 Narratives of loss and despair support sense of victimhood which becomes a core collective reference point. By portraying own group as a victim and delegitimizing/devaluating/dehumanising outgroup through „perpetrator“ labels, collective victimhood can be an engine for revenge and compensation for ingroups' suffering and loss, especially when past collective victimhood is used to explain and justify violence. Competitive victimhood only aggravates any chance for prevention, deescalation, or transformation of political violence, especially in protracted conflicts.
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thoughts, emotions and actions. These narratives (i.e., “collective narratives of guilt and shame”) frequently intersect with the “narratives of loss and despair” or exclude each other. Depending on the context, understanding of own history and own trauma, sense of guilt and shame may be ignored and own loss and despair prioritized. Reimann, C. and König, U. (2018). *Closing a gap in conflict transformation: Understanding collective and transgenerational trauma*.

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