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How Young People Make Sense of a Difficult Past

19. 11. 2026

Številka: 30/2026

Avtorica:

- Tamara Banjeglav



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More than three decades after the end of the 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence (locally known as the "Homeland War"), the conflict remains highly visible and omnipresent in Croatian public narratives and discourses of the past: commemorations, media representations, and public discussions continue to shape collective memory. However, a growing part of the population born after the war has no direct memory of the events themselves. This raises an important question: how is the past that was not experienced firsthand passed on, mediated, and made meaningful (or not) to younger generations? This article examines how memory of this difficult recent past is transmitted to younger generations as well as how they interpret and incorporate these memories and narratives into their own understandings of the past.

Existing approaches within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies often address the question of memory transmission through concepts such as collective and cultural memory, emphasizing the ways in which societies preserve and circulate shared understandings of the past. Memory studies scholars, such Ann Rigney (https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244105051158) , argue that shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication and are continually reworked through narrative circulation and remediation rather than preserved in fixed form. Rigney and Erll (https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110217384) further point out that cultural memory is constituted exactly through processes of mediation involving education, media, literature, and other cultural forms that shape and reproduce understandings of historical events. These perspectives are important in highlighting how memory travels across social and cultural domains.

Astrid Erll (https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2022.7) also discusses implicit collective memory which she defines as "processes of individual memory that subjects are not conscious of" and asks "how is implicit collective memory transmitted from

generation to generation when it is never explicitly addressed." Examples are visual icons, narrative patterns, stereotypes, metaphors, values and norms passed on from generation to generation. As Erll argues, a striking example of the hidden power of implicit collective memory lies in national narratives, which operate as its prime vehicle.

Another memory studies scholar, Marianne Hirsch (https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019) , theorized intergenerational transmission of memory through the concept of "postmemory," which describes the relationship that younger generations establish with traumatic events they have not directly experienced but encountered through stories, images, silences, and other forms of mediation. This concept is particularly useful for understanding how historical violence continues to shape future generations long after the events themselves have happened. While Hirsch emphasizes intimate transmission of traumatic experiences through familial narratives and affective relationships, her concept of affiliative postmemory extends this framework beyond family ties, highlighting the role of photographs in mediating relationships to the past.

Building on this understanding, I examine how younger generations encounter and interpret the war across multiple sites of memory, including formal education, media, literature, and commemorative practices. I argue that these encounters do not produce a singular or coherent inherited memory but expose younger generations to fragmented and sometimes contradictory narratives that require active interpretation and meaning-making. Understandings of the war are not only transmitted intact across generations, but they also happen through encounters with different representations of the past, shaped by silences, contradictions, reinterpretations, and temporal distance.

Learning about difficult past in postwar Croatia

To understand how this memory is transmitted in practice, I surveyed fifty-six history students and conducted two focus groups with history and sociology students at the University of Zagreb between 2024 and 2025. The research explored how much these students actually knew about the Croatian War of Independence, their impressions of mandatory school trips to Vukovar, and where they sourced their information. The data reveals a clear pattern: young people draw their knowledge predominantly from persons who directly participated in the war, parents and family members, and the media. Heavy reliance on intimate networks highlights the profound role that personal experiences and inherited emotions play in shaping their understanding of Croatia's recent past.

According to additional research through focus group discussions, participants believed that they did not learn much about the war and the recent past in school. As one respondent said: "The reason why we know so little about the Homeland War is because this is systemic, we are not taught this topic. We have maybe two hours, usually in elementary and high school, during which we discuss the Homeland War. This topic is so politicized that teachers either do not want to teach it or simply give us some basic overview." Another participant mentioned how badly he had felt not knowing enough about the subject: "When we started college, I remember feeling really bad, like a fool, for not knowing anything about the Homeland War. But with time, I realized this was systemic and that no one really knew anything and that it wasn't our fault that we knew more about kings Tomislav, Zvonimir and Petar-Krešimir. We have no idea about events that happened thirty years ago. We know about some battles, but this has never made a coherent story I could believe in. Now, at the university, there is no specific course on the Homeland War. There was a course on socialist transition, i.e. post-socialist transition, but it is not offered anymore."

Research participants also believed that the topic was deliberately avoided in school classes with the explanation that the issue was still unresolved, i.e. that the conflict was not completely resolved as there were still opposing sides fighting about what had happened and when it had happened, and that, for this reason, there was no need to talk about it.

Interestingly, respondents considered elementary and high school education as both a very limited source of learning and the primary source of information about the war. This ambivalence could be because students' only institutionalized source of knowledge about the war comes from formal education, while they believed that education on this topic was insufficient.

Research participants also expressed their belief that most of what they knew came from their own readings, their own interest in the topic, and from talking to those who directly participated in the conflict. One respondent obtained most information from her father, who fought in the war. Although she found his information to be subjective, she believed that some things she had heard from him could not be found in textbooks or could not be explicitly discussed in the media.

Another research participant talked about his confusion with what he had learned about the war from different sources: "I am from Slavonija, and there was no conscientious objection there, there was no running away from the war, everybody went to war, so it is all biased. It's OK that it is biased, but everyone will tell you a different story. At the end of the day, what do I know about the Homeland War? I know a million stories, but none of them aligns with what I have read in history textbooks. And that documentary, *The Death of Yugoslavia*. When I was watching it, I was thinking what is this? Is this what really happened, or what is written in textbooks, or what my family told me?"

Thus, rather than receiving a coherent account of the war in a single context, research participants encountered fragmented narratives in diverse settings: family conversations, school curricula, and public representations.

These examples show that engagement with events from the 1991–1995 war is shaped by fragmentation and that the problem is not in the absence of information, but rather in the absence of narrative coherence. While young people do

learn institutional narratives in schools, these narratives remain shallow, providing only basic information, while stories told by family members, direct participants in the war, and the media fill the gaps.

The official memory of the 1991–1995 war in Croatia can be understood as strong and fixed within public discourse and developed through commemorative practices, political discourse, and national symbolism. However, the existence of such a strong narrative does not guarantee its automatic integration into individual understanding. Instead, research participants encountered this official narrative alongside other, less stable forms of knowledge.

In the research on young people's understanding of the past in another post-conflict context, Northern Ireland, Alan W. McCully (https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197912440854) also argued that young people learn about recent history from a wide variety of sources, that there is a massive variation in the levels of knowledge that they have about the past, and that they are particularly interested in a greater knowledge and understanding of the recent past. They recognize the difference between history taught in school and historical narratives they can hear in their local communities, but they do not necessarily rate one better than the other one. Rather, they become aware of the existence of different narratives. They also try to develop their own understandings by combining elements of different sources, although they have great difficulties doing this.

As Keith C. Barton and Allan W. McCully (https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000266070) point out, such understanding of history is shaped by the particular educational context in Northern Ireland, where history teaching is enquiry-based and students are taught alternative perspectives of the past and multiperspectivity in schools. Schools explicitly teach that there is no single narrative of the past and that the past can be understood from different perspectives, while students are encouraged to examine competing interpretations, conflicting evidence, and alternative narratives. In Croatia, on the other hand, history teaching mostly relies on a dominant hegemonic narrative, while multiple perspectives appear only sporadically.

Although the educational contexts differ considerably, research from both Northern Ireland and Croatia suggests that young people are not passive recipients of historical narratives and memories of the past, but active interpreters who construct understandings of the past from multiple sources. The difference is in the memory environment in which this interpretation takes place. In Northern Ireland, schools acknowledge and encourage multiple narratives and interpretations of the past. While students are encouraged to critically engage with these different perspectives, McCully's research (https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197912440854) has shown that, in this post-conflict context, it remains difficult for them to move beyond the dominant narrative of their own community. Thus, even in an educational system that explicitly promotes multiperspectivity, students do not simply adopt historical narratives taught in school. As Barton and McCully's research (https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000266070) suggests, they selectively use what they learn in school to reinforce the historical narratives they have already started to develop. In Croatia, by contrast, formal education largely promotes a dominant national narrative. As a result, the meaning of the past must be actively negotiated there as well, but in a memory environment where alternative narratives are less explicitly acknowledged within formal education.

To conclude, the article argues that research participants' dealing with the war is shaped by a set of interrelated processes, including indirect transmission, avoidance, fragmentation, and delayed engagement with the past. Although they encounter the war through forms of intergenerational transmission that resonate with Hirsch's concept of postmemory, their accounts suggest a more complex process than a straightforward transmission of memories through family narratives. Instead, their relationships to the past develop gradually and through different sources of knowledge. Participants described the deliberate omission of war in formal education, where the topic was considered too sensitive to address. Consequently, some did not start thoroughly investigating this period until they reached university. In the absence of formal education, their understanding of the past was instead shaped through informal sources, such as family discussions and the media.

The findings resonate with Rigney's and Erll's understanding of memory as a mediated process that is continually reproduced and reworked through different forms of communication. Moreover, while Hirsch's concept of postmemory, particularly affiliative postmemory, helps explain how relationships to past violence can develop beyond familial ties and in the absence of direct experience, these findings suggest that such relationships develop through encounters with the war across multiple sites, including formal education, conversations with direct participants, and media consumption.

These findings show that memory, despite a widely circulated and fixed national narrative, is not transmitted as a stable body of knowledge and does not necessarily produce a coherent or shared understanding of the past. Rather, it develops gradually through fragmented and discontinuous processes in which recipients must actively interpret and negotiate available historical knowledge. Although limited in their scope, the findings of my research suggest that the past can remain highly visible in public discourse while being poorly integrated into individuals' own historical understanding. In this sense, the study emphasizes that intergenerational relationships to the past are shaped not only by what is transmitted, but also by the conditions under which historical knowledge becomes available and meaningful to younger generations.

* This article was written within the project RESLOVI, grant agreement no. 101130805, which received Horizon Europe funding. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the European Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.

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