

MISSING PERSONS AND THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF SEARCH AND IDENTIFICATION

People go missing all over the world, but the reasons for disappearances are enormously diverse. Some people are intentionally disappeared by the state: totalitarian and military governments as well as various paramilitary and criminal organisations have used enforced disappearances as a tactic to control a population and create submissive citizens or subjects through fear and insecurity. Both civilians and soldiers disappear invariably in the chaotic circumstances of war and armed conflicts. Some people disappear during natural catastrophes or fatal accidents; some disappear of their own free will. ‘Enforced disappearance’ as a term is used to refer to the tactic of intentionally making people disappear by the state or by those connected with the state, while simultaneously withholding knowledge of the whereabouts and destiny of the disappeared individual from their family. ‘Missing person’, on the other hand, refers to anyone whose protracted absence is unaccounted for, in situations that raise concerns among those left behind. This unease among those left behind is the crucial point for my understanding of a missing or disappeared person in this paper: it is the search, in whatever form, that creates the missing as a category (cf. Parr et al. 2016)

Whatever the reason for a disappearance, it disturbs the everyday flow of life in families and communities, and, in many places, it creates anomalies for modern state bureaucracies. Socially and culturally, disappearances that become presumed deaths create a liminal space between life and death (Huttunen 2016), and

that situation pushes others towards a search action aimed at closing the liminal space (Parr et al. 2016). In other words, unaccounted-for absences give rise to search practices, but the circumstances of search radically differ in various places and varied contexts of a disappearance. One way to approach these differences is to analyse the infrastructures of search in each site.

In this paper, I understand infrastructures as both technological and institutional structures enabling certain functions (Korpela 2016), and as ‘technologically mediated, dynamic forms that continuously produce and transform socio-technical relations’ (Harvey et al. 2017: 5). Moreover, ‘[...] infrastructures are extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations’ (ibid.).

Using the phrase ‘infrastructures of search’, I refer to the institutional structures and practices that allow families to report their family member missing with an assumption that the missing will be searched for, as well as referring to the structures and practices that aim to find missing persons. When a person goes missing in democracies in the Global North, the police are usually the institution with whom to report a missing person, thereby initiating search processes (Parr et al. 2016; Shalev Greene and Alys 2017). In armed conflicts, the functioning of such institutions often breaks down and other actors, such as established international organisations with other institutional and infrastructural arrangements, enter the scene. Similarly, when people move across state

borders along so called irregular routes, nation state-based infrastructural practices become problematic. Moreover, because a significant number of missing and disappeared persons are dead, infrastructures for identifying dead bodies are also crucially important.

In this paper, I juxtapose the missing from the Bosnian War (1992–1995) with migrants disappearing in the Mediterranean in the present. Moreover, I juxtapose the strikingly differing success rates in identifying the disappeared-turned-out-to-be-dead Bosnian victims and unidentified dead migrants encountered on Mediterranean shores.

Specifically, I am interested in the entanglement of the local with the global, and the spatial reach of search infrastructures (e.g., Harvey et al. 2017: 5). Moreover, I consider the significance of the material affordances (Ingold 2000, 2018) of some infrastructural forms—especially DNA—as key tools for identification. Herein, I offer some observations regarding how the entanglements of local and transnational investments and the material affordances of techniques allow some of the disappeared to be found and identified, while others remain more ‘disappearable’ (Laakkonen 2022).

BOSNIA–HERZEGOVINA

The armed conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, was characterised by projects of ethnic engineering and concomitant genocidal violence against civilians. Over 30 000 persons were reported missing by their families, with most of the Bosnian missing eventually identified as dead, brutally executed, and buried in mass graves. Now, 28 years after reaching the peace agreement, almost 80% of those reported missing have been found, identified, and returned to their families for burial. This

represents an unprecedented identification rate—such numbers are exceedingly rare among those forcibly disappeared or anywhere.

There are several factors that explain the high success rate of identifications in Bosnia, many of them connected to infrastructures. First, the infrastructures for reporting somebody missing existed from the beginning of the conflict, despite the breakdown of Yugoslavian state institutions: large international organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), operated in the area throughout the conflict (e.g., Jugo and Škulj 2015). These organisations have well-established procedures and a readily available infrastructures for reporting a family member missing during armed conflicts. The ICRC, in particular, has a long history of recreating connections between family members who have lost contact during the chaotic circumstances of war. Consequently, the disappeared were effectively registered, and this information was available when search operations began.

Moreover, the blatant failure of the West to prevent the genocidal attack on Srebrenica in July 1995 gave rise to a significant investment in building a search and identification capacity—in other words, infrastructures—to find the more than 8000 men and boys who went missing from the Srebrenica enclave under the gaze of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers. The International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) was founded to search for the missing and conduct the identification work. In addition, a significant amount of donor money enabled the ICMP to build an infrastructural capacity, including hiring personnel, building laboratories for DNA identifications, and organising outreach programmes to find the family members of the missing, now living in the global diaspora created by the war. The mandate of the organisation was soon enlarged to work

with the missing across the ex-Yugoslavian territories.

Identifying the large number of dead bodies in mass graves became a huge infrastructural challenge: the mass graves had to be located, and hiring experts was necessary to excavate the graves, work on identification, and work with the families to get the necessary information. In the early period after the peace agreement was reached in 1995, so-called traditional methods were applied focusing on the visual identification of bodies, but in those circumstances, they were not successful: the material affordances—such as the condition of the bodies in mass graves, and similar clothing worn by many bodies because of years of humanitarian delivery programmes—made visual identification virtually impossible. The heavy investment in developing new ways of applying DNA-based identification at a mass scale since 2001 brought about results, and the number of identifications began to dramatically increase (Wagner 2008).

As an infrastructural tool, DNA has specific affordances. DNA works as an identifier only if there is a reference sample, either DNA from the person herself taken while she was alive or blood samples from several close relatives. Moreover, significant resourcing of the ICMP enabled a well-organised outreach programme to collect reference blood samples from the relatives of the missing, both in Bosnia and amongst the diaspora created by the war.

Since the 1990s, DNA has become the key methodology for trustworthy identifications globally. However, to be reliable, DNA-based identification needs an entire set of infrastructures around it, including reliable laboratories with trained personnel, trustworthy chains of custody to transfer DNA samples, and knowledge and resources for archiving and providing access to the archives. This has

proved challenging in the context of migrant disappearances.

MIGRANT DISAPPEARANCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

While people inevitably disappear during armed conflicts, the number of disappearing migrants has grown dramatically over the last 20 years (Schindel 2020). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrant Project, more than 50 000 migrants have gone missing since 2014 globally, approximately half of these in the Mediterranean. Those who disappear are mostly undocumented migrants, pushed to travel increasingly more dangerous routes because of tightening border regimes. Currently, migrants originate from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as from the Middle East, including from Syria and Afghanistan. They move in a geographically wide and politically diverse transnational space, and the reasons for their disappearances are diverse, ranging from drowning and dehydration to violence from border guards or smugglers.

There are still no unified or universally trusted infrastructures to report a disappeared transnational undocumented migrant as missing. Often, families are reluctant to report them in their countries of origin because of mistrust in authorities. Likewise, they are hesitant to report them missing in putative countries of destination because of their undocumented status (IOM 2021). While several initiatives exist to establish universal procedures for searching for missing migrants and for identifying dead migrants, mainly through international organisations such as the ICRC and the ICMP, the political will to build such infrastructures does not (Huttunen and Perl 2023).

Attempts have been made to introduce DNA as the infrastructural tool to help identify dead migrants in the Mediterranean region. At present, DNA samples are often taken from unidentified dead migrants in Europe and the samples are archived in nationally run coroners' archives in each country for eventual future identification. However, because there are no outreach programmes aimed at finding families, no infrastructures to run such programmes or investments to build such infrastructures, the DNA remains 'mute' in the archives and does not do its intended identification work. In rare cases, some investments have allowed for identifying dead migrant bodies. One example includes the infamous shipwreck in Lampedusa in October 2013, resulting in the death of several hundreds of migrants on the Italian coast, in which the Italian government invested in retrieving the ship from the sea and identifying the bodies found. However, even in this case, only around 8% of the bodies were identified, and a significant number of bodies that sunk with the boat remain unretrieved (Olivieri et al. 2018).

The systems for monitoring migrant mobility on European borders has become a highly developed, institutionally and technically sophisticated infrastructure. Against this backdrop, it is quite striking that the infrastructures to search for and identify disappeared migrants remain fragmentary and ineffective at best, virtually non-existent at worst.

The two contexts of disappearance discussed here differ significantly from each other, and several reasons explain the dramatically different rates of identification. Infrastructures are always connected to political structures and to the control of resources. The volume of investment in Bosnia is rare, even in post-conflict situations, and is connected to the specific geopolitical moment. By contrast, the

lack of investment in migrant disappearances reflects contested political processes in Europe and the reluctance of any state to take responsibility for the dead and missing who are not European citizens. Moreover, the ways in which infrastructures do or do not work in these contexts also reflect questions of trust, on the one hand, and the material affordances of some infrastructural tools, on the other hand.

LAURA HUTTUNEN
PROFESSOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
laura.huttunen@tuni.fi

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