

Dealing with Painful Memories

Walking the (Thin) Line between War and its Aftermath

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The choice that we have is not between remembering and forgetting: because forgetting can't be done by an act of will, it is not something we can choose to do. The choice is between different ways of remembering ... Memories do not always bear fruit and may even lead us astray ... (Todorov 2003, 311)

1 Introduction

As I cannot do justice in this short paper to every point Hamber makes in his engaging and thoughtful article I have chosen to discuss a few points, drawing on my personal experiences of war in my homeland Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). First, I will provide an overview of the war in BiH and its nexus with trauma. I will question the transition process, reflecting on the blurred line between “conflict” and so-called “post-conflict”, and argue that war in BiH is not over yet; it is just being fought with other means. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss competing victimhood(s), ethnic identities and the parallel narratives that are a feature of the BiH transitional processes and that present obstacles to any attempts at reconciliation. Finally, I will suggest that in order to build a shared narrative of war it is important to intertwine the experiences of *all* victims and to draw on positive stories of courage and sacrifice in the midst of war, to restore the faith of Bosnian people in humanity and coexistence.

2 Painful Past

In March 1992, I was nineteen years old. Although the war in BiH was looming, I was oblivious to it and firmly believed that my long-held teenage ambition to study law in Sarajevo would come to fruition. I finished high school in May 1991 and did not believe my father, who said: “Next year at this time Sarajevo will burn”. I thought that he did not know what he was talking about; that he had been ‘brainwashed’ by local media that were spreading news about forthcoming war. Eventually an armed conflict did ensue, preventing me from fulfilling my dream of studying in the capital. I could never imagine that I would instead end up studying law in a refugee camp far from my family. I will be the third generation in my family to survive war.¹ Ever since the armed conflict in BiH ended, in 1995, I have been driven to learn why *my* people waged war against each other. But it was only in 2005 that I started to work professionally on issues related to war. I needed a space of ten years to work on my own mental wellbeing before I could turn my attention to other people’s painful stories. My experience is not in any way exceptional; many young activists in the former Yugoslavia have been survivors of war.

The majority of us who work on “dealing with the past” (or should I say “minority”, as we are still few in number) are indeed on “survivor missions” (Herman 1992) that have become one of our (un)conscious “diversionary tactics” (Hamber 2015, 14) for not dealing with our own grief. It is painful to go through personal grief alone, more painful than going through it with others or through the grief of others. As Hamber argues, for many victims of political violence the first step into the “world of psychosocial recovery” is to engage in some form of social justice activity (ibid., 13). Some of the well-known local organisations across former Yugoslavia have been led by ex-combatants and survivors of wartime rape and other atrocities, a path to help their “posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi/Calhoun 1995). It is common to see the same people holding on to these highly draining and psychologically demanding positions for more than twenty years.

¹ My grandparents survived WWI; my parents survived WWII and the war in BiH in the early 1990s.

Their work has become not only their identity but also an attractive survival strategy in a country that has almost 50 per cent unemployment.²

Still, while the former Yugoslavia has many civil society organisations working on social justice issues, very few focus their attention on programmes designed to “deal with the past”. As Dušan Jovanović, a representative of OSCE, recently noted:

... the other challenge [in dealing with past] is lack of interest. Very few people care about dealing with the past in the former Yugoslavia...no one pays attention...we are not an organised force...nobody listens to us, nobody wants to deal with these issues anymore...it's been more than ten years since all those wars ended and now politicians and international community, everyone is switching their focus to something else...(Youtube Video, 16 December 2013)

In a complex political environment, a small community of like-minded people have been tirelessly working for two decades to keep memory alive of the past atrocities and to seek truth and justice. But there is a real danger of “burning out”, and I wonder how much longer activists will be able to immerse themselves in traumatic stories and materials, constantly re-traumatising themselves. Many probably suffer from “vicarious trauma” (Brady et al, 1999), but I doubt that this will prevent them from continuing their important work. Last year, I had coffee with a long-term activist and friend in one of the most powerful civil society organisations in Serbia, which marks anniversaries of war crimes, visits graveyards and meets with survivors on a regular basis. My friend told me how exhausted he was:

... I cannot do this anymore ... but there are only few of us in [the] organisation and we all have problems ... I cannot sleep. You know, someone interviewed me recently for some research and asked me how can I stay normal working all the time on dea[th], genocide, killings ... she was right ... I really think I am not normal anymore.

After almost fifteen years of activism and struggling to survive abject poverty, my friend has no time or money for counselling. Even if he did have, counselling is not something that people necessarily think of as a solution to mental hardship, since great stigma is still attached to mental health issues. Despite these daily struggles, my friend will continue to protest on the streets and call for accountability for, and truth about, the past wartime crimes.

At the time that I was invited to respond to Hamber’s paper, I was immersed in literature questioning the capability of courts to address mass human violations in an appropriate way. I was also reading about the latest indictments, on-going trials and prosecutions of war crimes that were being investigated and prosecuted by the courts in BiH. Personally, I have started to question the purpose of publishing gruesome details of war crimes that occurred more than twenty years ago in local media on almost a daily basis. What effect will these stories have on generations who are trying to “move on” (Eastmond/Selimović 2012) from a violent past, hopefully towards a more promising future? According to some scholars, young people do not want to dwell on the violent past and its memories for one simple reason: they have had enough of the narratives of violence that happened between 1992 and 1995, and also of the conflict ongoing since 1995, fought not with guns but with *hearts and minds*.

Many young people find solace in “silence” rather than “telling the truth”. Indeed, silence may be a vital strategy deployed to make a shared life possible (Eastmond/Selimović 2012). Also, some Bosnian people think it is “too early to tell the truth”. But is there a right time to tell the truth? Do we need to talk about the past, and if so, how and why? Can BiH make a *pacto del olvido* (“the pact of forgetting”) in the name of “the greater good” and escape its traumatic memory, as it did once before? In Spain, *el pacto*

² As reported by the Federal Bureau for Statistics of the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. See <http://www.fzs.ba/eng/> (accessed 7 September 2015).

del olvido not only silenced and suppressed violent memories but also prevented legal action to punish those responsible for human rights atrocities and to repair and rehabilitate victims (Hadzelek 2012). Yet, memories can only be suppressed temporarily and will erupt sooner or later. Over the past decade, Spain has seen such eruptions and “unexpected emergences of the belated ‘memory politics’” (Davis 2005, 862; Aguilar Fernández 1996; Graham 2004).

The people of the former Yugoslavia experienced collective social and historical amnesia between 1945 and 1990, during Tito’s time, and many would argue that the policy of “pushing memories under the carpet” was one of the factors that contributed to the country’s dissolution. Under the mantra of “brotherhood and unity”, Yugoslav people were banned from speaking publically about the atrocities that had been committed against each other during WWII. Still, our elders whispered to us some of the forbidden stories – of murders, beheadings, concentration camps and rapes – stories that since this recent war have been talked about publically and widely. These stories, buried deep in the memories of several generations, have been reclaimed and appropriated, reinterpreted, and connected to the recent war narratives.

There is a sense of urgency and a greater willingness to record and tell the stories than ever before. There is a need to document and save stories before key protagonists – the survivors – pass away. Many have died already, several of these from ill health rather than age. In BiH, locals and foreign researchers are on a mission to save these stories from being extinguished. Together with the survivors, academia contributes to mounting volumes of literature based on grief and mourning: narratives of lament that operate as a mode of transitional justice.³

3 Painful Present

So far the prominent transitional justice mechanisms set up in BiH have been domestic and international trials. I do not suggest that BiH ought to turn away from these traditional mechanisms of criminal justice, but it must acknowledge that these are insufficient because they do not focus on the victims (Mutua 2015). 2015 marks two decades since the armed conflict ended, but it is still hard to see any indication from the government that a “holistic” and “transformative” (Gready/Robins 2014; Fischer 2013) understanding of transitional justice processes will be used in the near future: truth commissions or other forms of truth seeking, development of a holistic reparation and compensation processes, or hybrid processes such as *gacaca* “to mend community relationships” (6). Other mechanisms, such as official public apologies, memorials or the rewriting of official histories, have been highly contested.

Each ethnic group builds memorials to remember their own victims and rewrite history as it fits their “truth”, which is that their group is the main or exclusive victim, and that is not relevant to acknowledge crimes committed by their own group. This is common to all three major groups in BiH, the state which has become recently defined as a “victim state” (Ristić 2014) and a “pathological depressive patient” (Ivanov 2015). Ethnic identity constructions are related to the political structure: Bosnians are identified only as members of ethnic tribes, and legally, Bosnians do not have individual human rights, only collective rights, since political rights are based on ethnic proportional representation (Živanović 2015). This political configuration was introduced with the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. The absurdity of such policies is apparent in the fact that only now, twenty-two years after BiH became an independent state, has the country recognised the first Bosnian citizen by birth. In 2015, nine months after Faruk Salaka was born, his parents became the first to register their son’s nationality as “Bosnian” (Jukić 2015), not as a Bosniak, Croat, or Serb. Faruk’s parents were the first to defeat a system that insists on strict ethnic definitions and differences that had become “a major axis” of any analysis (Helms 2015).

3 For more on lament and transitional justice, see Galchinsky 2014.

It is of no surprise, then, that remembrance is also marked by ethnic definitions and differences. All three ethnic groups in BiH try to maximise the tally of their “own” victims and minimise the number of victims of the other ethnic groups. They all engage in a “victimization Olympics” (Novick 1999) or “competitive martyrdom” (Rosenbaum 1996, 2). Some blame academia for producing the narratives that politicians use in their battle for power: “... it is intellectuals who manufacture these narratives; not politicians. Politicians are just using these narratives for their own political game in manipulation but it is not them who came up with narratives...” (Jovanović/Subotić 2013, Youtube video).

As Hamber notices, some victims cling desperately to their victimhood as a sanctuary and moral grounding. They are not passive, I agree. On the contrary, they often either actively encourage or oppose reconciliation. Many victims seem reluctant to transcend their victimhood or be perceived as having transcended it (Hamber 2015, 12). The role of a victim is much more convenient: as a victim one can claim benefits – social and economic privileges not accessible to a “survivor”. This exposes the fallacy of the broad perception that a victim is inherently less powerful than a survivor. The trouble with the term “survivor” is that it shifts the focus from the victims’ devastating experiences to their agency and resilience and strips them of victimhood. In her book *On Innocence and Victimhood*, Elissa Helms carefully problematises the issue of victimhood. She discusses a public statement given by the former Leader of the Bosnian party SDA (Party of Democratic Action in Bosnia-Herzegovina), Tihić, who called upon Bosniak people to set aside the “passive position of victim and take up the active position and responsibility of a relevant political factor” (cited in Helms 2013, 225). His plea backfired, and the representatives of victims’ groups denounced him as a “traitor to national interest” who was “forcing victims to get used to the results of [war] crimes!” (Helms 2013, 225-226).

Victims are often pressured to speak up (10), with few or no incentives but often politically motivated expectations. Some victims are not willing to speak publicly (and some are not asked to speak)⁴, but others have become more pragmatic and demand to be properly compensated for sharing their experiences. They have had enough of foreigners “writing books on them”, as one female survivor of rape told me, while receiving nothing in return. Others have reported of being instructed on how to speak on public speaking occasions by their governmental or nongovernmental leaders. One long-term feminist activist told me she has recently attended a small gathering of female victims of wartime rape in BiH. Women were sitting around the table, looking down, looking serious, and oblivious to the people around them. The female facilitator began the meeting by saying that “these women do not dance and laugh”, since they are “too traumatised” to do so. Once they started speaking, the women did so with flat intonation and no apparent emotions, and it became obvious to everyone that they had told the same story many times before.

These victims may have become “professional victims” (Smyth 2003), assuming a monopoly on suffering and a power of veto on reconciliation, but they are often manipulated into this status by political elites. For such victims there is a real danger that they become connected only to those who approve of their victimhood (i.e. members of the same ethnic group) and disconnected from the broader community and social reality. If “victim groups become narrow interest groups” (14), this serves to reinforce their sense of victimhood. It becomes a justification to pursue only their specific victims’ interests, which are often not aligned to reconciliation.

While I agree with Hamber that “making sense of the seemingly meaningless” (Hamber 2015, 10) is vital for victims’ recovery, I wonder whether validating “any sense” may be dangerous. The majority of victims try to make sense of what happened to them, but the process of “making sense”, and the assumptions shaping their logic, may be oppositional to any constructive contribution to building peace. It is hard to be positive in a country in which perpetrators still live next door to victims. In the backlog of BiH war crimes cases, there are an estimated 1,300 cases, involving 8,000 suspects, where the identity of the alleged perpetrator is known (OSCE, n.d.). There are several thousand more crimes for which the suspect is still unidentified (Wigemark 2014) and it is thought that many of the suspects still live in the country.

4 Those who are not ‘ideal’ victims; those who belong to the perceived perpetrator nation.

BiH has a long way to go with the prosecutions. In February 2015 former Bosnian Serb Army soldier Dragan Šekarić was sentenced to 14 years in prison for rape and murder committed in the village of Kosovo Polje in the Višegrad municipality in 1992. Šekarić had been living near his victims and could rely on close supporters during the previous 20 years. In other places too, war crimes prosecutions are spanning generations. In Argentina, former dictator General Jorge Videla was convicted in 2010 in El Tribunal Oral Federal No.1 de Cordoba, found guilty of 29 counts of murder and 32 counts of torture. Ruti Teitel, in her response to the Videla judgement, asks: “What can such a verdict mean so many years after the restoration of democracy in Argentina?” Her answer was simple:

...not giving up on accountability, despite the passage of time, sends an important message about human rights, and the distinctive nature of these offenses as ‘crimes against humanity’. Years later, what’s at stake is not just punishment, but also political truth...That lesson, handed down along with the judgment against Videla, vindicates efforts to establish a global rule of law. Tyrants everywhere – and more than a few democrats – would do well to take note. (Teitel 2010)

However, those who are not sentenced to life but to a shorter prison term may return to their communities and re-encounter their victims. Nusreta Sivac, who testified in the Omarska case⁵, reported that she had met a guard who was released from the prison after serving two-thirds of his seven-year sentence. Sivac met him on the street in the town that was the original site of the crime and in which both of them now live again. She reported, “We glared at each other... He was the first to bow his head” (Cerkez 2013).

In BiH, so many different interpretations of the past exist that it is hard to imagine the establishment of any shared narrative in the near future. Each ethnic group maintains a specific version of past conflict(s), and these versions compete. These “parallel narratives” also shape the discourse of political leaders in the country and represent a challenge to transitional justice processes (Guzina/Marijan 2013). I agree with Hamber that there should be an effort to create “some framework of meaning at the collective level” (11), but the framework of meaning developed at a collective level in BiH is one of victimhood and denial. Many Bosnians do not engage in a dialogue that aims at reconciliation but in an antagonistic, politically motivated struggle over collective memory (Morrow 2012, 71) and an exercise in “collective victimhood” (Čehajić/Brown 2010, 192). In order to overcome these divisions they would need a more positive narrative that would include *all* victims’ experiences.

4 Positive Future?

As Hamber argues, we “cannot repair the irreparable” (7) and the “harm done cannot be reversed” (9), but “we need to acknowledge this reality” (9), the fact that coming to terms with the past is a lifelong process. “There was never going to be justice for [the] Holocaust, or a reckoning with its enormity”, says Elisabeth Kolbert, whose grandmother died in Auschwitz (2015). I think it is important to accept this as fact. The law’s capacity to address past human rights abuses is limited, but we still struggle to deploy other means to acknowledge past losses in a constructive way. After the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed by the governments of the countries involved in the BiH war, international actors put immediate pressure on people in the region to reconcile. People were still finding their footing after four years of war yet were swept into externally funded and imposed reconciliation projects. These projects were seen to demonstrate

5 Omarska camp was a death camp run by Bosnian Serb forces in the mining town of Omarska, near Prijedor in northern BiH, set up for Bosniak and Croat men and women in 1992. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) found several individuals guilty of crimes against humanity perpetrated in Omarska. For more see Prosecutor v Miroslav Kvocka et al, Case No IT-98-30/1-T, Judgment, 2 November 2001.

ignorance and were framed by many Bosnians as their needing “to work with the enemy” (8). As such, they created a new set of challenges and provoked resistance, and resentment towards the concept of “reconciliation”. This concept was and still is largely misunderstood in BiH as meaning forgiveness alone. I often heard victims saying “I haven’t quarrelled with anyone, so there is no need for me to reconcile”.

Furthermore, many victims from various ethnic groups do not want to come together. They do not trust each other. “[C]ommunity mobilisation” (13), as suggested by Hamber, is difficult to achieve where narratives are deeply divided. A holistic approach towards transitional justice needs to embrace *all* victims: not just those who are considered innocent, but also those whose stories have been suppressed under the enormity of mass crimes such as genocide. People’s stories may be a stimulus for exploring what prevents positive peace from flourishing and unfolding alternative answers to the difficult questions arising from the relationship between justice, peace and reconciliation (Porter 2015).

In BiH there are countless people who during the war put themselves in grave danger to help others regardless of their ethnic background, and their stories should be acknowledged and documented. In *Good People in an Evil Time* (2004), Svetlana Broz refutes the stereotype of inevitable natural enmities in the Balkans. She reveals the stories of ordinary people who resisted ethnic divisions under the most terrible historical circumstances. The tragic story of a young Bosnian Serb soldier, Srđan Aleksić, who was brutally killed in 1993 by his own peers, has become a symbol of courage and humanity to young people in BiH. After he saw his neighbour, an ethnic Bosniak, being harassed by a group of Serb soldiers, Aleksić tried to stop soldiers from beating him. However, the soldiers turned on Aleksić, beating him with their rifle butts until he fell into a coma. He died a week later in hospital. His story has been used by a number of local social justice organisations to inspire young generations, and a few local organisations have run essay competitions about “moral courage” and reconciliation in Aleksić’s name.

Recently, the Post-Conflict Research Center in BiH received an award for a multimedia educational project called *Obični Heroji* (Ordinary Heroes) that utilises stories of rescue and moral courage to promote tolerance, reconciliation and interethnic cooperation. According to the Center, “the rescuers’ narratives” represent all ethnic groups and highlight people’s humanities regardless of their ethnic background, while questioning the all-too-prevalent dichotomy between perpetrators and victims. I can only hope that such narratives will prevail and that in the future BiH will be less preoccupied with recounting memories of violence and despair, and more focused upon sharing stories of humanity that shone through those clouded years.

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