

Interviewing on Sensitive Issues: Negotiating new Identities in a Collectively Traumatized Society*

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In this article I aim to highlight the question *how to negotiate and reconstruct new identities among previously perpetrator groups in the trauma zones* by looking at a specific case example, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Bosnian Serbs. After the end of the Bosnian war (1992-1995) through Dayton Peace Accord, Bosnian Serbs have been started to be classified as the perpetrator group of the war. However, both Bosniaks, the main victim ethnic group of the war, and Bosnian Serbs have also started to draw the borders of *Serbness* into different boundaries, such as moral and religious ones. In this study I employed the method of (online) in-depth interviewing with my Bosniak and Bosnian Serb participants to underline and display which components and experiences have been shaping Bosnian Serbness since the end of the war. After the analysis of my interviews, one could argue that *burden of guilt* and *burden of loss* might have caused re-imagination of Bosnian Serbness as today's victims. Furthermore, according to the main pattern I detected among the testimonies of my participants, one could also argue that exclusion of Bosnian Serbs due to their ethnicity from everyday tasks or rituals makes their another supreme identity much more visible: they are Christian Orthodoxies of Bosnia now.

Keywords: collective trauma, memory, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosnian Serbs, identity negotiation

Introduction

Collective trauma is generally discussed to understand reasons behind motivations among perpetrator groups and its macro and micro impacts within societies. While working on collective trauma in the field of memory studies everyday activism or making the motto of "never forget" much more palpable is one of the purposes to highlight burden of sorrows among rank-and-file members of the societies (Rigney, 2018). There are many historical and current case examples of collective trauma among different groups; such as Holocaust, Spanish civil war and its impacts, Rwanda and Srebrenica genocides, Greek civil war, dissolution of the Soviet Union from the perspectives of communists, Syrian war, and invasion of Ukraine by Russian Federation (Igartua & Paez, 1997; Audergon, 2004; Nielsen, Sağaltıcı, & Demirci, 2022). All those incidents I listed just above have common patterns: masses have been shocked due to atrocities, quotidian activities were destroyed, guilts and losses influenced agents, and reconciliation is necessary for a recovery.

While focusing on reconciliation steps or prescription of nation-states for a societal recovery, one can argue that reconciliation and rehabilitation are generally aimed to be discussed for the previously victim groups of

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trauma zones (Perry, 2003). Although issue of justice vis-à-vis the perpetrator is mainly underlined in collective memory studies, reconciliation for the members of the previously perpetrator group and negotiation process of their new identities are not well studied in the literature. In this article, I aim to find a relevant and reliable answer to my research question, *how to negotiate and reconstruct new identities among previously perpetrator groups in the trauma zones*, by looking at one of the current cases I picked as a case study: Bosnia and Herzegovina (or interchangeably Bosnia or BiH) and its Bosnian Serbs.

There were massive atrocities-systematic tortures, rapes, killings in the Bosnian war (1992-1995), and the dissolution wars of socialist Yugoslavia were bloody especially in Serbo-dominated regions of the federation. The dissolution war of the socialist regime is generally framed and discussed as the wars of oligarchies of Yugoslavia, especially conservative Serbian ones due to tensions between reformist and conservative sides (Gagnon, 2010; Horvat & Štiks, 2015). Srebrenica genocide in 1995 was the turning point of the war since many Bosniak men were systematically slaughtered by the Serbian agents, and that pushed the international actors for a peace plan: Dayton Peace Accord of 1995. After all these trauma especially in the Bosniak side, previously perpetrator group, Serbs, have been started to be framed as ultimate evil even without naming and shaming them in everyday life of Bosnia probably due to legacy of co-habitation years under the period of Josip Broz Tito, founder president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In order to analyse and understand appearance and negotiation of new identities, especially within the side of previous perpetrators, I employed online in-depth interviews as I mentioned above. I talked with 16 participants from the side of Bosnian Serbs and 12 participants from the side of Bosniaks. I just talked with members of two ethnic groups who are mainly narrated as the perpetrator and the victim of the war, respectively (Božić, 2019). All participants of the research were urban settlers, witnesses of the both the socialist regime and the war years as an adult, and they economically define themselves disadvantageous or member of lower class. While looking at a reliable answer to my research question, I discovered that burden of guilt and burden of loss might have caused re-imagination of Bosnian Serbness as today's victims. Furthermore, according to the main pattern I detected among the testimonies of my participants, one could also argue that exclusion of Bosnian Serbs due to their ethnicity from everyday tasks or rituals makes their another supreme identity much more visible: they are Christian Orthodoxies of Bosnia now.

Online Interviews

Online interviews have been trending among different branches of social sciences, especially with the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Patel et al., 2020; Dodds & Hess, 2020; Gruber, Eberl, Lind, & Boomgaarden, 2021). Although online interviewing is effective in terms of different dimensions; such as lack of "financial constraints" and "geographical dispersion" (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014), hesitations of the interviewees in the online chat rooms, technological problems, and lack of authenticity can be counted as limitations of online interviewing (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; James & Busher, 2006). On the other side, synchronous (real-time) online interviews with well-equipped technologic staff might also open Pandora's box as if the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Before interviews, consent form (or through oral ways) also informs the participants about the content of the interview, and they generally start to reply to questions with a conscious: we are here for a purpose (Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011, p. 355). James and Busher (2006) also state that "validity" and "reality" of the research should be well defined to the interviewees, not just through written explanations, but also via talking during the online interviews.

In my research, I also drew attention on crucial ethical points of in-depth interviewing when I talked with my participants through online interviews. While focusing on ethical issues, especially in the online interviewing, “privacy” and “participant distress” are leading issues (Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2022, p. 4). The participants of studies might feel themselves exploitable in the synchronous online interviews since their visual and audio record might be copied. However, a relationship between researcher and interviewee should be constructed according to the principles of trust, and legal dimension of violation of (interviewees’) rights should be mentioned to display awareness and transparency of researcher. The other significant issue is about participant distress, and it might be more visible in the online interviews due to lack of emotional contact between the parties, that’s why researcher should also inform the interviewees to underline whenever they want, they can end or stop interviews.

Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, and Elford (2004, p. 949) argue that online interviews have also different qualities that are not discussed or underlined too much in the literature. For example, participants can use the language of instant messaging via chat box of online interviews (among different programmes of online interviewing, there is also an option of chat box, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams), and this gives an opportunity to researchers to grasp emotions of the interviewees through their reactions (LOL, laugh out loud, and different emojis) (Davis et al., 2004). Furthermore, Crichton and Kinash (2003, p. 3) state “documentation of communication” facilitates transcription steps in terms of researcher, and “critical review of submissions prior to posting” makes the participants more transparent since they have much more time to change their ideas, positions, even questions of researchers (because they could re-contact via the same method). In my research, I also applied method of online semi-structured interview within my sample groups as I mentioned above in detail to understand and discuss negotiation of new identities in today’s Bosnia.

Design of the Research

While I was trying to find a reliable answer to my research question, *how to negotiate and reconstruct new identities among previously perpetrator groups in the trauma zones*, I conducted my online interviews with my participant in the period between January and March 2023. I sampled my groups according to principles of snowball sampling. Noy (2007, p. 329) argues that snowball sampling which provides recruitment of participant via daily networks might underline social knowledge that “is presently viewed as primarily dynamic, processual and emergent” and crucial to understand impacts of changes and incidents in societies. Although I employed snowball sampling, I also sampled my groups purposively just from the very beginning of the research. In other words, “specific kinds of people may hold different views” (Campbell, 2020, p. 3) while thinking about the same issue, and this way of sampling among participants may demonstrate non-highlighted experiences and testimonies of within groups.

I recruited my participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina and from its distinct cities. I talked with 16 participants from the side of Bosnian Serbs and 12 participants from the side of Bosniaks. I just talked with members of two ethnic groups who are mainly narrated as the perpetuated of the war and the victim, respectively (Božić, 2019). All participants of the research were urban settlers, witnesses of the both the socialist regime and the war years as an adult, and they economically define themselves disadvantageous or member of lower class. I posted announcement of call of my interviews through Twitter (public tweets). Therefore, ethnicity, location, age, and economic class are purposively asked to select participants according to the purposive sample grouping. Furthermore, participants recommended their relatives and friends to take the online interviews, that’s why

snowball sampling was effective during the participant collection. While talking with them through online (via WhatsApp calls) in-depth interviews, I, firstly, read the consent form to the each participant. All interviews were conducted in BSC, and during the transcription my translator also helped me. We spent almost 30 minutes in each call. While talking about war traumas of the participants, one could easily argue that during and after the war, new identities were reconstructed in Bosnia, especially within the side of previously persecutor group.

Sensitive Issues: Testimonies on Collective Trauma

Traumatized individuals or societies have a tendency to refuse to remember or to talk about their memories during interviews or daily discussions (Seedat, Pienaar, Williams, & Stein, 2004), however remembrance of past might also be interpreted as a quotidian activism by those actors to prevent similar incidents in the future (Rigney, 2018). Hage (2003) argues that re-interpreterion and remembrance of former traumatic cases, such as wars and conflicts, to take lessons from them is a priority in memory studies, especially during the period of rise of paranoid nationalism. Although pseudo-victory of liberalism was interpreted as the end of the warfare between nation-states, ethnic and religious conflicts within societies in the 1990s highlight that economic and social motivations were the push factors of those conflicts that caused naissance of new traumatic experiences and memory (Woodward, 1995). Hence, Huntington's (1993) argument named "Clash of Civilization" has also been falsified just from the very beginning while discussing the motivations behind ethnic or religious conflicts (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Despite that, rise of nationalism and far right turned into the black death of the 21st century too. As I mentioned above, end of the Bosnian war in 1995 through Dayton Peace Accord did not guarantee peace, inclusionary everyday politics, and anti-nationalistic principles (and institutions) for the folks of Bosnia. Reconciliation was not prioritized, and collective trauma of Bosnians has been clinched day by day in their ethnically polarized society during the post-war period.

How to collect ordinary individuals' testimonies on their recent dark past is a tricky question since participants of studies who have first-hand experiences on their collective trauma may try to hide or cover facts due to burden of guilt (1) or burden of loss (2), or they may reject to reply to questions of interviews just from the very beginning (Bar-On, 1990). In my research, I face above-mentioned two patters among my interviewees to hide the facts. Firstly, I will discuss and display several examples from testimonies of my participants that aim to hide facts and realities due to burden of guilt. Their strategy is also a proof of how their current Bosnian Serb identity was under the influence of post-war discussions and atmosphere.

Burden of Guilt

Perpetrators of large-scale violence (and their family members) may not be willing to participate in oral history studies due to burden of the past (Bar-On, 1990; Fujii, 2010; Aydoğan, 2022). When these participants accept to reply to questions about their own dark past, they might also hide the realities about their acts and decisions since they may still feel themselves guilty (Fujii, 2010). At the same time, participants may also be willing to reply to almost all questions to highlight realities about their own society for a healthy reconciliation process (Von Kellenbach, 2013; Aydoğan, 2022). In my research, I detected that several members of military officers and paramilitary forces from the Serbian camp and their family members hid facts about war years. During the transcription period of the interviews and their first stage of analysis, I did not realize whether they hid realities or not, but after re-analysis of all answers and puzzle, I realized that there were some missing parts that might have related to burden of guilt. Fujii (2010) claims that "denials" and "rumors" are most applied

discursive strategies during interviews to hide facts. In the following quotes, I will demonstrate several examples from my interviews with Bosnian Serbs who also applied strategy of denial while replying to questions:

Researcher: As far as I understood that you think the victim numbers, the official ones, within Bosniak community is an example of exaggeration to make Serbs scapegoat.

Participant A: Yes! My grandmother is also a Bosniak. Her house was damaged in the war years. My father says that Croats damaged it to calumniate Serbs.

Researcher: But just in the very beginning of our interview you told that only Serbs had occupied your village.

Participant A: Why you do not understand me! We did not harm anybody in our village. Even Bosniaks might have planned to damage themselves to demonstrate us guilty! Or, some Croats might have reached our village through tunnels to cause a chaos. I do not know.

Kalayjian, Shahinian, Gergerian, and Saraydarian (1996, p. 88) argue that denial mechanism is constituted “to avoid consequences of actions” among perpetrators. While there might be material-based consequences of those actions, such as compensations, moral-based consequences might have long-term impact on perpetrators. This short passage underlines that participant aims to *morally* protect his/her ethnic group by denying facts about the Bosnian war years. In the next parts of the interview with this participant, s/he states that “we (Serbs) were guilty, but we were not alone”. Although this participant raised an awareness on actions of his/her ethnic peers, s/he unconsciously proposes to share burden of guilt with other ethnic groups even in certain cases to activate denial mechanism. In the next example from my interviews, I highlight a similar story of denial in relation to burden of guilt.

Researcher: Did you lose your relatives or friends during the Bosnian war?

Participant B: I just lost my friends who were members of Serbian paramilitary groups. In each three groups-Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats-there were victims. There is no hierarchy of victims or pains.

Researcher: Then, is this a civil war from your perspective?

Participant B: Absolutely. We are all both victims and perpetrators. We need justice for all of us.

Researcher: What do you remember about Srebrenica genocide? Srebrenica is so close to your town.

Participant B: I am not specifically narrating our own genocide stories. During the Bosnian war there was also Croatian or Serbian genocides. But, you are specifically asking the Bosniak one! You think that we, only Serbs, were guilty. Everybody who owned a weapon was guilty equally. While using the term genocide with Srebrenica, I guess, you claim that Serbs were the main perpetrators. You can see who is the main perpetrators by looking at Mostar!

This participant tries to share the burden of the past among major ethnic groups of Bosnia. There were criminal acts within three ethnic groups in the war despite traceable Serbian aggression (Simic, 2011; Meernik, 2015), s/he also insisted that there was no only one ethnic perpetrator. That’s why after my question on Srebrenica, this Serbian participant tried to underline Croatian war crimes by referring to Mostar. This is another discursive denial strategy while refusing to talk about his/her ethnic peers’ criminal acts and simultaneously by altering the main topic due to burden of guilt.

Burden of Loss

Although burden of guilt has a significant influence on perpetrators while they talk about their criminal acts or their criminal recent past, burden of loss might also prevent revelation of certain realities during interviews or daily dialogues because of direct impact of individual pain. Keyes, Pratt, McLaughlin, Koenen, and Shear (2014, p. 864) argue that burden of loss is generally defined with “an unexpected death of a loved one”. While the rate of those deaths increases in a society, collective trauma is generally the main inevitable result for folks and their

public health (Keyes et al., 2014). Destruction of homes, public places, monuments, or a homeland may also cause traceability of burden of loss among ordinary people (Ortiz, Simmons, & Hinton, 1999), and a similar reaction among these people to refuse to talk about those incidents might be expected. Aftandilian (2016, p. 201) claims that “a transfer of trauma from one generation to the next” is possible in collectively traumatized groups, and the next generations might answer the questions as if they were witnesses of incidents in the interviews due to burden of loss of members from their ethnic or religious group, or basically from their family (Assmann, 1995). Cobin and Morse (2003, p. 343) argue that “changing to another topic” or “terminating interviews” are observable strategies among interviewees while they narrate their sorrows. Just in the very beginning of the interviews, I thought that especially Bosniak participants would apply these strategies under the impact of the burden of loss, but I detected that mainly Serbian participants tried to change the topic or wanted to end interviews while they started to narrate their loss. On the other side, Bosniak participants were very transparent when they were narrating their own stories probably to make their motto much more rigid: “never forget” (Rigney, 2018). But, Serbian interviews were under the influence of diverse feelings, such as combination of both burden of guilt and loss, so they reacted according to above-mentioned patterns:

Researcher: How did your life change just after the war?

Participant X: I lost my homeland. I had to go to Belgrade during the war since I refused to fight as a Serbian militia. Even my father did not speak with me because of my decision. Sometimes I still feel like an alien in this city. When I see some street names about Yugoslavia or some evocatory materials on our socialist past, I cannot describe how I feel desperate.

Researcher: You told that your father has not spoken with you anymore because of your decision, not fighting. But now? After all these years?

Participant X: I actually fought against Bosniaks for a year, then I changed my mind. And, I do not want to tell anything about my father. Why we are not talking about good days of the socialist regime because I have many things to describe that times.

As this short passage underlines that participants may try to direct the interviews by altering the topic due to a quest to talk about his/her non-criminal past (the socialist period) in interview. This is in line with Cobin and Morse's (2003, p. 343) argument about conducting interviews on sensitive issues: as a discursive strategy “changing to another topic”. I also traced a similar attitude towards changing topic of interviews among 10 Serbian participants when we were talking about their dark memories. Furthermore, although s/he claimed that s/he did not fight during the war, then s/he explained the true story. This is also another proof of impact of burden of guilt as I discussed in the previous part. However, his/her loss is about his/her homeland and healthy relations with his/her father. That's why the interviewee did not want to narrate the past about his/her war years under the influence of burden of loss. Although loss of homeland is a traumatic incident because of multiple losses, such as “friends, often close relatives, language, understood social customs, a cultural heritage, and familial social hierarchy” (Podolsky-Schneller, 1981, p. 95), socialist Yugoslavia was a federation among south Slavs who shared similar everyday customs, even languages among Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, and Montenegrins, so burden of loss of homeland might not be heavy as much as his/her another loss, the familial one during the conflict years (Walsh, 2007, p. 208). This participant wanted to change the topic when I asked something about his father. Therefore, in this case, familial losses, not just state of death, might have more drastic impact due to its sharp burden.

Cobin and Morse's (2003, p. 343) another claim is about a strategy of “terminating interviews” when Pandora's box opened that highlights dark incidents and memories during the interviews. Only two Serbian

interviewees terminated our conversation, and I will illustrate one of them to display impact of burden of loss in our interview:

Researcher: As far as I understood that your social environment was totally destructed in the war. And, although you had an ethnically diverse group of friends, today you are enforced for ethicized social isolation in Sarajevo. Am I correct?

Participant Y: That's correct. But, when I think of old good days, unconsciously I compare these days with today. I feel miserable and so alone now because of the ridiculous war. Please stop talking, at least for today. Remembrance of all those losses within my social world are so fresh to me. Yes, after almost thirty years. I can accept to be named as a war criminal or guilty on behalf of my ethnic group although I did not fight in the war, but I hate the feeling of today's victimhood. This is our reality, especially among Bosnian Serbs.

This participant's testimony clearly shows how ending interviews is a strategy to be able to combat with the feeling of burden of loss, at least for a short period of time (in the following days of our interviews, s/he did not want to talk about this topic). In this passage, s/he clearly states how s/he is still under the influence of his/her losses from his/her social environment. Elder and Clipp (1988, p. 182) focus on loss of friends in the war, and they claim that the other's life becomes crucial as if s/he was your family member due to construction of fictive ties voluntarily. Moreover, the interviewee states that victimhood is the current struggle and burden of Bosnian Serbs. How previous war criminals, at least named like that, might have turned into victims is a significant question to negotiate new identities in the post-war sphere under the influence of distinct burdens.

How to Analyse New Identities?

Emergence of new identities are generally expected results of societal ruptures and structural changes, and Chandra (2012) argues that even our supreme and leading identities, ethnic or religious ones, might change through time and as a result of either individual or collective decisions or enforcements. If ethnic and religious identities may change through time due to their flexible borders, attachments on groups and societies may quickly change after massive cases. The Bosnian war of 1992-1995 clearly demonstrated that ethnically Serbians were labelled as the ultimate evil of the war due to Serbian war criminals and impact of Bosniak genocide, especially in Srebrenica where Serbs planned and organized the genocide. Golubović (2020) argues that Bosnian Serbs started to be isolated after the war although many of them were not war criminal, or especially women who did not participate in military or paramilitary units. Thus, Golubović (2019, p. 552) claims that "asymmetrical politics of belonging" is the current problem of Bosnian Serbs, especially Sarajevan Serbs, after the war because they are today's losers of the war, and they located themselves as *victims* of Serbian war politics. Structured, semi-structured interviews and oral history studies are crucial to trace all these changes in specific fields, especially during the period of post-war/conflict/polarization etc. because first-hand witnesses of incidents have direct testimonies and experiences (Portelli, 1991). Therefore, emergence of new identities in a specific zone should be researched by reaching fragile groups of today, not just by looking at majorities' testimonies or archive-based classic history understanding (Connerton, 1989). In my research, I also traced several testimonies of Bosnian Serbs that are about how they see themselves as *victim* of politics.

From War Criminal to Victim

There are still ongoing investigations on war crimes in the Bosnian war, and there is an organic relation between several political actors of Serbian politics and Serb war criminals that also cause to overshadow the principle of rule of law and transparency of trial processes (Gordy, 2014, p. 11). Although International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was founded as a part of United Nations court in 1993, several splashes about

the judgement process also caused to rise the feeling of injustice among Bosniaks (Kostić, 2012). While judgement processes are inevitable part of justice after this destructive war from both domestic and international perspectives, partial justice is also another problem in the Bosnian society, especially among Serbs since they are depicted and labelled as the unique perpetrator of the war (Selimovic, 2015). How Bosnian Serbs perceive their everyday position in their societies after the war is not too much discussed in the literature. In this part, I will demonstrate two examples from testimonies of Bosnian Serb interviewees to depict their current fragile position:

Researcher: After the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended war, how your life change, could you describe?

Participant C: Dayton just ended the physical war for all ethnic groups. The psychological war continues for Bosnian Serbs. We are inferiors of our state. You cannot be a proud Serb in Bosnia. No one directly excludes you from the society, but there is an invisible contract among everybody, i.e. among Bosnian Jews or Roma, and almost every non-Serb hesitates to accept or classify you as a Serb. Now, we are the fragile minority of Bosnia.

Researcher: Have you ever thought to migrate?

Participant C: No. Never. It was sin of my ethnic peers, and I have to suffer for compensation.

The dialogue above demonstrates this participant recognizes guilt of his/her ethnic community when s/he replied to the question about migration and his/her unwillingness to migrate: “sin of my ethnic peers” and staying in Bosnia “to suffer for compensation”. Further, his/her testimony directly underlines currently minority situation of Bosnian Serbs. Golubović (2020, p. 546) argues that Bosnian Serbs are not labelled ethnic guilty or “other” of Bosnians, especially Bosniaks, after the war in Bosnia, on the other side now Bosnian Serbs are “reconfigured into moral boundaries” instead of ethnic categories. In other words, their fragile position is reconstructed, and their everyday borders with other ethnic groups are re-demarcated according to moral classifications due to Serbs’ war crimes. But before studying everyday concerns of Bosnians Serbs, it is also necessary to indicate that their returning process to Bosnian where many Bosnian Serbs had to escape during the war was not smooth after the war, and their returning period/steps also made visible “moral boundaries” (Golubović, 2020). Jansen (2011, p. 145) argues that even “local authorities were reluctant to create conditions for their return”, and this period also influences Bosnian Serb returnees and their way of conceptualisation of themselves into victimhood:

Researcher: As you told before, you returned from Belgrade to your homeland, Bosnia. How do you remember your refugee years?

Participant D: Living in a different land since you have to... It was terrible. Although almost everybody was Serb in my quarter in Belgrade, I knew Serbia was not my home although I am a Serb. After the war, we directly made an application to return to our homeland, Bosnia. But, you cannot imagine how it was hard. There was no institution we could contact. No responsible person. We were just waiting without information or a structured process. Why we could not return our home easily, and what we did, we could not understand. We escaped from the war, not to fight. Is this our award? We could not reach the Federation and its civil servants among responsible groups about these issues; Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs.

This narration shows that one could argue how Bosnian Serbs might have struggled to return to Bosnia after war, and how there was a lack of institutional support for their transition process. This is also another proof of shifts in moral boundaries since the interviewee classifies himself/herself as innocent by saying “...we escaped from the war, not to fight. Is this our award?”. Stefansson (2010, p. 68) states that although many Bosnian Serbs returned to Bosnia, especially to Banja Luka, after the war, there is a traceable limited “inter-ethnic and social cooperation pattern” among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs even though they are still neighbour. This also underlines how morally canalized relations might have been polarized more drastically through socio-economic channels.

When I conducted my interviews with Bosniaks, I detected that almost all Bosniak participants of my research defended and tried to legitimize ethnicized justice within their state after the war. Walker, Spohn, and DeLone (2016) argue that race and ethnicity are important parameters in criminal justice to imagine a criminal agent much more guilty or not. While there were many criminal attacks, acts, and decision during the Bosnian war especially within the Serbian camp, there were also other criminal subjects among Bosniaks and Croats, but transparent judgement process for each victim, regardless of ethnicity, is not a case in the post-war Bosnia (Clark, 2009). This situation might also foster isolated position of “the main persecutor”, Serbs in Bosnia:

Researcher: What do you think about Naser Orić's¹ release in 2018?

Participant E: I am extremely happy since I heard the good news. He just tried to protect us, all Bosniaks, in the region where he was responsible. He basically did his best.

Researcher: But, according to accusations, he has also consciously preferred to not protect Bosnian Serb detainees. How you interpret that?

Participant E: We immediately have to talk about justice for Bosniaks because we were the main victims. All other incidents during the war were like details.

Researcher: So, Bosnian Serbs cannot be innocent.

Participant E: Of course there were innocent Serbs, but you are skipping the real sorrow of the war. Also, you are saying “Bosnian Serbs”. Yes, all witnesses of the war know they are Bosnian Serbs even according to our current constitution, but do you know that young Bosniaks do not accept that naming?

During the field of my doctoral thesis, I talked with several young Bosniaks, either via face-to-face or online channels, and I have realized that according to their classification Bosnian Serbs are just Christian Orthodox folks of their nation. Might it consolidate isolation of Bosnian Serbs in post-war Bosnia?

Bosnian Orthodox vs. Bosnian Serb

Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 ended the physical war in Bosnia, and also its Annex 4 introduced a new constitution for Bosnia-Herzegovinians. According to this current constitution, there are ethnically recognised three groups in Bosnia-Bosniaks (majority), Serbs, Croats, and other groups are classified under the title of *ostali* (others) (Bieber, 2006). Bringa (2020) states that many Bosnian Orthodoxies identify themselves with “the Serbian narod” (nation) (p. 28), but there is no flawless overlapping between these two ethnic and religious groupism(s) (as it can be discussed in countless different examples, such as Protestant Turks, Christian Albanians, Muslim Greeks, etc.). In my interviews with Bosnian Serb participants, I realized they are stratified with Christian Orthodoxy in Bosnia and in everyday life, and this also reproduces new identities in the post-Dayton atmosphere:

Researcher: Do you really need to cover you Serbian identity during your everyday interactions?

Participant Z: I am not a Serb in Sarajevo anymore. This city welcomed almost all Abrahamic religions, and I am a member of one of these confessional communities. That's all. No one will kill me if I underline my Serbian identity, but I know it will not be welcomed through gestures of Bosniaks.

Golubović's (2020) ethnographic study highlights that one could argue Sarajevan Serbs try to escape from the label of Serbness through certain changes in their body language and gestures, and Golubović's participants state that Bosniaks' reaction can be visible again through their body language and gesture if Sarajevan Serbs reveal their ethnic identity through performance. Furthermore, Eastmond and Selimovic (2012) underline that

¹ Naser Orić was a military officer in the Bosnian war who commanded Bosniak units, or specifically Army of the Republic of Bosnia Herzegovina, especially in Srebrenica. He was imprisoned since according to ICTY he consciously did not protect Bosnian Serb detainees in the war.

Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs try to communicate on everyday rituals when they talk since talking about war might open Pandora's box and new questionings that can make visible Serbian identities. I also listened similar stories as I will illustrate below one of them:

Participant Q: Here everybody knows I am a Serb. We never talk about war or all these ethnic categorizations. I am just a rank-and-file member of Christian Orthodox community. That's all. If I want more identity, such as the Serbian one, now then I will be a reason of threat. Probably members of my generation who witnessed the war and the socialist regime will not care, but the young are more fervent when they think about nationalism.

Aydoğan (2022) argues that younger Bosniaks who knew war and stories about it through their interaction with family members might be more likely to be exclusionary against Bosnian Serbs. This pattern is also traced among several testimonies of either Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs, and this also pushes Bosnian Serbs to exist only under the banner of Orthodox Christianity. Therefore, the spirit and oral code of pre-war Bosnia, as a part of socialist Yugoslavia, have been drastically changed while making religious identities much more visible.

Conclusion

In this article I aimed to display and discuss the question *how to negotiate and reconstruct new identities among previously perpetrator groups in the trauma zones?* I employed the method in-depth interviewing with my participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I recruited my participants according to principles of both snowball and purposive sampling. I talked with 16 participants from the side of Bosnian Serbs and 12 participants from the side of Bosniaks. I just talked with members of two ethnic groups who are mainly narrated as the perpetrator and the victim of the war, respectively, in Bosnia (Božić, 2019). Further, they are also members of economically lower classes according to their perceptions and classifications in the post-war period. I conducted my interviews in the period between January and March 2023 through online channels, especial via WhatsApp calls, due to efficiency and benefits of online interviewing as I mentioned above.

From the current perspective, there is still no inclusionary politics or moral framework in Bosnia since the end of the war through Dayton Peace Accord of 1995 (Bosnian). Serbs are generally framed as the perpetrator group although there were criminal acts within three ethnic groups in Bosnia: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. Especially Srebrenica genocide and well-planned atrocities that were organized by the Serbs caused imagination of Serbness as the ultimate guilty of the Bosnian war. To deal with criminal identity, evil or perpetrator position of Serbs as a burden of the war years one could argue that perpetrator group(s) and victim group(s) of the war(s) might attach new meanings to perpetrators' supreme (ethnic) identities, and through time those attachments might shape their ethnic identities or replace with them.

In this case previously perpetrator group, Bosnian Serb participants of my research demonstrate that they are under the influence of both "burden of guilt" that mainly causes activation of denial strategies and "burden of loss" that makes themselves uncomfortable during conversations or everyday discussions. In other words, their Serbian identity might have owned a defensive characteristic under the influence of their guilts and losses. Golubović (2019, p. 552) also argues that "asymmetrical politics of belonging" is one of the main problems of Bosnian Serbs in the post-war atmosphere since they have been started to be classified as morally other and inferior of the Bosnian society. Hence, being Serb in Bosnia means being other of the Bosnian society from moral perspective that makes Serbian ethnic identity much more irrelevant into moral boundaries. I also state that there is a state of asymmetrical justice against Bosnian Serbs, not just through lack of legal supports but also exclusion

of their ethnic performance from everyday rituals of Bosnia. According to testimonies of my both Bosniak and Bosnian Serb participants, one could also argue that their exclusion due to their ethnicity makes their another supreme identity much more visible: they are Christian Orthodoxies of Bosnia. While my Bosniak participants state that this is less polarizing in terms of groupism, my Bosnian Serb participants argue that this makes their Serbian identity much more invisible. Therefore, during the negotiation process of new identities within the previous perpetrator side, there is also asymmetrical power.

There are several issues that shape the perpetrators' identity in the post-war atmosphere as I summarized in the Conclusion part, but it is also necessary to highlight that previously perpetrator group of the Bosnian war turned into today's victims according to testimonies of my participants, especially by making Serbian identity both evil and irrelevant. That caused less blurry religious identities among Bosnian Serbs from the previous victims' perspective. Although Partisans of socialist Yugoslavia aimed to push religious affairs to the private zones, this result Bosnian Serbs faced might be evaluated as a revenge of their past.

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