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MEMORY AND CONFLICT: INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH OF THE BOSNIAN WAR

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Introduction

For the past two months, I have been based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), conducting interviews with the generation of children and teens affected by the Bosnian War of the 1990s. The purpose of this research is to determine patterns, if any, in existing and nonexistent dialogue in regards to past memories of childhood interrupted by war, how those memories affect personal identity and current views on the social, political, and economic conditions of BiH, and future outlook with particular attention focused on reconciliation. What I will be presenting today is related specifically to the first section regarding memory, but these themes, patterns, and clips are part of a larger and ongoing untitled “Bosnia Project,” in which post-conflict development is given particular focus. Interviews are conducted

with a voice recorder, the purpose of which is not only for transcription but also to create a multi-media project in which this dialogue literally has a voice.

History

With Tito's death and the fall of communism in the 1980s came the rise of nationalism and palpable ethnic tension throughout the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Multiparty elections were held in 1990 across republics, and Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, shortly followed by the more ethnically mixed and geographically more vulnerable Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 1992. Competing goals in this war varied; Serbia, under Slobodan Milošević, working to create a "Greater Serbia," flexed his power behind the scenes, supplying the Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić and his general Ratko Mladić, with financial and military support before and after Bosnian Serbs declared an independent Serbian republic (Republika Srpska). Croatia, under Franjo Tuđman, in its own war for independence, attempted to annex the parts of Bosnia mainly populated by Bosnian Croats. Alija Izetbegović, representing the Bosnian Muslim party in BiH, strove to keep Bosnia a united but independent country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina officially went to war in April 1992; what resulted in the next three and a half years was widespread ethnic cleansing, mass rape, and genocide, the majority of which was committed against Bosnian Muslims; after the war, it was also revealed that atrocities, including concentration camps, were committed on all three sides (Smajić, 2010). The end to the war came in the form of the Dayton Accords, signed in December of 1995. While Dayton brought an end to the violence, it came at the price of an excessively complex governmental system, which essentially stalemated the war and divided the country into two highly independent entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. Ethnic divisions were legitimized and remain in place politically and socially. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague, established during the war, has slowly been distributing sentences for war crimes; however, opinions vary as to the bias and efficacy of such trials, particularly considering the UN and the international community's disastrous failure to prevent such atrocities. According to World Bank data, BiH currently has the highest youth unemployment rate and one of the highest general unemployment rates in the world. Despite receiving more aid per capita than any other European country under the Marshall Plan post-war (Pasic, 2011), corruption is widespread and well known.

Methodology

The interview structure is broken into four sections: creating a profile, past memories, present views, and future outlook. All names have been changed, but they reflect the cultural practice of naming one's children related to heritage, for example, Fatima is changed to Yasira or Aleksander is changed to Dušan.

Age & Gender: Four participants were female and four were male. The age range is from (at the start of the war) 6 years old to 17 years old. I purposely did not define an age limit; the primary restriction was that the participants had to be conscious and aware of the situation but be unable to take any action to change their circumstances. This of course is subjective, hence my hesitation to automatically limit the participant pool. For example, one participant was recruited into the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) during the war, but in his interview talks about his personal struggle with being a pacifist and essentially a pawn in a war out of his control.

Marital Status, Occupation, & Language: Most participants were unmarried without children. Occupations varied in industry, but all participants were university educated, many with post-graduate degrees. The language is in English. I would like to continue this research and gather a wider participant pool as I am aware that it lacks diversity in this area.

Place of Origin & Current Location: I interviewed people originally from Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Konjic. Emina, Dželila, and Haris remained in Sarajevo throughout the siege. Jovan remained in Banja Luka until deployment in the VRS. Tomislav left Banja Luka for Belgrade very early in the war but returned after a year. Branka left Sarajevo as a refugee in Croatia but returned several years after the war ended. Lastly, Zehra and Damir left during the war and remained abroad, making them members of the Bosnian Diaspora.

Ethnicity & Religion: When asked to identify their ethnicity, some participants answered with exactness, for example "Bosnian Muslim," or "Serbian," while others gave much broader answers.

That's kind of the toughest question you can ask someone... By the law, you must be either Serbian, Croat, or Bosniak, or others. So during the, I don't know, when I'm working or whatever I need to cross Bosniak, but I declare myself as Bosnian... By the constitution, I must be one of those three. (Haris)

I know that this may be the problem that some people would say Bosnian or something like that. I do not have problem with that category "Bosnian," but I really avoid to do that because I always have a feeling that one group manipulated that nationality, so I do not like that term "Other." I think that's just term as a term is terrible, but I always use it... I really have a totally different background in my family, but that is not the only one reason why I choose to do that. I really do not want to be in one category... If you are not a constituent,

you must be one national minority. I am not national minority. I am not constitutive. I am—I just do not feel like I belong to some ethnics group. (Dželila)

I would say my background is mixed ethnicity, Serbian and Croatian, and there is a thing here in Bosnia that one group of people who don't want to be put in a box, so they want to say that we are all Bosnian and Herzegovinians. But I think that's wrong, because that is like citizenship and not the ethnicity, and the need to just put us all under the same name is kind of fascist. Because it presumes that if we are not the same, we cannot get along. So I don't feel a special correlation to my ethnicity. (Branka)

Identity is a common and recurring theme in these interviews, unsurprisingly because of the role ethnicity played in the war. Even this seemingly simple profiling question revealed the complexity and the insight into which one's identity in a political atmosphere is taken into account.

Past: Memories of War

In this section, I asked participants about pre-war childhood and nostalgia, wartime memory, becoming aware, and identifying the enemy. All of the participants had what they considered good and normal childhoods, many speaking of the former SFRY as providing economic stability and a certain level of comfortable living. Jovan's answer best summed up the general opinion of childhood in the former communist state:

I don't know. Maybe we were living in a dream. Maybe we were told lies. But, you know, I really loved that kind of dream. You know, I enjoyed it... In other words I enjoyed that kind of lie.

Like Jovan, this realistic nostalgia of sorts was commonly felt among participants who felt, either through past recognition or present reflection, that life was not actually as perfect as it seemed, but continued to look fondly back at that past anyway. Dželila even felt nostalgia when reflecting on her experience through the siege of Sarajevo. She explained that despite the horrible living conditions, there was an emphasis on maintaining normalcy. As a young teenager, this meant hanging out with her friends, going to school (when she could), and occasionally lying to her parents. For some participants, memory is divided into two periods: before the war and after the war. Certainly, this phrasing is commonly heard among older generations. However, for Dželila, the war was something that happened around her, something she lived through but that did not stop her from living. She wondered aloud if her normalcy was best maintained because of her age, or also perhaps because she did not experience any particularly personal trauma.

Emina, on the other hand, clearly remembers the day her father was killed as the day she realized the nature of war. She was able to describe the flowery skirt she was wearing, what the weather was like that day, and how she remembers catching a dandelion and making a wish:

I remember catching that, and making a wish, you know, of course there was this boy that I liked, so I'm thinking I want to be his girlfriend. And then the second wish was so that nobody gets killed in my family. Well obviously that wish came too late for that day anyway.

Not only does she remember very specific details about the entire course of the day, which she considers to be a result of the stark difference between the hours before she found out her father had been killed and after, but she also exemplifies the contrast between the innocence of childhood and the violence of war. Her first priority when making the wish is for this young crush, and only as an afterthought does she wish for her family's safety. The very idea that something bad could happen to her, that war could enter her life beyond the lack of electricity, food, and warm clothing, was simply unfathomable.

Haris' first interaction with war came when he narrowly escaped deportation and possible execution as Serb soldiers neared his apartment building:

I mean, the first moment when I was kind of really scared, it was when I saw two tanks at the angles of our building, and who started out to taking people out and leaving with them. So it was like two buildings before us, and then the next one was our building, and fortunately—fortunately—we had time to escape.

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After moving to a safer location in the center of town, Haris, like Dželila and even to some extent Emina, lived as close to a normal life as possible under the circumstances. All three lived under constant threat during the siege, however, all spoke of needing this normalcy; indeed, Haris spoke with pride about the resilience of the city in continuing cultural events, such as the Sarajevo Film Festival, which began during the war. This normalcy was not only necessary to maintain one's sanity but also an act of defiance in the face of aggression.

Participants also became aware of their identity or discovered its significance just before or during the war, although not typically because of one specific event. More commonly, this discovery of identity was included in the early stages of the war. For example, Zehra became aware that she had a Muslim name, Haris realized that only his Serb friends were leaving Sarajevo, and Jovan found that Croats began leaving his neighborhood, followed by Muslims, including eventually his friend, Damir. Interestingly, it was Damir who expressed how he felt the anti-Muslim attitude came only after the war started. Jovan wondered in our interview, however, if this was in fact the reality or if this was because they had a very close-knit group of friends who protected each other from the ethnic tension that he sensed had been a growing concern. In any case, Damir's family did eventually flee Banja Luka as the situation became too dangerous. He

spoke about seeing the effects of being exposed to violence, especially violence committed by one's own army:

If you watch people get slaughtered and killed or tortured, if you're like 18, 19, you just go crazy. And that made my life, like, very scary because then you have a bunch of crazy people also walking around, and with guns, you know? And then you don't know what's going to happen.

Unlike Damir, who was rejected from recruitment because of his ethnicity, Jovan was recruited by the VRS when he turned 18 and ultimately served 16 months before the war's end. His story involved serious reflection into his own views as a pacifist:

You see we didn't try to find a justification, you know? "Our friends are gone, so we can play war." No. Knowing that you can shoot someone, take someone's life—purposefully or un-purposefully—it's awful. That was my opinion. That is my opinion now.

From his perspective, the knowledge that he may eventually be forced to take a life in a kill-or-be-killed situation was haunting. He resisted the suggestion that not knowing the enemy made it easier to kill; rather, he emphasized how lucky he was for never being in a situation that necessitated using his gun.

While I hesitate to apply the relationship between Damir and Jovan beyond their individual experiences, their interviews—conducted separately—did reveal commonalities across participants. For example, nearly every participant stressed early on in the interview that they had friends of all ethnicities and religions when they were children. When later discussing the memory of war and its impact on identity, several still maintained that beyond not holding any prejudice, they simply did not care about identifying each other by the basis of ethnicity. But this was not met without contradiction. Tomislav, who firmly declared himself Serb in the beginning of our interview and quite often reverted to a collective identity as “We Serbs,” explained that he was unaware of his ethnicity before the war, that friendships between different religions were the norm, and insisted that Muslims should feel welcome to live in Banja Luka today. However, he also maintained that the separation of people was beneficial for all because, as he saw it, clearly they could not live together peacefully. Conversely, Zehra, who said she was born to Islam but does not identify further than that, regularly struggled with contradiction. One particular moment of reflection came on the third day of Marš Mira, an annual peace march commemorating the genocide at Srebrenica, in which she contemplated her feelings when passing through Republika Srpska:

I have to admit that for me the third day also was a bit of, I guess, my own aggression coming out, of “I'm here, I'm here,” and it was a kind of satisfaction of being there, and then I felt ashamed of that feeling because I identify that to be aggressive... And I didn't take pride in that.

For Zehra, who left very early in the war and remained abroad in the Diaspora, finding answers to questions related to her past was an integral part of her identity. She acknowledged that much of her struggle was related to coping with the guilt at not being present for a war she felt wholly a part of and affected by. Haris, like Zehra and most of the other participants, maintains his apathy about his own ethnicity, feeling forced to declare one over another for political reasons, but he did feel a sense of pride at being from Sarajevo and surviving the siege. Jovan, who is technically half-Serbian, formally declared his father's ethnicity as Slovenian after the war, putting him in the minority "Other" category. While he did not have an exact answer as to his motivation, he too maintained that being in one box or another was unnecessary, polarizing, and essentially a way for the politicians to maintain their power with the status quo. Branka, who struggled with her identity as an outsider and a refugee while living in Zagreb after escaping Sarajevo, continued to struggle with her identity even after returning. For Zehra and Branka, leaving during the war put them in a limbo of questioning their identity. This was not the case for Damir, however, who acknowledged his ethnicity but was just as quick to say that he is not practicing any religion. For Branka, Dželila, and Jovan who all declared themselves as "Other," identity was a personal choice made upon reflection of their experience during the war.

Concluding Remarks

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Participants experienced a wide range of exposure to the war. Indeed, some shared similar experiences, e.g. living through the siege of Sarajevo, growing up together in Banja Luka, or being a part of the Bosnian Diaspora. Many were forced to flee, even more lost friends or relatives. Certain patterns did arise, particularly in how memory of war shaped personal identity. All were either unaware of their identity or did not consider it to be an important facet in their everyday lives before the war. All believed that, regardless of how apathetic towards or attached to their ethnicity they personally were, maintaining politically set identities were a manipulation by an unspecified governmental force to keep politicians in power by pitting people against each other. Most pined for their nostalgic pre-war, idealistic Yugoslav ("brotherhood and unity") childhood, although war made these memories biting with realism. Maintaining normalcy was a common theme, but most especially for those who lived under constant threat of harm. And finally, interethnic friendships were stressed amongst most participants.

While I do not have time today to go into much detail as to the later parts of this project—that is, the present and future views and outlooks—I would like to briefly touch upon these topics. Participants across the board were not optimistic about reconciliation, the exact

definition of which was left open to interpretation. Although most stressed their interethnic friendships before the war and maintain their lack of bias today, they overwhelmingly believe that reconciliation is at worst not possible and at best possible only with major, systemic change. This change came at different suggestions; however, it became clear very quickly that there are fundamentally different beliefs present that are currently inhibiting proactive solutions. Namely, those in the Federation did not believe that Republika Srpska as an independent entity should exist as it is currently, which to most is considered land rewarded for genocide in a war of aggression. Further, although it is roundly acknowledged as responsible for stopping the war, the Dayton Accords were heavily problematic at the time of signature and remain untouched, essentially resulting in a shaky stalemate within the politically and ethnically divided country. Tomislav, and others I did not formally interview in Republika Srpska, were against this argument, maintaining that their legal status as an entity was a result of civil war, not aggression, and generally insisted in a conflation of numbers of victims. This last point is especially problematic because, returning to the theme of contradiction, although it was agreed that genocide and other atrocities occurred, this was acknowledged in the same breath of atrocities committed against Serbs, too. This juxtaposition of “yes, but,” although perhaps unintentional, reads as justification for violence.

More pressing to participants than memory of war was the poor health of the economy and severe lack of jobs. Most were not optimistic about Bosnia’s application to the EU, and many were not optimistic about the status of the EU on its own. Generally, participants were not actively engaged in Bosnian politics or acts of change; heavy protesting last year gave a brief spark of hope, and even the cross-ethnic assistance following the floods that devastated the country later on similarly gave rise in a belief that fundamental changes could be on the horizon. However, both failed to take permanent hold, and participants overwhelmingly felt a sense of hopelessness when it came to the future of their country.

Despite the pessimism, people do still care, with many expressing regret at the droves of educated youth leaving the country, the seemingly endless corruption in government, and the political battleground their ruggedly beautiful and naturally resourceful country has become. Their culture, as vibrant and varied as it is, is extremely important. In spite of everything—their childhoods being cut short, the distrust in and disillusionment with the international community, living through trauma—participants carried a dark but quick sense of humor, a deep-rooted social structure based in family, and a surprisingly sustained level of steadiness despite the numerous cups of coffee.

After the war's end, Jovan recalled checking on the statuses of his friends. Too afraid to hear bad news over the phone, he took his chances wandering the streets:

I went walking and I think it was... that guy, he has the same name. And I think, you know, he says something, "Hi!"

I said, "Hi! You are alive."

"Yes, and you are alive, too."

"Great! Let's have a beer."

"Perfect." You know?... And you knew that everything started to become normal again.

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SUMMARY

Memory and Conflict: Interviews with Youth of the Bosnian War

This paper was part of a multi-media project presented at the University of Gdańsk in September 2015. It examines the preliminary findings of interviews conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and over Skype in July and August of 2015. Eight participants—ranging in age, gender, religion, ethnicity, place of origin, and other profiling components—answered questions regarding past memories of childhood interrupted by the 1992-1995 war, how those memories affect personal identity and current views on the social, political, and economic conditions of BiH, and future outlook with particular attention focused on reconciliation. All names have been changed. For reference purposes, the list of abbreviations and bibliography is included at the end.

KEYWORDS

Conflict, war, Bosnia and Herzegovina, memory, interviews, reconciliation, identity, religion, ethnicity

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Bosna i Hercegovina* (BiH)
- Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)
- Army of Republika Srpska, *Vojska Republika Srpska* (VRS)
- International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)
- Jugoslav People's Army, *Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija* (JNA)