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DEFINITIONS OF WAR VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION IN NARRATIVES OF SURVIVORS FROM THE WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Abstract

Previous research on violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina have emphasized the importance of narratives without focusing on narratives mentioning war violence, but they have not analyzed stories on war violence that were the product of interpersonal interaction and meaning-making activity. The aim of this study is to fill this knowledge gap by analyzing the narratives of survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia in the 1990s. The focus lies on analyzing interviewees’ description of war-time violence and also analyzing discursive patterns that contribute in constructing the phenomenon “war violence”. Analysis shows that the interpersonal interactions that caused the violence continue even after the violent situation is over. Recollections from perpetrators and those subjected to violence of the war do not exist only as verbal constructions in Bosnia of today. Stories about violent situations live their own lives after the war and continue being important to individuals and social life. Individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war in the 1990s are, in a legal sense, in a recognized violence-afflicted victim category. Several perpetrators were sentenced by the Hague Tribunal and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on War Crime. The crimes committed in northwestern Bosnia are qualified as genocide according to indictments against former Serbian leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. All interviewees in this study experienced and survived the war in northwestern Bosnia. These individuals have a present, ongoing relation with these communities: Some live there permanently, and some spend their summers in northwestern Bosnia. Institutions in the administrative entity Republika Srpska (to which northwestern Bosnia now belong administratively) deny genocide, and this approach to war-time events becomes a central theme in future, post-war analysis of the phenomena “war violence”, and “reconciliation”. Therefore, it is very important to analyze the political elite’s denial of the systematic acts of violence during the war that have been conveyed by the Hague Tribunal, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on War Crime, and Bosnian media. The narratives in my empirical material seem to be influenced by (or coherent with) the rhetoric mediated in these forums. When informants emphasize extermination and the systematization of violence during the war, they produce and reproduce the image of a mutual struggle on a collective level. The aim of this struggle seems to be that the described acts of violence be recognized as genocide.