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## Definitions of Violence: Narratives of Survivors from the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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**Title:**

Definitions of Violence: Narratives of Survivors from the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Abstract**

Previous research on violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has resulted in a one-sided presentation of the phenomenon “war violence.” Researchers 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 article 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.” My analysis shows that the individual’s interpretation of the biographical consequences of war violence is intimately related to the interviewee’s own war experiences. All interviewees described war violence as something morally reprehensible. These narratives recounting violent situations, from perpetrators of violence and those subjected to violence, not only exist as mental constructions but also live on even after the war; thus, they have real consequences for the individuals and society.

**Keywords:** violence, war, perpetrator of violence, subjected to violence, narrative, Bosnia

## Introduction

The starting point of this article is the war that took place in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina and more specifically interpersonal interpretations of violence and the biographical impact of war-time violence. Serbian soldiers and police targeted their use of violent force directly against the civilian populations in northwestern Bosnia. In their quest to expel Bosniacs<sup>1</sup> and Croats from this area, Serbian soldiers and police used mass executions, forced flight, systematic rape, and concentration camps (Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005). For example only in the municipality of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia, the number of the killed Bosniaks and Croats during the summer 1992 was more than 3000 (more than 200 women and 100 children was killed) and more than 40000 Bosniaks and Croats, nearly half the prewar population in Prijedor, is driven into exile (Basic 2016; Tokaca 2013; Zwierzchowski and Tabeau 2010; Tabeau 2009; Cekic 2009; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; IPC Patria 2000; Greve and Bergsmo 1994).

Earlier research concerning violence during the war in Bosnia presents a one-sided picture of the phenomenon “war violence” as well as of the actors—the “violent perpetrator” and those “subjected to violence.” These studies develop a picture of the phenomenon “war violence” based on analyses of sieges and bombings of cities, killing, rape, and the expulsion of civilians, both adults and children. Examples of violent perpetrators are presented through images of soldiers and police who have killed, raped, and expelled civilians. As an example of “subjected to violence,” we often see images of killed or raped and expelled civilian adults and children (Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007; Houge 2008; Maček 2009; Mannergren Selimovic 2010; Skjelsbæk 2007; Steflja 2010; Stover and Weinstein 2004). Researchers have discovered the importance of post-war narratives but have not paid attention to stories on war violence or analyzed the stories on war violence as a product of interpersonal interaction and as a meaning-creating activity.

The aim of this article is to fill this knowledge gap through analyzing the stories told by survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia during the 1990s. The purpose is to analyze how

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<sup>1</sup> Bosnian Muslims began to identify themselves as Bosniacs during the war. The term ‘Bosniac’ is actually an old word meaning ‘Bosnian,’ which is now used both in an official context and everyday language. Both “Bosniac” and “Muslim” are used in everyday speech.

the survivors describe war-time violence and which discursive patterns emerge in the construction of the category “war violence.” My question is: How do the interviewees describe war-time violence? In this study, I seek to touch on the phenomenon “war violence” by analyzing the narratives of the informants, namely their descriptions in relation to themselves and others.

The phenomenon “war violence” is a consistent theme in this article. I found that earlier research regarding violence during the war in Bosnia was insufficient for this analysis (Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007; Houge 2008; Maček 2009; Mannergren Selimovic 2010; Skjelsbæk 2007; Steflja 2010; Stover and Weinstein 2004). As an aid for the analysis, I therefore used a somewhat more general sociological research on violence based on interpersonal interaction (Åkerström 2002; Betz 1977; Collins 2008; Katz 1988; Presser 2013; Schinkel 2004; Stanko 2003).

This analysis will show that the interpretation of the biographical consequences of war violence is intimately related to the subject’s own war experiences. In the following, I try to highlight how the creation of the concept “war violence” is made visible when the interviewees, in the empirical material, talk about (1) a new social order in society, (2) human suffering, (3) sexual violence, and (4) slaughter of humans.

### **Analytical starting point and methodology**

This study joins those narrative traditions within sociology where verbal stories are regarded as both discursive and based on experience (Riessman 1993, 2008). The general starting point of this study is based on interaction but is also inspired by how people portray their social reality (Blumer 1969/1986; Garfinkel 1967/1984). Stories are interpretative because they are used to try to explain the situation, but in turn, they need to be analyzed (Riessman 1993, 2008).

Ethnomethodology does not explain what a social phenomenon is but how it is created (Garfinkel 1967/1984). From this perspective, one can regard both the interviewees’ stories and the analysis of them as meaning-making activities (Blumer 1969/1986; Garfinkel 1967/1984; Riessman 1993, 2008). In this study, narratives are analyzed as a separate piece of reality; I assume that the narrator is creating a reality within his story (Potter 1996/2007: 97-

98). During the analysis I ask: How is the actor creating his description? What is the actor doing with his story? For what purpose does the actor do precisely this?

### *Field work and interviews*

This article is based on different types of empirical material, especially recorded interviews, carried out with 27 survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina, and field observations (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Theidon 2001). The material for this study was collected during two phases. During phase one, March and November of 2004, I carried out fieldwork in Ljubija, a community in northwestern Bosnia. I interviewed 14 individuals who lived there at that time, five men and two women who had spent the entire war in Ljubija, as well as four men and three women who were expelled from Ljubija during the war but had returned afterward. Six of the fourteen interviewees were Serbs, five were Bosniacs, and three were Croats.

During the first phase, I was in Ljubija carrying out observations, including on buses and at bus stops, marketplaces, and cafés. In these places, I noted parts of the social reality through field notes. These field notes were produced as follows: I often wrote down short observations on a piece of paper, in a situation or immediately after. I usually expanded these notes the same day, thus shaping field observations into a text by building on these notations and recollections from the observations (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 17-65; Theidon 2001). During some of the interviews, I asked some “trigger questions” concerning violent situations that occurred in Ljubija during the war (see field interview with Samira under the section *War violence and new social order*). In addition, I collected and analyzed the daily newspapers that could be bought in Ljubija during my stay.

Under phase two, from April through June of 2006, I interviewed nine former concentration camp detainees and four close relatives. The detainees had been placed in the concentration camps by Serbian soldiers and police despite being civilians during the war. At the time of the interviews, some of the interviewees lived in Sweden and some lived in Denmark and some in Norway. Eleven of those interviewed came from the municipality of Prijedor (to which Ljubija belongs). The two remaining interviewees came from two other municipalities in northwestern Bosnia. Ten men and three women were interviewed; three interviewees were Croats and ten were Bosniacs.

I personally experienced the beginning of the war as a member of one of those groups of people expelled from that area. I personally know most of the interviewees from before the war, those interviewed during the field work in Ljubija, and those individuals mentioned by the interviewees in Ljubija. I am also familiar with some of the described violent situations that took place during the war in Ljubija and Prijedor. During my work on this study, I faced the dilemma of originating from that area in northwestern Bosnia.

I worked continuously and intensively to emerge as neutral in the analysis. On the other hand, my own experiences from the war in Bosnia helped me to better understand, recognize, and analyze general social phenomena such as war violence. During my analysis, I tried to act in as value-free a way as possible. I worked continuously and intensively against collectively blaming and homogenizing any of the sides in the war. The analytical work has continuously been presented at seminars and at national and international conferences.

The material was transcribed into the Bosnian language. Usually, I did this the same day or the following days to ensure a qualitative documentation of details and comments in the transcription. By commenting in the transcription, I created a categorization of data (Silverman 1993/2006). When encoding the statements, I identified markers of violence in the material (discursive patterns of war violence). Empirical sequences presented in this study were categorized in the material as “violence – new social order,” “violence – human suffering,” “sexual violence,” and “violence – slaughter of humans.” My choice of empirical examples was guided by the study’s purpose, i.e., to analyze how interviewees describe war-time violence as well as finding discursive patterns that participate in the creation of the category “war violence.” Furthermore, the choice of empirical example was guided by the *analytical quality of the sequence*, i.e., to what extent the example clarified the analytical point I wanted to highlight.

The interviews were carried out in a conversation-oriented fashion in which I took on the role of interlocutor rather than interrogator. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) call this way of interviewing, where the interviewer takes on the role of an improvising and flexible conversational partner, an “active interview.” In practical terms, this means that I assumed the role of an interested listener wanting to learn more about war violence, the perpetrators, and

those subjected to violence. This fashion of interviewing promotes both the conversation and the moral production of the interviewees (Rapley 2001; Theidon 2001).

The interviews analyzed in this study have a strong emotional charge. They concern painful stories about neighbors who changed their behavior when the war began: One day, a neighbor is a civilian greeting you just as friendly as ever, and a week later, the same neighbor is in uniform; he still greets, but he also participates in massacres, rapes, robberies, and abduction of neighbors to place them in concentration camps. The narratives also tell us how the camps were organized and governed; they describe “pockets of resistance” and survival tactics, and they speak of rituals confirming the guards’ oppression and the inmates’ submission (Basic 2007, 2016). I also researched the competition for the victim role after the war as well as reconciliation and implacability of social life in the post-war society of present-day Bosnia, namely how people, in their everyday lives, try to cope with the fact that some events can never be forgiven, or at least leave very few opportunities for reconciliation (Basic 2016, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2007, 2005<sup>2</sup>). The narratives contain several intersection points among war, violence, crime, ethnicity, nationalism, “total institutions” (extreme institutions that control the detainee’s whole existence), and power. In this article, I analyze the term ‘violence’ as a particularly relevant component in these specific stories that I analyzed.

### **Violence as an interpersonal interaction**

Randall Collins (2008) analyzes the phenomenon “violence” from a micro-sociological perspective with a focus on the individual in a situation that evolves into violence. He argues that these situations can be studied as exceptions in ordinary interactive patterns, during an interactive situation or in an interactive chain. Collins (2004) means that social life is formed through a series of rituals in which individuals are interlinked when a mutual *point of interest* awakens their curiosity. Individuals can disregard experiences from previous situations when they move between different situations. In other words, earlier situations merge with new ones. Even though violent situations could be seen as exceptions from normal interactive patterns, they cannot automatically be seen as a disruption of the interaction (Collins 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> These analyses are based on the same data and with comparatively different research questions.



Collins (2008) projects an image that violence is hard to follow through. In a normal violence-free social existence, individuals act much too peacefully and helpfully with others to engage in violence. Individuals gladly engage in verbal conflicts, but they are not portrayed as violently as one would presume. Collins argues that stories about violence almost always tend to be more violent than the situation they describe.

In his analysis, Collins separates conflict and violence. More than conflict is needed to make an individual use violence, according to Collins, and an escalating conflict is not to be seen as a disruption of interaction. Simmel (1908/1955) argues that in contrast to perfunctory perceptions that conflict means disruption in the parties' relations, you could see conflict as unifying to the parties. He also notes borderline conflicts that are difficult to analyze as unifying in the relation. Such examples are those conflicts that "aim at annihilating" the others; another example is an assassination where "the proportion of unifying elements" between the murderer and his victim "have become equal to zero."

Collins (2008) analyzes violence as an escalated conflict that becomes physical. He argues that all interaction—even violent interaction—is bound to a *situation*, *context*, and *positional relations* between the actors (Collins 2004). He argues that the actors in the interaction produce and reproduce the inferior and superior (dominant) actor. Often the inferior and superior are appointed in the narrative process, which contributes to the construction of the specific situation—even the violent situation (Collins 2004, 2008).

To act with violence during a war is harder than one would imagine, Collins argues (2008). War movies and the media create an image of the brave, competent, and effective soldier, but Collins' study shows that the perpetrators of violence during the war (soldiers) might equally as well be frightened, incompetent, and inefficient. This is especially applicable to *close violence* (violence between a perpetrator and those subjected to violence who are close). The most efficient soldier is the one who perpetrates violence from a distance: the sniper, the bomber, the artilleryman.

Collins (2008) means that all violence is shaped by *emotional energy*, an emotional field arising from fear and tension. He believes that previously experienced situations "fuel" people with a certain emotional energy. When these people move between different situations or when they are especially active, they carry this charge from former circumstances (Collins

2004: 109). For emotional energy to occur in a situation of confrontation requires that the individual has *self-confidence* and *the public's confidence* (Collins 2008). To act out violence in close combat during the war means that the soldier must surpass the tension and fear present in the violent confrontation. Taking "the last step" and becoming violent is not something that happens automatically and without reflection, according to Collins (2008). His point is that a violent situation, such as those in war, must not create violent individuals. To carry out violence during a war requires the individual to feel *mobilization*, *euphoria*, and a *bodily sense of excitement*, all with a pinch of *panic*. These dimensions can create a successful perpetrator in a war situation where close violence sometimes might be the only way out. Collins (2008) notes that for soldiers, it is most difficult to engage in violence when close to the enemy.

The study of Lois Presser (2013) paints a diversified image of the social reality, especially in a war situation, where an act seen as righteous for one side is the worst atrocity for the other. The split logic of the diversified reality is produced and reproduced, inter alia, through stories. These stories produce and reproduce dominant actors in these violent situations, actors who acquire some kind of *permit* to hurt the inferior actor. In an interesting way, Presser highlights how the dominant actors define themselves as being so *powerless* that they could not avoid hurting the inferiors. The dominant actors are given a permit from society to use violence, but they also seem to have been caught in a *violence-interactive web* without a way out.

Presser (2013) writes that Tutsis in Rwanda, prior to and during the genocide in 1994, were called "cockroaches" and "dogs" and that Jews in Nazi Germany were called "rats." Disparaging those who are the target of a violent attack means that an object of lesser complexity than the perpetrator is created, which confirms the *justification* of the violence (compare Katz 1988: 12-15, the term "righteous slaughter"). Presser notes that dominant perpetrators of violence are often under the influence of stories that are produced, reproduced, and distributed throughout the society. She argues that the new social order that emerges in society during war results in the dehumanization of those subjected to violence. It is also common that the use of violence is normalized into everyday interaction, thus becoming the prevailing norm in war society.

David Wästerfors (2014) criticizes Presser's study, referring to the lack of theoretical and empirical interest for interpersonal interaction in violent situations. Wästerfors argues the

existence of research on violence (for example, Randall Collins and Jack Katz's violence analysis) that provides tools for a more vivid and direct way of analyzing violent situations, by paying attention to emotions, methods, and types of violence, and the interactive dynamics that are integrated into narrative structures.

Earlier research on the phenomenon "war violence" uses Collins (2008) but usually without expanding his reasoning; in those studies, war violence is not analyzed as an interactive and situation-induced phenomenon. These studies tend to remain at a general macro-level, and in their analysis, their authors miss the relations between the perpetrator and the situation, between the perpetrator and the public, and between the perpetrator and those subjected to violence. It is common that authors do not go deeper into some form of empirical material. The studies could be described as narratives on war violence without ever analyzing the narratives (for example, see Malešević [2010] as well as Blattman and Miguel [2009]). Similar criticism is formulated by Wästerfors (2014) when reviewing Presser (2013). The existence of this criticism argues the need for a violence study that recognizes violence as an interactive phenomenon.

In the following sections, I primarily analyze the interactions regarding the violence perpetrators' (the superiors) use of power and the interviewee's response to these interactions; later on in the stories (Wrong 1979: 26, 42, 222-225). The "violence" category is not an objective category but is constituted in the interaction between individuals, in the very definition of the specific violent situation (Collins 2008; Schinkel 2004). It can be regarded as an abstraction or social type (Åkerström 2002; Stanko 2003). According to Åkerström (2002), definitions of the "violence" phenomenon could be seen as the result of a *moral production* and *boundary drawing work*. She believes that the content of the violence term is not obvious and that the actors' positions within the interaction as well as the context in which the interaction occurs are important to the definition process. Betz (1977) argues that the "violence" term holds a judgmental effect and that the moral responsibility of the perpetrator implicitly makes this behavior morally reprehensible. The perpetrator himself can struggle with moral questions, sometimes hiding them, and then when perpetrating violence, testing his utmost censored wishes (Athens 1997; Katz 1988).

Interviewees in my study present violence as something that is morally wrong and despicable. I argue that the narrators' portrayals of war perpetrators have real consequences after the

war—the image of the violent situation does not just exist as a conception of the mind. The approaches of the mentioned researchers seem useful to my ambition to analyze the interviewees’ stories on violence, both as an analytic starting point and as a subject for nuances. My analytic discoveries are presented under the following themes: (1) war violence and new social order, (2) war violence and human suffering, (3) sexual war violence, and (4) war violence and slaughter of humans.

### **War violence and new social order**

Earlier research concerning violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has noted the importance of post-war stories (Basic 2016, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e; Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007; Houge 2008; Maček 2009; Mannergren Selimovic 2010; Skjelsbæk 2007; Steflja 2010; Stover and Weinstein 2004). Stories about the “war violence” phenomenon in my study produce and reproduce the image of disintegration of the social order that existed in the society before the war. Daily use of violence, during the war, is *organized* and *ritualized*, thus becoming a norm in society rather than an exception. The stories on war violence reveal how the existing social order from before the war is rejected, and in its place is the war-time social order that is upheld.

The war made its entrance in Ljubija<sup>3</sup> at the end of spring 1992 when Serb soldiers and police took over the local administration without any armed resistance. Several villages in the Ljubija region (for example, Hambarine, Briševo, and Biščani) were shelled by Serbian artillery while media spread propaganda about “Muslim and Croat war crimes against Serbs” to create panic (Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Greve and Bergsmo 1994; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005). The residents of these villages were unarmed and sought shelter in the mountains and valleys surrounding Ljubija. A large number of refugees were caught by Serbian soldiers and police. Some were instantly executed in the woods, and some were transported to Ljubija where they first were battered in the central square in Ljubija or at the Ljubija football stadium. Finally, they were executed in the stadium or at other locations around Ljubija (Basic 2016; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-97-24-T;

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to the war, Ljubija was a multicultural society. The inhabitants lived in two administrative communities (Mjesne zajednice). Upper Ljubija was ethnically mixed, and most of the inhabitants lived in flats. Lower Ljubija was predominately inhabited by Bosniacs, and the townscape was dominated by private houses. Most residents worked in the Ljubija iron mine prior to the war.

Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). One of the interviewees, Vlado, recounted a violent situation from the central square in Ljubija that he witnessed:

I will never forget when there were 15 Muslims lying on their bellies in the center while Serbs beat them and sang “who is saying, who is lying that Serbia is small.” Such uniformed savages, damn it. They jumped on their backs and kicked their heads, which moved lifelessly, like a football. It still echoes in my head how these poor people screamed. The singing too, “who is saying, who is lying.”

Collins (2008) means that it is difficult to take to violence but not impossible. Doing so usually requires charging—you must be trained or drilled by an army or in other ways induced to take the leap, bypassing the tension and fear that usually hold us back when in an escalating confrontation. Vlado’s story retells an episode “in the middle” of an event that had probably been going on for some time. The United Nations, Hague Tribunal, and Bosnia and Herzegovina Tribunal on War Crime report on events that were ongoing a long time before the war started. These reports and sentences present years of Serbian propaganda, mobilization, identity-creation in contrast to others, and the production of degrading images of Croats and Bosniacs. There are concrete examples of glorification of violence and the revival of Serbian ideals from earlier wars (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994; ICTY 2015a; ICTY 2015b). Something must also have happened in the central square in Ljubija before the soldiers started jumping on the subjected-to-violence bodies. The soldiers probably underwent some sort of identity change when enlisted in the Serbian army, when they received their uniforms and weapons. The song itself should, using Collins’ conceptual apparatus, be interpreted as a way to evoke violence, similar to chants mustering support for a sports team.

Vlado dramatizes the described situation, aiming at presenting the perpetrators’ actions as morally despicable (“Such uniformed savages, damn it”) and the subjected-to-violence position as a typical example of submission and weakness (Åkerström 2002; Betz 1977; Collins 2008; Wrong 1979). Those stricken by violence lie “on their bellies” and are weak, almost non-acting. I write “almost” because there is one activity that Vlado notices: These individuals scream while being battered. These screams appear in this story 14 years after the described situation. The image of the perpetrators and those subjected to violence does not

seem to exist merely as a construction of the mind. Vlado says that it still “echoes” in his head and that he “will never forget.” It seems that stories about perpetrators and those subjected to violence still live, even long after the war.

Another thing that still echoes in Vlado’s head is the song: “who is saying, who is lying that Serbia is small.” Vlado portrays the perpetrators as a coherent violence-exercising group. In his description, he makes an ethnic generalization of the perpetrators and the subjected-to-violence (Katzs 1988: 237-273). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993) argues that ethnic identity is an ongoing process of relations between actors who perceive themselves as distant from members of other groups with whom they have or feel having a minimum of regular interaction. Ethnic identity is based on the contrast to the others. Hylland Eriksen believes that ethnic identity is most significant when it is perceived as threatened. Vlado did not call the perpetrators soldiers or policemen; he said that “Serbs” used violence and sang a Serbian nationalist song. To ethnically generalize those subjected to violence, Vlado constructs the abused in the situation as “Muslims.” He makes a generalization based on opposing positions between categories.

Through his story on war violence, Vlado highlights the decay of social control which, according to his view, occurred at the beginning of the war. Such a display of violence could not be seen in Ljubija before the war. The social control of the pre-war society could not have accepted a situation in which a group of individuals is beaten publicly in an open square, screaming out loud while the perpetrators sing.

It is interesting to see how the perpetrators and the public describe the violent situation in Ljubija’s central square. Vlado’s story characterizes the perpetrators as confident during the use of violence, so secure that they even sing. Vlado expresses his disgust, but he does not say anything about the public’s reactions. Collins (2004, 2008) argues that the use of violence that is justified as a punishment for an alleged crime can verify and enhance the collective opinion, emotions, and conception and thus the social solidarity.

Coherence between those using violence and the public was retold by several of the informants during my field work in Ljubija. (I personally witnessed some parts of that situation during the war; I also asked about it during my field work, and I analyzed parts of my experiences in Basic 2005: 31-35). During a field interview, Samira told me how she had

seen a lifeless body being kicked repeatedly by several individuals in the Ljubija central square while spectators were cheering. The background story is that the media had singled out a pre-war policeman for an assault against Serbian soldiers. A couple of months later, Serbian soldiers captured him in the forests surrounding Ljubija. In Samira's story, his lifeless body is thrown from a lorry on to Ljubija's central square. Samira says that she was standing at a window overlooking the square from a rather high position. She told me that when the information about the capture was released in Ljubija, a "mob" came running from a street into the square as she was watching. She said that hundreds of Serbian soldiers, policemen, civilians, women, and children had come to the square. Several individuals were shooting firearms into the sky, cheering, and at the same time kicking the policeman's lifeless body. Samira particularly spoke of her neighbor and his family participating in this violent situation. In her story, the neighbor, a former employee in the iron mine, is now uniformed and armed. His son is also participating, and he is also armed. He is shooting in the air. The neighbor's wife and daughter are also participating. The wife is dressed in a house-gown (a practical dress only used in and around the home), and the daughter is wearing sports clothes. These two are kicking the lifeless body. After this episode, which happened on the main square in Ljubija, Samira heard that the policeman had been instantly executed when they caught him in the forest, and after the sequence in the square, they transported him to Hambarine where the soldiers roasted him on a spit (field notes).

Presser (2013) means that the social reality is versatile, especially in a war situation. In the eyes of the perpetrators and the audience, this "policeman" was a deviator who did not respect the current social order (or rather the current disintegration of social order according to Vlado's and Samira's perspective) and therefore should be punished. The punishment was carried out with public use of violence and through audience participation. It seems the cheering and joy expressed by the audience encouraged the perpetrators, who thus received confirmation for their actions. The participation of a large number of individuals enables this ceremony, which fulfills the community systems needed to preserve a new social order that allows this type of violence.

Pre-war social control did not allow executions in the woods or kicking a lifeless body in public, in the square. However, during the war, these events served the purpose of empowering unity and enabling the future use of violence. In the mentioned example, we have a situation where the use of violent force increased dramatically in the war society.

Collins (2008) argues that the ritualized use of violence, i.e., that which is done on a daily basis, is organized and becomes a norm in a war society. In this case, new deviants and new crimes emerged, for example, refusing to participate in war-time use of violence. An old social order is rejected, and a new one emerges and is preserved.

### **War violence and human suffering**

Stories of the phenomenon “war violence” produce and reproduce the image of human suffering during the war. In these stories, a correct moral behavior is constructed as a contrast to the stories of suffering during the war. The stories of war violence paint the picture of the perpetrator as someone who is dangerous, evil, and the ideal enemy, as a real but distant criminal who is seen as a clear threat to the existing social order from before the war.

The new war order normalized the existence of concentration camps in society (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A.; Case No.: IT-99-36-T.; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). The interviewees who were detained in concentration camps told me that inmates died in great numbers because of food shortage, diseases, battering, and planned executions. Firearms were seldom used; instead, they used baseball bats or knives. According to the interviewees, all inmates lost between 20 and 40 kg of body weight and were so emaciated that they had trouble standing up and moving. The general atmosphere and the ritualized use of violence in the camps made the inmates apathetic, and at times, it seemed that they just waited to be killed to end the pain (Basic 2016, 2007: 46). For example only in Omarska camp were held in appalling conditions, about 5000–7000 Bosniaks and Croats in summer of 1992 (including 37 women). Hundreds died of starvation, punishment beatings and ill-treatment. Hundreds was transported to different localities and executed (Basic 2016; Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). Nesim, a former concentration camp detainee, explains:

“Behind your back, Goran (Nesim addressing the interviewer by name), just one meter behind you, they slaughtered and flayed people. There was screaming and commotion. It happened beneath the feet of those lying in the last row, I think I was lying in the fourth. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard a man’s shriek of agony, torment, and pain



while being tortured. It is totally different from the cries you hear when someone is in emotional distress. I feel chills to this day when I hear someone crying. People were crying because of the torment, they begged to be killed to escape the pain. This makes your blood freeze. /.../ No one got worse off than Stipo (a person from Prijedor whom both I and Nesim know), they strapped him between four vans, I could hear this. They tortured him /.../ They battered him several days in a row while drinking and singing: 'there's no guard garde without "kokarde" (Serbian cockade) nor no soldier but the "četnik"' (chetnik – Serbian paramilitary soldier).

Nesim, like Vlado, emphasizes the "scream," beating, and nationalist songs when describing this violent situation. Moreover, Nesim notes the slaughter of humans, torture, a human "agony," and pain. A special importance is given to the sounds in Nesim's story. That which he hears can be seen as the discursive basis of his presentation of the perpetrator and those struck by the violence. Nesim says, "I feel chills to this day when I hear someone crying," which shows the importance this described situation has in his present life.

Interviewees in this study depict the perpetrators as big, strong, evil, and non-human. The suffering created by the perpetrators is making them distant actors and a threat. The portrayal of the perpetrators produces and re-produces the picture of those submitted to this violence as weak and inferior. By categorizing the perpetrators as such, interviewees also instructs others to identify the results of the perpetrators' actions. By pointing out the perpetrators' position, interviewees implicitly points out the perpetrators' complementary contrast—those subjected to violence. Note how perpetrator and the subjected to violence, in the previous empirical example, are constituted simultaneously. The perpetrators' actions are clearly shaped through a concrete dramatization and an explicit designation.

Implicitly, interviewees create the correct morality when they reject the actions of the perpetrators. In other words, interviewee's rejection, which reveals itself during the conversation, contains a moral meaning. Presser (2013) argues that a connection exists between war-time violence and the social order. What interviewees tell us could be seen as a verbal reaction to his unfulfilled expectations. These expectations—for example, helping a human in distress—are morally correct actions, which from interviewees perspective are absent in the violent situation they retell. Nesim seems surprised and horrified by the guards'

extreme use of violence and the suffering they caused. He implicitly constructs the morally correct action regarding the violent situation in contrast to that which he told us.

### **Sexual war violence**

The narratives about sexualized war violence also give an example of how the violence persists in its effects to the present day after the war in Bosnia. All interviewed and mentioned persons in this section are accommodation in Ljubija and they know each other from before the war.

Milanko says: "I feel sick from it, they put on their uniforms and go out to the villages to rape and kill women," and Radovan too: "Who gives us the right to rape someone's sister and mother." Rada reveals: "During the war, in this apartment, when Briševo was massacred, I was severely beaten by Serbs and my neighbor was raped." Nada also told me that she saw soldiers and policemen through the window as they were "partying by the Glass house. They raped women there. Drunk." The drunk group of soldiers and policemen "continued and raped Gara (Nadas neighbor who was raped)." Bela gives us instance of the personal, individual aspect of this violence and how it carries into post-war social life. She says that "Ranka and Anka (both friends of the interviewee) became pale-white, I asked them what was wrong, and they answered, here comes Laic. He had raped them lots of times during the war"

Even the stories from the concentration camps contain episodes of sexualized war violence; Zahir's story is one example of this: "Savages (Zahir refers to guards), they forced old Adnan (another inmate) to rape a girl, and she was not older than 15 years. They have also forced men on each other."

The rapes described seem to have a ritualized element with the "putting on the uniforms" and other systematized factors, and appear to have been ethnically targeted. Stories about sexualized war violence serve to support my argument that war violence in this war was more personalized/individualized—in many cases these are neighbors committing these crimes against people they know or "who are" (People) in their social networks. In many cases violence was of an individualized and personalized nature (people knew each other, they were neighbors) with this characterization of the perpetrators as sadistic, powerful and distant monsters.

Stories about war violence are examples of a certain war interaction that includes upholding normality in different relations, partly between perpetrators and those subjected to violence, and partly between the perpetrators and the narrator. These stories are permeated with retold distance between actors where the war's social order is defined. The interviewed in this study portray the perpetrators as dangerous, mad, and evil—on one hand as a clear threat to the pre-war prevailing order, and on the other, as an ideal enemy, a real but distant criminal.

### **War violence and slaughter of humans**

Narratives on the phenomenon “war violence” produce and reproduce the image of de-humanized, violence-affected actors, often portrayed as slaughtered in violent situations. The narrator's dramatization of violent situations reveals his own experience of threat to his or others' physical existence and ethnic identity; the description of a violent war situation is emphasized through a *symbolicism of ritualized ethnic violence*. The use of violence is described as something carried out both through bureaucratic planning (using lists) and without it. The perpetrators are presented as spontaneous, organized, and rational.

The de-humanization of the non-Serb population in northwestern Bosnia led to the killing of more and more people. Bosniacs and Croats were progressively taken to the concentration camps, and beatings and torture occurred on a daily basis in police stations and the military police headquarters. There were several cases of non-Serb killings at mid-day, in front of or behind their homes, in front of their families and neighbors (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994).

The interviewees' stories on war violence depict de-humanized and violence-struck actors. These individuals are often mentioned as being slaughtered in violent situations. Alma was arrested together with almost all residents in her village, and the group was guarded by soldiers and police in a schoolyard. She recounted a series of violent situations taking place in her village during the war:

There was the famous “Vojvoda” (warlord). He gathered his neighbors at the beginning and cut the throat of them all. They recently found that mass grave and dug up 13 to 14

people. They cut off one man's head and then impaled it on a pole, then they called his wife and said that her husband wanted to talk to her.

Stories about war violence and slaughter of humans show that violence in this war were more personalized and individualized. Alma described Vojvoda as a sadistic monster who is in charge and of another ethnic group but who carries out his acts against his own neighbors, thus, personalized, distinct from the typical industrial violence during the Holocaust (Bauman 1991; Browning 1992; Megargee 2013a,b).

How the war violence turned into another part of everyday life is described by Irfan, who said, "We had all been chosen for the slaughter, we were to be annihilated, full stop. They started with the intellectuals, none of them survived." The perpetrators in northwestern Bosnia had at their disposal lists of people who were "known" in the society, for example, local leaders, intellectuals, politicians, criminals, and wealthy people who were often imprisoned, robbed, and executed (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). Irfan says, "They started with the intellectuals," and in this way, retrospectively, the perpetrators are presented as organized and rational in their violent actions.

Even stories from the concentration camps contain examples of organized, rational, and spontaneous perpetrators. According to the interviewees, it was common that perpetrators came to the camps looking for people from their lists to batter or kill. Usually, it was after the third beating that the person died. It was also common that murders were carried out on someone's order. One former concentration camp detainee said, "They selected people from an order to be slaughtered." According to the interviewees, someone may have wanted to get rid of a wealthy neighbor who was detained in the camp, in order to take over his property and capital, and the guards therefore got paid to murder. This happened on a daily basis, according to all interviewees who were detained in concentration camps during the war. The interviewees say that the perpetrators usually searched individuals by name, and sometimes in the morning, they could see that person on a pile of corpses in front of the "white house." (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A.; Case No.: IT-99-36-T.; Greve and Bergsmo 1994).

Several interviewees describe a widespread ritualized use of violence during the war in northwestern Bosnia, and those descriptions often portray an uncivilized and savage slaughter of humans. These stories are filled with images of how fearsome these perpetrators are, for example, when Alma says that “Vojvoda” rules and has the power, his strength cannot be questioned. The perpetrator is often designated as supreme—he is, for example, capable of killing, mutilating, and exterminating families.

The dramatization of the war-time situation is amplified with symbolism of ritualized ethnic violence (Collins 2008, 2004; Hylland Eriksen 1993; Katz 1988: 237-273; Presser 2013). The individuals who were slaughtered in the previous empirical examples are Bosniacs and Croats, and those slaughtering them are Serbian police and soldiers. Alma uses the term “vojvoda.” During the Bosnian war, the term “vojvoda” was used only when talking about Serbian forces warlords. The meaning of the term “vojvoda” is “Serbian warlord.” The importance of ethnic identity is greatest when it is perceived as being threatened (Hylland Eriksen 1993). The referred description depicts the identities of the narrator and those submitted to violence as being just as threatened as their physical existence.

The bureaucratic charge (lists) in the stories on ritualized use of violence during the war could in post-war stories indicate a vindication of violent acts during the war (Presser 2013). The image created suggests that the perpetrators had some kind of permission and “right” to kill those subjected to violence, and that those “visible” in society had a stamp on them that made them especially susceptible to war violence that became normatively accepted in society. Reality is versatile, according to Presser (2013), especially during a war. Something that is considered the worst atrocity by most people, such as aiming violence against civilians, might be seen as an act of heroism among others, probably depending on whether the war has ended or not or if the violent sequence is retold or observed, and depending on who is telling the story.

### **Definitions of War Violence**

Earlier research on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognized the importance of post-war narratives (Basic 2016, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e; Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007; Houge 2008; Maček 2009; Mannergren Selimovic 2010; Skjelsbæk 2007; Steflja 2010; Stover and Weinstein 2004). However, these analyses do not focus on narratives about the

“war violence” phenomenon itself. In an attempt to fill this knowledge gap, my primary purpose is to describe how the actual actors portray violence during the war. My secondary goal is to analyze which discursive patterns participate in creating the category “war violence.” My empirical material is analyzed using research on violence based on interpersonal interaction. (Åkerström 2002; Betz 1977; Collins 2008; Katz 1988; Presser 2013; Schinkel 2004; Stanko 2003).

Definitions of "war violence" in this study are based on the survivors' stories of war violence during the war in Bosnia and in the discursive patterns which constructs the category of "war violence" in the descriptions. The concept of "war violence" is constructed in the study's empirical material when the survivor tells of a new social order, human suffering, sexual violence and human slaughter in war society. War Violence is presented in the studied narratives as morally wrong and reprehensible.

This study shows that after the war in Bosnia, the interpretations of biographical consequences of violence are intimately connected to previous war experiences. Narratives on the phenomenon “war violence” depict a decay of pre-war social order. The use of violence during the war is described as *organized* and *ritualized*, which implies that the use of violence became a norm in society, rather than the exception.

The narratives on the phenomenon “war violence” produce and reproduce the image of human suffering and slaughter. Those subjected to violence are portrayed in a de-humanized fashion and branded as suitable to be exposed to it. In these stories, morally correct actions are constructed as a contrast to the narratives on war violence. In these descriptions, the perpetrator is depicted as a dangerous, evil, and ideal enemy. He is portrayed as a real and powerful yet alien criminal who is said to pose a clear threat to the social order existing before the war. The narratives on wartime violence, war perpetrators, and those subjected to violence during war are enhanced with symbolism of ritualized ethnic violence (“cockade,” “chetnik,” “Serb,” “Muslim,” “warlord”). On one hand, the narrators make an ethnic generalization based on the differences between the ethnic categorizations; on the other hand, they present their own physical existence and ethnic identity and that of those subjected to violence as being threatened by the violent situation.

The disintegration of the existing, pre-war social order produces and reproduces a norm resolution that enables the ritualized war-time use of violence. This development allows the normalization of war violence in this time period even though the result, as this study shows, means human suffering and the slaughter of humans. This study presents this development in society ambivalently, as both allowed and normatively correct (during the war) and as prohibited and condemned (primarily in retrospect, in post-war narratives). It seems as if the category “war violence” means different things depending on whether it happened during war or not, whether it is retold or observed, and who is telling the story. For some persons, violence targeting civilians during the war is an act of heroism (see also Basic 2015c).

The Holocaust during World War Two was in many cases highly efficient and industrialized; the typical goal was to kill from a distance, impersonally (Bauman 1991; Browning 1992; Megargee 2013a,b). Researchers have noted that those who climbed the ranks to leadership positions or were in charge at concentration camps seemed to have engaged in very personal, sadistic acts in Germany during WWII. Is there an interaction of rank/power in wartime and level of motivation/energy input required for violence (ie, those in charge require less energy input because of the factors that put them in charge in the first place)? The stories and phrasing in this paper emphasize a distant, evil, and/or powerful leader who motivates the crowd (perhaps in part by symbolically reducing an ethnic target to something like a dog or rat) or gives orders, with the distinction from Holocaust violence that the leaders in these stories were neighbors, etc., of those they were harming and killing.

In general contrast, the war violence in Bosnia was more broadly characterized by the *individualized use of violence*, in which the perpetrators often knew those subjected to violence. The stories reveal that firearms were seldom used; instead, the weapons were baseball bats or knives. These features can be compared to examples of violence in Rwanda, e.g., Hatzfeld (2005) and Lee (2009), where the violence was more similar (and even more “savage”) to that in my material than the typical examples of industrialized extermination violence of World War Two.

The perpetrators in this study are often portrayed as people who enjoyed humiliating, battering, murdering, and inflicting pain in different ways. This characterization is a contrast to Collins (2008), who suggests that soldiers are not good in acting out *close violence* and that individuals are mostly inclined to consensus and solidarity. An explanation, in my study, of

the soldiers' actions can be that soldiers in a war are pressured into being brave in close combat, the aim being to reign over the Others, the enemy. During war, enemies are targets of violence, to be subjected to it and neutralized. Soldiers and police in northwestern Bosnia were not close to any battlefield, and civilians thus were framed in the enemy role. By exposing civilians to violence, soldiers proved their supremacy over the enemy even when the enemy was an abstract type, unarmed and harmless (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). Another explanation might be found in the degree of mobilization and emotional charge that occurred before the war, through the demonization of the enemy. People were probably brutalized through this process.

Those 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. They suffered crimes against humanity, including most types of violent crimes (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-95-8-S; Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-98-30/1-A; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). Several perpetrators were sentenced by the Hague Tribunal and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on War Crime (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015; ICTY 2015a; ICTY 2015b). The crimes committed in Prijedor and Ljubija are qualified as genocide according to indictments against former Serbian leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić (Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT). All but two of the interviewees in this study experienced and survived the war in Prijedor and/or Ljubija. These individuals have a present, ongoing relation with these communities: Some live there permanently, and some spend their summers in Prijedor and/or Ljubija (Basic 2015c). An analysis of the processing of experienced or described violent situations in a society that exists as a product of a series of violent acts during the war must be conducted in parallel both at the institutional and individual levels. Institutions in the administrative entity Republika Srpska (to which Prijedor and Ljubija 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,” “victimhood,” and “reconciliation” (compare Becirevics’ [2010] analysis of denial of



genocide in Bosnia). The existence of Republika Srpska is based on genocide committed in Prijedor, Ljubija, and other towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Wesselingh and Vaulering 2005; Case No.: IT-09-92-PT; Case No.: IT-95-5/18-PT; Case No.: IT-97-24-T; Case No.: IT-99-36-T; Greve and Bergsmo 1994). 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 fora (Basic 2015c). 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.

One interesting question that could not be answered with this article is how the experiences after the war also affects the social construction of 'war violence'. Extensive literature on diverse traumatic experiences clearly indicate that post-trauma experiences are equally or sometimes more important than the original traumatic experiences in constructing a narrative of the events. An important example in this context is the experience of impunity after violence, which may affect all, victims, bystanders and perpetrators.

There are still few studies that deal with phenomenon "war violence" as an interactive phenomenon which analyzes violence categories that arise in stories. In addition, the knowledge presented in this article can be useful for active practitioners at various government agencies who treat survivors of similar historical and contemporary situations.

Another interesting aspect of the phenomenon "war violence," to be examined in a future analysis, regards the stories of perpetrators describing violent situations (Athens 1997; Katz 1988). Conversations with these actors and an analysis of their stories might add a nuanced perspective of the phenomenon "war violence." Another question that emerged during my work on this article is, What importance is given to stories told by the perpetrator of violence and those subjected to violence in the development of a post-war society? The Bosnian media emerges subjected to violence from the war frequently, but the perpetrators of violence are absent. The question is whether the prisons where the convicted perpetrators of violence are serving are gathering places for experience and resources which can be utilized in the processes of reconciliation after the war?

I believe it is of great importance to study stories in both categories. By recounting their stories, those subjected to violence could obtain recognition and some degree of self-esteem and the perpetrators be given a chance to explain to themselves and others, display shame over their actions, and possibly restore their social status. Without this type of process, those who are subjected to violence risk a life without recognition, and the perpetrators risk being permanently bound by their war-time actions, a clearly unstable foundation for the future development of a post-war society.

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Goran Basic has a PhD in sociology and is a senior lecturer at the Department of Pedagogy, Linnaeus University. His research concerns fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina; he has written articles on the postwar society and carried out an evaluation of a project in the juvenile care. Basic's dissertation "When collaboration becomes a struggle. A sociological analysis of a project in the Swedish juvenile care" is based on ethnographic material. Currently, he is analyzing the collaboration between border police and coastguard in the countries of Baltic region.