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*Published in:*

Proceedings of the 1st Annual International Conference on Forensic Sciences & Criminalistics Research (FSCR 2013)

2013

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Basic, G. (2013). Stories after the Bosnian War: Competition for Victimhood. In L.-L. Cheng (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 1st Annual International Conference on Forensic Sciences & Criminalistics Research (FSCR 2013)* (pp. 68-77). Global Science and Technology Forum (GSTF). <http://dl4.globalstf.org/?wpsc-product=stories-after-the-bosnian-war-competition-for-victimhood>

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1

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# Stories after the Bosnian War: Competition for Victimhood

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## *Abstract:*

The aim of this article is to analyze verbally portrayed experiences of 27 survivors of the 1990's war in northwestern Bosnia. Focus lies on describing how the interviewees portray the social phenomenon of "victimhood", and to analyze discursive patterns which contribute to constructing the category "victim". When, after the war, different actors claim this "victim" status it sparks a competition for victimhood. Categories appear and they are: "the remainders" those who lived in northwestern Bosnia before, during and after the war; "the fugitives" those who driven into northwestern Bosnia during the war; "the returnees" those who returned after the war and "the diaspora" those who were driven out from northwestern Bosnia and remained in their new country. The competition between these categories seems to take place on a symbolic level. All interviewees want to portray themselves as "ideal victims" but they are all about to lose that status. The returnees and the diaspora are losing status by receiving recognition from the surrounding community and because they have a higher economic status, the remainders are losing status since they are constantly being haunted by war events and the refugees are losing status by being presented as strangers and thus fitting the role of ideal perpetrators. It seems that by reproducing this competition for the victim role, all demarcations, which were played out so skillfully during the war, are kept alive.

*Keywords:* victim, war, victimhood, crime, perpetrator, Bosnia.

## **Introduction**

The Bosnian war can be seen as a particularly illustrative case of war sociology, based on the ethnic mix of the population prior to the war. War antagonists often knew each other from before the war. Serbian soldiers and policemen carried out mass executions, forced flight, and systematic rape and set up concentration camps in their effort to drive away Bosniacs<sup>1</sup> and Croats from northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The warfare was directly targeted against civilians (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).

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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.

During the norm resolution that accompanied the war, certain crimes occurred that were either crimes against the rules of war (e.g., mass murder, rape) or violations of warfare norms, such as desertion or refusing to accept the propaganda of one's "side". Crimes against the rules of war are sometimes perceived with ambivalence: Some are accepted (relatively), but others are not accepted and are condemned (especially in retrospect). In other words, "crime" has different meanings depending on whether it is war or peacetime and depends on who the victor is or is believed to be, and who is perceived to be the victim or perpetrator (Bougarel, Helms, and Duijzings, 2007; Stover and Weinstein, 2004).

Post-war Bosnians do not portray their victimhood only in relation to the war as a whole but also in relation to the specific actions of themselves and others during and after the war (Basic, unpublished 2). How is one's victim status decided? Being an ideal victim seems desirable here; it upholds some sort of general status that can be set next to other status groups, for example "war criminals" (Christie, 1986). This study shows that stories of Bosnian war survivors are built on these and other social categorizations.

This article analyzes verbally depicted experiences of 27 survivors from the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. One aim of the article is to describe how the actors portray the social phenomenon of "victimhood", and the second is to analyze discursive patterns that interplay in the creation of the terms "victim" and "perpetrator". My research question is, How do the interviewees describe victimhood after the war? With this study, I try to access the phenomena of victimhood by analyzing the interviewees' stories, namely their own descriptions in relation to themselves and others (Riessman, 1993).

In the following, I attempt to illustrate how victimization markers and the creation of the terms "victim" and "perpetrator" are exposed when interviewees talk about (a) war victimhood and (b) post-war victimhood.

## **Analytical starting points**

The general starting point of the study is interactionistic but with the influence of an ethno-methodological perspective on how people present

their social reality. As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) point out, ethno-methodology does not want to explain what a social world is but rather how it is created. The interviewees' stories as well as the analysis of them could, in light of this perspective, be seen as activities that create meaning (Blumer, 1969/1986; Garfinkel, 1967/1984). Narratives are interpretative because they attempt to explain the world, but they also need to be interpreted. This research joins those narrative traditions within sociology where spoken stories are considered as being based on experiences as well as being discursive (Riessman, 1993). In addition to this general starting point, I perceive the terms "conflict", "competition", and "ideal victim" as particularly relevant components in the specific stories that I have analyzed.

Simmel (1955[1908]) understands social interaction as an interpersonal interaction – an interplay that can assume and display a variety of social forms. Conflict and competition, for example, are specific forms of interaction that emerge in the analysis of the post-war relations between the individuals and groups. Simmel (1955[1908]) argues that, in contrast to perfunctory understanding that implies that conflict disrupts the relations between parties, conflicts should rather be seen as an expression of the actors' powerful involvement in a situation, and conflicts fulfill an integrative function between involved parties. Simmel (1955[1908]: 61) writes:

The aim for which competition occurs within a society is presumably always the favor of one or more third persons. Each of the competing parties therefore tries to come as close to that third one as possible. Usually, the poisonous, divisive, destructive effects of competition are stressed, and for the rest it is merely admitted that it creates certain values as its product. But in addition, it has, after all, this immense sociating effect. Competition compels the wooer who has a co-wooer, and often in this way alone comes to be a wooer properly speaking, to go out to the wooed, come close to him, establish ties with him, find with him, find his strengths and weaknesses and adjust to them, find all bridges, or cast new ones, which might connect the competitor's own being and doing with his.

Simmel (1955[1908]: 61-108) argues that conflicts and competition may keep fighting parties concentrated on a point of interest. In his (1955[1908]: 87) words:

Our language offers an extraordinarily telling formula of the essence of these changes: the fighter must "pull himself together" ("sich zusammennehmen"). That is, all his energies must be, as it were, concentrated in one point so that

they can be employed at any moment in any required direction.

Simmel (1955[1908]: 61-108) argues that points of interest enable struggle between fighting actors. He believes that focus on mutual points enables antagonism in the same way that absence of focus or the lack of conflict objects dampens tensions. Collins (2004: 34, 79-109, 150-151, 183-222) offers similar thoughts, arguing that social life is shaped through a series of rituals in which individuals are interlinked when a common point of interest awakens their attention. When people move between different situations, earlier situations merge with the new ones. In consecutive interactions, involved individuals show respect and appreciation on behalf of objects seen as especially important.

When writing about conflicts, competition, and conflict points of interest in the following analysis, I am addressing the *verbal struggle* that occurs in analyzed sequences of the empirical material (Blumer, 1969/1986; Garfinkel, 1967/1984). From these sequences, different images of "victims" and "perpetrators" emerge.

Christie's (1972) study on concentration camp guards during World War II in Norway is imbued with a certain war interaction that includes the maintenance of normality in various relations, partly between those guards working for the Germans, killing and torturing in the Norwegian camps, and partly between Yugoslav war prisoners who had been placed in Norwegian concentration camps and the Norwegian general public after the war (Christie, 1986). This relationship seems to be characterized by closeness and distance between actors where collective expectations of what is culturally desirable are defined (societal norms). Some guards portray the detainees as dirty and dangerous perpetrators – a threat against wartime's existing order. The general consciousness, after the war, portrays the guards as mad and evil perpetrators because in Norway, after the war, there was a need for a dehumanized picture of the enemy, a real and distant perpetrator. The result from Christie's study shows that the guards killing and torturing in the camps were ordinary Norwegians, and his point is that other Norwegians in wartime Norway would have done the same as those guards if they were the same age, had the same educational background, and had found themselves in the same situation.

Christie's (1972, 1986) studies show a connection between societal norms and the "victim" and "perpetrator" statuses. Collective expectations of what is culturally desirable are sometimes informal and unspoken and thus difficult for an outsider to understand. These norms often become clear when someone violates them and the environment reacts. Through this reaction, an image of the "ideal victim" is created. With the term "ideal victim", Christie

(1986) wants to describe that individual or individuals who, when subjects of crime, most easily will obtain the legitimate status of a victim: The individual should be “weak” and have a respectable purpose or honorable intentions when the attack occurs, and it should not be possible to blame the individual for being there. Furthermore, the ideal victim needs to have some influence to claim victim status. Ideal victims need and “create” ideal perpetrators. The perpetrator is expected to be large, mean, inhuman, and evil and without relation to the victim (Christie, 1986). The ideal perpetrator is a distant creature. He or she is a stranger who is not regarded as human (Christie, 1986; Simmel, 1955[1908]), perhaps some kind of “danger” or “threat”, using Christie’s (1972) terminology.

The “victim” category is not an objective category; it is in fact created during interaction between individuals, in the definition of the specific social situation (Christie, 1986; Holstein and Miller, 1990). It could be seen as an abstraction or a social type (Åkerström, 2001; Christie, 1986). According to Åkerström (2001), victimhood could also be seen as a product of moral creativity. It should not be possible to question the moral responsibility of an ideal victim. Åkerström argues that the picture of an ideal victim could have real consequences – that it does not exist only as a mental construction. For a specific category to achieve victim status, there must be some common interest that acts on behalf of the victims; in other words, there must be someone who has an interest in ensuring that the category achieves victim status. These activities sometimes take place on an institutional level and could be transferred to an individual level, as a conversation topic, for instance.

The competition over the victim role is a comprehensive and tension-filled theme in my analysis. The viewpoints of the above-mentioned theorists seem useful in serving my goal of understanding the interviewees’ stories about victimhood, both as an analytical starting point and as a subject for nuance.

### Method

The material for this study was collected through qualitatively oriented interviews with 27 survivors from the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The material was gathered during two phases. During phase one, March and November 2004, I carried out field work in Ljubija, a community in northwestern Bosnia.

Ljubija is a part of the Prijedor municipality. Before the war, the residents of Ljubija lived in two administrative areas (Mjesne zajednice). Upper Ljubija was ethnically diverse, and the residents lived in flats for the most part. Lower Ljubija was predominately inhabited by Bosniacs, and they mostly lived in single-family houses. The Ljubia region is known for its mineral wealth. There was

plenty of iron ore, quartz, black coal, and clay for burning bricks as well as mineral-rich water. Most residents worked at the iron mine before the war. The war began in Ljubija in the beginning of the summer of 1992 when Serbian soldiers and police took over control of the local administrative government without armed resistance (Case No.: IT-97-24-T.; Case No.: IT-99-36-T.).

In Ljubija, I interviewed 14 people who were living there at that time and performed observations at coffee shops, bus stops, and the local marketplace and on buses. I also collected and analyzed current local newspapers being sold in Ljubija during my stay. I interviewed two women and five men who had spent the entire war in Ljubija, together with three women and four men who had been expelled from the town during the war but had returned afterwards. Six of these fourteen interviewees were Serbian, three were Croats, and five were Bosniacs.

Ljubija is a small community. Most of the pre-war population knew each other or had at least heard of one another. I experienced the beginning of the war in Ljubija personally as a member of those groups of people who were expelled from the area. I knew from before the war most of the interviewees and those mentioned during the interviews. I also possessed earlier knowledge about some of the events that were described in the interviews, which occurred during the war. Thus, the fictitious names that appear in the analysis (for example, Milanko, Dragan, Sveto, Milorad, Klan, Planić Mirzet, Savo Knezevic, Alma and Senada Husic, Bela, Laki, and Laic) are real people who are not unknown to me. This association, of course, affected the execution of the study. I was, on one hand, aware of the possible danger that my acquaintance with some informants and my knowledge about certain war events could affect the scientific nature of the text – and I worked intensely and continuously to be value-free in the analysis. On the other hand, my own experiences, from the war in Bosnia helped me more easily recognize, understand, and analyze social phenomena such as war victimhood.

During the second phase, April through June 2006, nine former concentration camp detainees were interviewed. They were placed in the concentration camps (Omarska, Keraterm, and Manjača) by Serbian soldiers and police even though they were civilians during the war.

Omarska is a village that belongs to the municipality of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia. The population of Omarska is predominantly of Serbian origin, and the camp was located in the management buildings of the Ljubija Ironmine. Before the war, Keraterm was a brick-burning factory in Prijedor. Manjača is a mountain massif in the northwestern part of Bosnia, and prior to the war, the Yugoslav People’s Army had several training facilities in different locations within the massif. When the war in

Croatia began, some of the army compounds became concentration camps for captured Croatian soldiers and civilians. This continued when the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began; Manjača was used as a concentration camp for civilian Bosnians and Croats (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).

These individuals who were interviewed, together with four relatives, all now live in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Three women and ten men were interviewed. The majority of the interviewees come from the municipality of Prijedor (to which Ljubija belongs). Ten interviewees are Bosniacs and three are Croats. Parts of the material collected in 2004 and 2006 have been analyzed in other reports and articles. These analyses are based on the above-described material and with partly different research questions (Basic, unpublished 1, 2).

To understand the dynamics concerning the upholding of the victim and perpetrator, this study analyzes a limited context in northwestern Bosnia, more specifically the area around Prijedor. I seek to place my reasoning in relation to other studies on Bosnia and the region so that the reader can understand the extremely polarized environment that exists partly because of collectively targeted crime during the war (including concentration camps, systematic rape, mass executions, etc.), and partly because of the competition for victimhood after the war.

From the above, we see that informants belong to different ethnic groups, but the informants' ethnic background is not specified in the analysis that follows. It is my conscious choice to not focus on ethnic background, hoping that this approach results instead in pointing the analytic focus towards social phenomena such as victimhood and competition. Furthermore, the margin of error is great when the "ethnicity" is used. There is an example regarding an informant I interviewed in Ljubija. His mother is from Serbia, and her name suggests that she is Serbian. His father is from Bosnia, and his name suggests that he is Serbian. The informant calls himself "Covjek". Translated, "covjek" means human or individual, but the informant probably implies something more than this. With the word "covjek", he wants to describe himself as a just person, as not caring about ethnic affiliation. The question I found difficult to answer was how I am supposed to classify this informant ethnically, as a "Serbian", "Bosnian Serb", or "covjek"?

When preparing for the interviews, I used an interview guide designed after, among other influences, the above theoretical interests. During the interviews, I strived for a conversation-oriented style in which the interviewer takes the role of a sounding board and conversation partner rather than an interrogator; the interview is designed as a so-called

"active interview" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995). The interviews lasted between one and four hours and were carried out in the Bosnian language. A voice recorder was used in all interviews, and all informants agreed to that. The interviewees were informed about the study's aim, and I pointed out that they could terminate their participation at any time.

The material was transcribed in the Bosnian language, usually the same day or the days just following the interview to ensure good documentation and to comment with details<sup>2</sup>. By commenting in the transcript, I produced a categorization of data. In encoding the statements, markers for victimhood and competition for the victim role were identified in the material. My choice of empirical examples was guided by the study's aim and how distinctly those empirical examples illustrated the analytical point I wanted to highlight. For this reason, some of the more eloquent informants are heard more often than others.

The material from the interviews is analyzed based on a tradition from the qualitative method (see Silverman, 1993/2006 as an example). The above-mentioned theoretical interests – Simmel's view on competition and Christie's term "the ideal victim" – are not only applied here but also are challenged and modified with nuance.

#### Stories about war victim

Individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war in the 1990s are, in legal terms, a recognized victim. They were subjects of crimes against humanity, and most were subjects of various types of violent crimes (Greve and Bergsmo, 1994; 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.). Many perpetrators have been sentenced by the Hague Tribunal and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Tribunal on war crimes (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013; ICTY, 2013a; ICTY, 2013b).

Earlier research on victimhood during the Bosnian war often has presented a one-sided picture of the "victim" and "perpetrator". The picture of victims is often exemplified by killed or raped and displaced adults and children. The picture of perpetrators is exemplified by soldiers or policemen who have displaced, raped, and killed civilians. Some research on the post-war society in Bosnia, however, presents a more diverse picture of the "victim" and "perpetrator". Victims are partly exemplified by individuals killed in the war and partly by individuals who survived the war but lost relatives or got displaced or raped during the war. The picture of the perpetrator is exemplified partly by former soldiers and policemen who had killed and raped as well as participated in the displacement, and partly by

<sup>2</sup> Relevant parts of the transcribed material were translated by an interpreter (some parts I translated personally). The aid of an interpreter has been helpful to minimize loss of important nuances.

economic perpetrators who became rich during the war (Bougarel, 2007; Delpla, 2007; Duijzing, 2007; Helms, 2007; Houge, 2008; Skjelsbæk, 2007; Stefansson, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover and Shigekane, 2004). These two concepts of “victim” and “perpetrator” are objects of a general post-war discussion on a symbolic level. This social phenomenon becomes clear during trials at those tribunals where war crimes are dealt with or in other general inter-human and inter-institutional interaction, but as my research shows, the correlative discussion also appears in scientific interviews.

An analysis based on Christie’s (1986) view regarding the informants’ stories about the expulsion from northwestern Bosnia could add nuance to the images of the “victim” and “perpetrator”. Pre-war acquaintances between the antagonists could further complicate the definition of an “ideal victim”. Serbian soldiers and policemen and Bosniac and Croatian civilians in northwestern Bosnia often knew each other well from before the war, which has probably affected descriptions after the war. At the same time, the stories about expulsion obviously contain a new foreignness. In this regard, new premises for victim status are created because of the radical change in interactive patterns.

We find an example of altered relations with neighbors and acquaintances in Milanko’s story. Milanko was a child during the war, and he told me how he saw his neighbors being battered and executed. He stayed in northwestern Bosnia during and after the war. These are Milanko’s words on the spread of excessive violence during the war:

I feel sick from it, they put on their uniforms and go out to the villages to rape and kill women. Not just Dragan but also Sveto and Milorad and a bunch of others. How do they sleep now, do they worry for their children? (...) They abducted Planic Mirzet before my eyes. Milorad and the son of Sava Knezevic were the guilty ones. It was Milorad in person who deported Alma and Senada Husic, together with many others, from Ljubija. (...) In 1992, 1993, it was Milorad, Sveto, Klan who ruled and decided, they were gods. They did as they pleased. I just don’t understand why nobody arrests them now?

In Milanko’s story, we see that the conflict is portrayed through personified terminology (it is “Mirzet”, “Dragan”, “Sveto”, “Milorad”, and others) and maybe because of this, in rather accusatory terms. The conflict points of interest that are actualized in the description are, for example, “uniform”, “rape and kill women”, and “arrests”. These terms are charged with meaning and given importance in the depiction. The perpetrators’ actions are most clearly shaped through concrete drama.

In Milanko’s description “Planic Mirzet”, “Alma and Senada Husic”, and “many others, from Ljubija” are portrayed as ideal victims according to Christie’s conceptual apparatus. These individuals are portrayed as weak during the war, and their purpose and intent cannot be seen as dishonorable. The perpetrators “Dragan”, “Sveto”, “Milorad”, and “a bunch of others” are depicted as big and evil. What problematizes the image of an “ideal victim” is that the perpetrators and victims are not strangers to one another. They know each other well from before, and there are relations between them.

Milanko is also asking for law enforcement over a clear definition of the perpetrators (“I just don’t understand why nobody arrests them now”). It seems that he, by accentuating the others’ victim role, constructs a distinction against the perpetrators.

We see examples of relations after the war, concerning trials and interpersonal and inter-institutional interaction in research reports from war-victim organizations. A predominant number of Bosniac and Croat war-victim organizations appreciate and accept the efforts of tribunals, in contrast to Serbian war-victim organizations, which often distance themselves from the tribunals’ findings. The tribunals are often described as partisan by the Serbian war-victim organizations (Delpla, 2007: 228-229). The majority of those convicted at the tribunals are former Serbian politicians, soldiers, and policemen (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013; ICTY, 2013a; ICTY, 2013b). The general regional discussions often stress the importance of administering justice for war victims after the war. Steflja (2010) argues that this administration of justice may cement the antagonism and social identities that were actualized during the war. Another important point is made by Skjelsbæk (2007) in noting that these actions, on the institutional level, frequently get transmitted to the individual level. The stories in my empirical material seem to be influenced by (or comply with) the rhetoric of war-victim organizations and the tribunals.

In addition to the distinction between “victim” and “perpetrator”, the description also reveals a closeness between the antagonists. Nesim is a former concentration camp detainee now living in the Scandinavian countries. He was handed over to the soldiers during an attack on his village. Here is his description of the transport to the concentration camp:

Those sitting in the van started looting, they wore camouflage uniforms, Ray-Ban sunglasses, black gloves, we were shocked, the impossible had become possible. (...) When I saw how they beat those men which they picked up, and when I saw who guarded them by the railway, they were my workmates, this made the shock even bigger. One of them had worked with me for 14 years, and we

had gone through good and bad times together, we shared everything with each other (...) I just froze.

Nesim places himself in a clear victim role, and he portrays the soldiers and policemen who expelled him and his neighbors as dangerous. Conflict points of interest are charged with importance (“camouflage uniforms”; “Ray-Ban sunglasses”; “black gloves”) in an effort to depict the soldiers’ actions as threatening. Nesim also uses dramaturgy when he talks about the shock he experienced (“the impossible had become possible”). When Nesim accentuates his victim role, he upholds and enhances the image of the perpetrators using dramaturgy and charged conflict points of interest.

Several interviewees who were displaced from northwestern Bosnia said that they saw their friends, neighbors, or workmates while they were being exiled. Nesim spoke about his workmates, as mentioned in the quotation above, who were participating in the displacement (they were battering civilian villagers). The informants who were detained in the concentration camps emphasized the importance of not knowing any of the guards or camp visitors. According to the informants, visitors came to the camps to batter and kill prisoners. Continuing with Nesim’s description of the situation when “old friends” came and battered two inmates:

Nesim: One was frightened, everyone knew Crni, he was a maniac. I knew Crni from before when he worked as a waiter at the station and was normal. Now everyone was mad. I knew most of them, and it was hard finding a place to hide. (...) Elvis was abducted, and he was neither dead nor alive when he was dragged back. He was only moaning: “give me water.” When they have fractured your entire body, you only feel heat and you just want water. Nobody dared approach him (...). We saw Elvis whose skin was completely dark, we could not see his eyes because of the swelling. He had the same dark color as his sweater. He could not stand up for seven days, he who was such a large and strong man.

Goran: Did he survive?

Nesim: No, he did not. After 10 days, he had recovered sufficiently so that he could walk, but when they saw that they took him away and beat him up completely. This recurred four, five times. There was a certain group (of guards and visitors) who did this, and they did it to Elan, too. Everyone in Prijedor knew him as someone who liked to fight, but he cried when they battered him because the beating was excessive. Next time they came for Elan, he cried so that it echoed in whole of Omarska. “Don’t take me, leave me alone, ouch, ouch, ouch, leave me alone”.

That which Nesim emphasizes in his story is fear, assault, and death in the camps. The reason for the difficulty in clearly defining “the ideal victim”, according to Christie’s (1986) perspective, is to be seen in Nesim’s depiction. We see that those who suffered the worst in the camps knew their tormentors. This can complicate a clear definition of the ideal victim according to Christie. Even Nesim’s portrayal of the perpetrators may give them some kind of victim role when they are described as mad (“he worked as a waiter at the station and was normal. Now everyone was mad”). Being mad could indicate an assigned victimhood (in relation to the victim’s surroundings) – we often feel sorry for people who are mentally ill. Furthermore, what Nesim perceives as war crime others may perceive as deeds of heroism (by “Crni”; “a certain group who did this”; other soldiers and policemen who complied with the politics of expulsion). Reality could be multifaceted, especially in a wartime situation, where something that is perceived as a righteous deed by one side could be seen as a hideous crime by the other. This is probably most clear in reports from the Hague Tribunal and the Bosnia and Herzegovina tribunal on war crime (Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013; ICTY, 2013a; ICTY, 2013b). A large majority of those indicted by the Tribunal begin their statement with the words “nisam kriv” (“not guilty”).

#### Stories about post-war victim

Examining interviews, observations, and articles in newspapers, I found that developments during and after the war in northwestern Bosnia led to individuals’ being categorized in four ways. The “remainders” consist of individuals who lived in northwestern Bosnia prior to, during, and after the war. Dragan, Milanko, Sveto, Milorad, Klan, and Crni belong to this group. Then we have the “returnees”, comprising those individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war and now have returned to their pre-war addresses (returnees). Individuals mentioned here who are in this group are Bela, Laki, and Tuki. The “refugees” are individuals who came as refugees to northwestern Bosnia from other parts of Bosnia and Croatia and now have settled in the new area (i.e., like Ljubo, who appears later on). Finally, we have the “diaspora”, the individuals who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war and stayed in their new countries. The “diaspora” is represented by Planic Mirzet and Nesim, who both live in Sweden, together with Alma and Senada Husic, who both live in the USA. Individuals belonging to the “diaspora” usually spend their vacations in Bosnia.

These individuals who appear in the material seem to be relatively melded together, and interaction between them exists. Members of the different groups talk to each other when they meet in the

streets or cafés in Ljubija. Analyzed newspapers also exhibit an image that could be seen as a common denominator for all four – all are constructed as an antipode to former politicians who are portrayed as corrupt and criminal.

It seems that the division of between “us” and “them” for the most part happens on a symbolic level. For example, the “remainders” and “refugees” see the “returnees” and “diaspora” in a negative way. On one hand, the “refugees” do not want to assimilate and have in time become the majority in northwestern Bosnia, which in turn has forced the “remainders” to follow their norms and values. On the other hand, “returnees” and “diaspora” have a better economic situation than the “remainders”, which has created jealousy.

Christie (1986) argues that the ideal victim role requires an ideal perpetrator who is expected to be big and evil. During the war in northwestern Bosnia, the “returnees” and the “diaspora” confronted the “perpetrators”, as mentioned in the previous section, who appeared big, evil, and inhuman. However, they were obstructed from being *ideal* perpetrators because they were not unknown to their victims. They were neighbors, living in the same town, being workmates, which meant that there was a relationship between victim and perpetrators. When people began returning to northwestern Bosnia, relationships to some degree changed between the involved parties. The area was flooded with “refugees”, who arrived during the war. They lived in the houses and flats of “returnees” and sabotaged their return. On one side, we have new perpetrators (“refugees”) who, during the return, were assigned the role of distant threatening actors as strangers in the community (Christie, 1972, 1986; Simmel, 1950/1964: 402-408). On the other side, we have victims who received help and recognition from the surrounding world and the local police, which made the *ideal* in the very concept disappear. Members of the returnees and diaspora were no longer “weak”.

Markers of victimhood and the construction of the terms “victim” and “perpetrator” appear in the analysis of stories about returning after the war and refugees’ arriving during the war. The following quotations give us an example of returnee stories in which a wartime perpetrator appears. Bela and Laki describe their first visit to the community from which they were expelled during the war:

Bela: 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. I asked him what he wanted, and he answered that he had come to pay a visit to his neighbors. I told the police, and they chased him away. Go to hell you fucking pig, whom did you

come to visit? (Bela is upset and “aiming” at Laic.)

Laki: Personally, I was not afraid. I was not a pig like they (war-time perpetrators), not even during the war, they should be afraid and ashamed. They killed innocent people, women, and children, I did not. The Serbs killed and robbed. It is known who is missing. Laic came to pay a visit (profanity). He had beaten people, murdered, forced Pasic to pull a horse-cart like a horse. /.../ There were some Serbs there, with whom I socialized before the war, who had come to see me at that time. It was them together with the police who chased Laic away.

In these interviews, Bela and Laki portray themselves as both wartime and post-war victims. They separate the “returnees” from the “remainders”. Conflict points of interest appearing in the description are “raped them lots of times”, “you fucking pig”, and “they killed innocent people, women, and children”. Bela and Laki point out that it was the “remainders” who raped women, killed, abused, and humiliated during the war. Christie argues that there is a reason the “returnees” are portrayed as victims. They described themselves as weak during the war and in some way even now when returning. They came to visit their home town from which they were expelled during the war and where they, using Christie’s words, had a respectable errand when the expulsion took place (during the war). No one can criticize them for having been in northwestern Bosnia in 1992 or for being there after the war.

The role of ideal victim, according to Christie (1986), requires weakness but also strength to claim this victim status. Those who returned were somewhat successful in achieving this. Tuki relates:

The international community helped us with mattresses and plastic tarpaulins, also from the Sana residents, the diaspora in Sweden, and the Swedish people. It came from everywhere, I mean it was early spring.

As we see in the above quotations, those who returned received help from the local police. These policemen wear the same uniform and symbols as did those policemen who, together with soldiers, participated in the expulsions during 1992 (field notes). Returnees were also recognized as victims by the outside world (“Sweden and Swedes”).

The development of events in other parts of Bosnia and Croatia flooded northwestern Bosnia with “refugees”. These individuals could be seen as victims – the refugee status is often charged with victimhood. “Refugees” occupied the houses and flats of “returnees” and, according to informants belonging to the “remainders”, “returnees”, and



“diaspora”, they actively sabotaged their efforts to return. These new perpetrators (“refugees”) were, after the war, given the role of distant actors, strangers in the society (Simmel, 1950/1964: 402-408) as well as being viewed as dangerous and threatening perpetrators (Christie, 1972; Christie, 1986). Laki describes the refugees’ resistance to return, and Milorad and Sveto describe the decay in society that came with the “refugees”:

Laki: On St. Peter’s Day, they (refugees) gathered round the church, and the drunkards’ stories were all the same: Let’s go to the mountains and beat up the Turks (demeaning word for Bosniacs). They came and then there was trouble.

Milorad: At my first contact with them (refugees), I thought they cannot be normal but after spending every day, for five years, with them, they become normal to you. (...) You can see for yourself what Ljubija is like nowadays. It is wonderful for someone who has lived in the mountains without running water, electricity, and water closets. For someone like that, asphalt is the pinnacle, but all those who lived here before know what it was like then. The cinema, bowling alley, everything is ruined. The sports arena, Miner’s House, everything is ruined.

Sveto: Someone who has lived near the asphalt does not chop wood in the staircase in the morning, it echoes. Firewood, mind you, for what does he use the woodshed anyway. Downstairs from me, you hear chickens, where Said (Sveto’s acquaintance) used to live. People and chickens do not live together, they never had. I don’t know where they used to live before. Let us go to the pub tonight and you will see. The way they behave and talk is outrageous. (...) We are a minority, we have no place there anymore. Before it was only five percent of those who visited the pub who had rubber boots and sheepskin vests, the rest had jeans or other normal clothes. Nowadays, the majority wear rubber boots and sheepskin vests.

Studies on the post-war relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina show that relations between the “victim” and “perpetrator” are characterized by a combination of rejection and closeness as well as competition between them (Bougarel, 2007; Delpla, 2007; Duijzing, 2007; Helms, 2007; Skjelsbæk, 2007; Stefanssons, 2007; Steflja, 2010; Stover and Shigekane, 2004).

In the prior quotation, Laki, Milorad, and Sveto seem to agree that the criticism raised against the “refugees” is well founded. The conflict points of interest can be seen when they say: “everything is ruined”, “we are a minority”, and “beat up the

Turks”. “Refugees” are depicted as a threat, they destroy the environment (“everything is ruined”), and they are rowdy (“there was trouble”). Laki, Milorad, and Sveto portray their own victimhood in relation to the decay of society and newly arrived “refugees”.

In this context, “refugees” are portrayed as a community hazard or as external actors or, using Simmel’s terminology, as strangers. Simmel (1950/1964: 402) writes the following about foreignness:

The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. For, to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction.

According to Simmel (1950/1964: 402-408), foreignness is characterized by a combination of nearness and remoteness, respectively nonchalance and commitment. The foreigner’s position in the group depends on nearness versus remoteness throughout the relationship. When the issue of distance towards the foreigner is more dominant than nearness, we have a special relationship with the stranger – he is not a member of the actual group, but he is present.

In the Stefansson (2007) analysis, we can see that refugees who arrive at a community during the war can be perceived as a danger and a threat (as an “invasion” and “attack”). These individuals are often presented as dirty, poor, and primitive. This perception could be interpreted as an articulated identity construction carried out by individuals who want to describe themselves as different, being clean, rich, and modern.

In the depiction that Laki, Milorad, and Sveto sketch, there is a similar relationship. These actors’ rhetoric projects the image of “the refugees” as strangers and a danger to society. Those refugees who ended up in northwestern Bosnia are described as the worst thing a society might experience. They are singled out as guilty for the cultural decline and the destruction of infrastructure.

The language in these quotations conveys an image of great polarization between the categories. On one side, we have the “remainders” and “returnees” and on the other the “refugees”. The informants declare themselves as distant from the “refugees”, but still there are signs of nearness between them. The actors portray themselves as being part of two entities, one of which consists of “remainders” and “returnees” and the other of “refugees”. A competition at a symbolic level emerges between the two entities. The quotations

may be seen as an arena for different swings between “us” and “the others” in which the image of victimhood is upheld. The conflict points of interest reproduce a certain competition because they keep the demarcation between victim and perpetrator alive.

Markers for victimhood and the creation of the concepts “victim” and “perpetrator” are also made visible in stories about the riches of “returnees” and “diaspora”. Ljubo is a “refugee” who prior to the war was an industrial worker in a town in northern Bosnia. During and after the war, he worked in an elementary school in northwestern Bosnia. He exemplifies how the “diaspora” and “returnees” provoke “refugees”. Furthermore, he notes how “the rich get richer” after the war:

Someone who, for example, meets a Serb in the street can hold his nose like there is a stench, like a pigsty. (...) Do you know what I think is wrong here? Many people were expelled from here, that is a fact. Many have stayed also. Those who stayed do not have any money to buy their flats and those who live abroad can afford to buy out their flats and then sell them for 30,000 Marks<sup>3</sup>. They (diaspora) come on vacation here, and at the same time they earn money. Where’s justice in that, I would confiscate everything (the returners’ and diaspora’s properties).

Ljubo, amongst other things, draws attention to the following points of interest: the refugees’ provocations and the lack of justice after the war. Ljubo’s story reflects considerable jealousy. He displays envy and remoteness towards “returnees” and “diaspora”. Ljubo is claiming the property of those abroad because this property makes the rich richer; in actuality, it means that those treated unjustly before are still treated unjustly. When we reach so far into the discussion, we could ask this question: Who is the victim in this situation? Earlier we have pointed out that “the ideal” disappeared when returning. Now, in addition to “returnees” and “diaspora”, we have “remainders” and “refugees” who could claim the victim status. They are poor, weak, and, to say the least, dependent on the financial resources possessed by returnees and the diaspora. “Remainders” and “refugees” are portrayed as *economic victims* while “returnees” and “diaspora” are portrayed as some kind of *profiteers* (or economic perpetrators). Radovan and Lana, who both stayed in northwestern Bosnia before, during, and after the war, explain this problem as follows:

Radovan: It is easy for these from Prijedor, they have returned with money and received donations in order to repair their houses. Gino (a mutual acquaintance who was expelled from northwestern Bosnia now living in Austria)

should thank the Serbs because he would never have such a car if it wasn’t for them.

Lana: Another problem is that the returnees have money, the refugees are at the bottom, and this creates a rift. Hate rises, but no one thinks about who deserves to be hated, the returnee or the politician who hasn’t given me anything even though I fought.

Some points of interest charged with importance concern the economic success of the “diaspora” and “returnees” owing to their expulsion during the war and the surrounding world’s recognition after the war (“received donations” and “would never have such a car”). Radovan’s and Lana’s description portrays “diaspora” and “returnees” as rich. Those with a bad economic situation are victims, too, according to their description.

### Concluding remarks

The norm resolution that occurred during the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s resulted in the creation of new groups, and between these groups, conflicts and hostility arose even after the war. This article analyzes the retold experiences of 27 survivors from the war in Bosnia. The primary goal was to describe how actors present the social phenomenon of “victimhood”, and the secondary aim was to analyze discursive patterns that contribute to constructing the terms “victim” and “perpetrator”.

Development taking place during and after the war has led to populations’ being described based on four categories. One consists of “remainders”, namely those who before, during, and after the war have lived in northwestern Bosnia. Another is “refugees”, those who were expelled from other parts of Bosnia and Croatia into northwestern Bosnia. The third is made up of “returnees”, those who were expelled from northwestern Bosnia during the war but have returned afterwards. The fourth is the “diaspora”, individuals who were expelled from the area during the war and stayed in the new country.

Within the dynamics of upholding the victim and perpetrator, there has arisen a competition for the victim role after the war. The competition among the “remainders”, “refugees”, “returnees”, and “diaspora” seems to take place on a symbolic level, and the conflict points of interest are often found in the descriptions of the war-time and post-war periods. The remainders argue that the refugees, for instance, do not want to assimilate, that in time they have become the majority of the society’s population, which in turn pressures the remainders to follow the refugees’ norms and values. Furthermore, the returnees and the diaspora are criticized for having a better economy than remainders and refugees, making the latter jealous.

All interviewees portray themselves as victims, but it seems that they all are about to lose that status.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 15,000 euro.

Those who remained might do so because they are still under the shadow of war events; the refugees because they are portrayed as strangers and fit the role of ideal perpetrators; and finally, the returnees and diaspora because they have achieved recognition from the surroundings and have a better economic situation. This situation can produce and reproduce a certain competition for victimhood that re-creates and revitalizes those collective demarcations that were played out so clearly and in such a macabre fashion during the war.

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