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Basic, Goran

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

4.7 STORIES OF SEXUALIZED WAR VIOLENCE AFTER THE BOSNIAN WAR

GORAN BASIC¹

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze verbally portrayed experiences of 27 survivors of the 1990's war in northwestern Bosnia. The focus lies on evaluating interviewees' description of wartime sexual violence and analyzing discursive patterns that contribute in constructing the phenomenon "sexualized war violence". My analysis shows that the new social war order normalized the sexualized war violence in society. In many cases, these crimes are committed by neighbors and people known by the victim. After the war, all interviewees described war sexual violence as something morally reprehensible. These narratives paint a picture of the perpetrator as someone who is dangerous, evil and the absolute enemy. This enemy is a real but distant criminal who is seen as a clear threat to the existing social order from before the war.

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this article is the war that took place in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina and, more specifically, the interpersonal interpretations of sexual violence and the biographical impact of wartime sexual violence. Serbian soldiers and police weaponized their use of sexual violent force directly against the civilian populations in northwestern Bosnia. In their quest to expel Bosniacs² 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).

The aim of this article is to analyze the stories told by survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia during the 1990s. The purpose is to study how the survivors describe wartime sexual violence and which discursive patterns emerge in the construction of the category "sexualized war violence". My question is: How do war survivors describe sexual violence and other sexual abuse during the war? In this study, I seek to touch upon the phenomenon "sexual war violence" by analyzing the narratives of the informants, namely their descriptions in relation to themselves and others (Riessman 2008).

This analysis will show that the interpretation of the biographical consequences of sexual war violence is intimately related to the subject's own war experiences. In this article, I try to highlight how the creation of the concept "sexual war violence" is made visible when the interviewees, in the empirical material, talk about (1) a sexual violence in the war, and (2) dissociation from the perpetrator of sexual violence after the war.

METHOD

This study joins the narrative traditions within sociology where verbal stories are regarded as both discursive and based on experience. This study is based on interaction but it is also inspired by how people portray their social reality. Stories are interpretative because they are used to explain the situation through a subjective point of view, thus, they need to be analyzed (Riessman 2008).

This article is based on recorded interviews carried out with 27 survivors of the war in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The material for this study was collected during two phases. During phase one, i.e. 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 period in Ljubija, as well as four men and three women who were expelled from Ljubija during the war but had returned afterwards. Six of the fourteen interviewees were Serbs, five were Bosniacs, and three were Croats.

Under phase two, from April through June of 2006, I interviewed nine former concentration camp detainees and their 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; 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. 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 2015, submitted 1, 2, 3, 4, 2007, 2005).

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

¹ Goran Basic is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology, Lund University, Sweden (e-mail: goran.basic@soc.lu.se). 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.

² 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.

data (Silverman 1993/2006). When encoding the statements, I identified markers of sexual violence in the material. Empirical sequences presented in this study were categorized as “normalization of sexual violence”, and “dissociation from the perpetrator of sexual violence”.

NORMALIZATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE WAR

Earlier research concerning sexual violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has noted the importance of post-war stories (Houge 2008; Skjelsbæk 2007). Stories about the “sexualized 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.

The new social war order normalized the rape existence in society (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 narratives about sexualized war violence give an example of how the violence persists in its effects to the present day after the war in Bosnia. Milanko’s³ story is one example of this: “I feel sick from it, they put on their uniforms and go out to the villages to rape and kill women,” and Radovan questions: “Who gives us the right to rape someone’s sister and mother?” Rada reveals: “During the war, in this apartment, when Briševo⁴ 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 (Nada’s neighbor who was raped).”

Bela gives us instance of the personal and individual aspects 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”.

The new social war order normalized even the existence of concentration camps in society (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)⁵. 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.”

Interviewees dramatize the described situation, aiming at presenting the perpetrators’ actions as morally despicable, and their subjection to sexual violence is described as one being in a state of submission and weakness. The image of the perpetrators and those subjected to sexual violence does not seem to exist merely as a construction of the mind. Stories retold 14 years after the crimes still describe perpetrators and those subjected to sexual violence vividly, even long after the war (Houge 2008; Skjelsbæk 2007).

Interviewees portray the perpetrators of sexual violence as a coherent violence-exercising group. In their description, they make an ethnic generalization of the perpetrators and the victims of sexual violence. 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 to have a minimum of regular interaction. Ethnic identity is based on the contrast with others. Hylland Eriksen believes that ethnic identity is most significant when it is perceived as threatened. Rada did not call the perpetrators soldiers or policemen; she said that “Serbs” used violence and raped Rada’s neighbor. She makes a generalization based on opposing positions between categories.

Through their stories on sexual war violence, interviewees highlight the decay of social control, which, according to their view, occurred at the beginning of the war (Houge 2008; Skjelsbæk 2007). Such a display of sexual violence could not be seen in northwestern Bosnia before the war. The social control of the pre-war society did not permit a situation in which a group of individuals were openly accepted as targets for sexual attacks.

Presser (2013) explains that social reality is versatile, especially in a war situation. Pre-war social control did not allow sexualized violence. However, during the war, these events served the purpose of building unity and enabling the future use of violence and sexual violence. In the mentioned example above, we have a situation where the use of sexual 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 wartime’s use of sexual violence. An old social order is rejected, and a new one emerges and is preserved.

³ All names and identifying information have been changed.

⁴ Briševo is a village that belongs to the municipality of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia.

⁵ 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 (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, Basic submitted 1, 2007).

DISSOCIATION FROM THE PERPETRATOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AFTER THE WAR

The stories on sexual war violence reveal how the existing social order from before the war is rejected, and in its place, the wartime social order is therefore upheld. Stories of the phenomenon “sexualized 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 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 sexual war violence and human suffering serve to support my argument that sexual war violence in this war was more individualized - in many cases the attackers are known and exist in the victim’s social networks and are identified as sadistic, powerful and distant monsters.

Interviewees depict the perpetrators as big, strong, evil, and non-human. The suffering created by the perpetrators turns the latter into distant actors and a threat. The portrayal of the perpetrators produces and re-produces the picture of those submitted to this sexual violence as weak and inferior. By categorizing the perpetrators as such, interviewees also instruct others to identify the results of the perpetrators’ actions. By pointing out the perpetrators’ position, interviewees implicitly point out the perpetrators as contrasts to those subjected to sexual violence. Note how the perpetrator and the victims of sexual 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 (Houge 2008; Skjelsbæk 2007). In other words, interviewees’ rejection, which reveals itself during the conversation, contains a moral meaning. Presser (2013) argues that a connection exists between wartime violence and the social order. What interviewees tell us could be seen as a verbal reaction to their unfulfilled expectations. These expectations - for example, helping a human in distress, are morally correct actions, which from the interviewees’ perspective, are absent in the sexual violent situation they retell. Zahir seems surprised by the guards’ extreme use of sexual violence and the suffering they caused. He implicitly constructs the morally correct action regarding the sexual violent situation in contrast to that which he told us.

Stories about sexual war violence and human suffering are examples of a certain war interaction that includes a sense of ‘normalizing’ certain relations, partly between perpetrators and those subjected to violence, and partly between the perpetrators and the narrator. These stories are permeated by retelling, and are constructed so as to allow the different actors to distance themselves from one another, and thus maintain the war’s social order. The interviewed people 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.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Earlier research on the sexual violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognized the importance of post-war narratives (Houge 2008; Skjelsbæk 2007). My primary purpose is to describe how the actual actors portray sexual violence during the war. My secondary goal is to analyze which discursive patterns are used in creating the category “sexualized war violence”.

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

The narratives of the phenomenon “sexual war violence” produce and reproduce the image of human suffering. Those subjected to sexual 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 sexual war violence. In these descriptions, the perpetrator of sexual violence is depicted as a dangerous, evil, and ideal enemy. He is portrayed as real and powerful, yet he is the alien criminal who is said to pose a clear threat to the social order that existed before the war. The narratives on wartime sexual violence, war perpetrators, and those subjected to sexual violence during war are enhanced through the usage of symbols of ritualized ethnic violence. 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 sexual violence as being threatened by the sexual violent situation.

The disintegration of the existing, pre-war social order produces and reproduces a norm resolution that enables the ritualized wartime use of sexual violence. This development allows the normalization of war sexual violence in this time period even though the result, as this study shows, means human suffering. 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 “sexual 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, sexual violence targeting civilians during the war is an act of heroism.

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