

Distancing Personal Experiences from the Collective

Discursive Tactics among Youth in Post-War Mostar

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Introduction¹

The debate on collective memory in the Balkans evolving around the Yugoslav wars presented the outsider with a picture of a society clearly divided along lines of national affiliation. Within this debate, the focus was on the role of memory politics, including the manipulation of memory and the rewriting of history in the course of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Most research on Yugoslavia and its successor states in the field of ‘memory studies’ since has focused on Partisan collective memory among the different nations; and thereby has explored how the new political elites, after crucial political changes, rewrote and rewrite the past in order to legitimise their rule and to make the past fit their nationalistically oriented goals.² These studies are of great value. Nevertheless, the focus on collective

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Critical Spaces of Hope: Locating Postsocialism and the Future in Post-Yugoslav Anthropology,” University of Chicago, 2008.

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2. See, for example, Bette Denich, “Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide,” *American Ethnologist* Vol. 21. No. 2. 1994. pp. 367–390. See also Robert Hayden “Recounting the Dead. The Rediscovery and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia,” in Ruble Watson, ed., *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American

memory is often maintained at the expense of the individual agent. It bears the risk of obscuring the view on diversity, such as other identities existing alongside only national ones. Moreover, studies on collective memory tend to concentrate on the persistence, reproduction and transmission of memory leaving little room for understanding change.³ This is particularly problematic when studying collective memory in the context of conflict.⁴ If we describe the society as traumatised by war and manipulated by nationalist memory politics, we dismiss all individual interpretation of the past as well as individual ways of coping with the experience of war and its aftermath.

The present paper explores the question of how young people in Mostar position themselves vis-à-vis the war fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and which discursive tactics⁵ they follow in order to deal with the experience and legacy of the war in everyday life. The analysis builds on the understanding that rather than a collection of memories, remembering is a selective, situational and social act that constitutes individual and group identities. Remembering is "(...) not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it, 'doing' something".⁶ Thus, remembering is always coupled with forgetting and silencing.⁷ When narrating the past the process of forgetting/silencing is at least as crucial as the process of remembering. "For every narrative depends on the suppression and repression of contrary, disruptive memory – other people's

Research Press, 1994), pp. 167–189. See also Sandra Basic-Hrvatini "Television and National/Public Memory," in James Gow et al., eds., *Bosnia by Television* (London: British Film Institute 1996), pp. 63–71. See also Ilana Bet-El "Unimagined Communities: The Power of Memory and the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia," in Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 206–222.

3. For a discussion on this issue see David Berliner, "The abuses of memory: Reflections on the memory boom in anthropology," *Anthropology Quarterly* Vol. 78. No. 1. 2005. pp. 197–211. See also Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social memory studies: From 'collective memory' to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 24. 1998. pp. 105–140.

4. Stef Jansen, "The violence of memories: Local narratives of the past after ethnic cleansing in Croatia," *Re-thinking History* Vol. 6, No. 1. 2002. pp. 77–78.

5. In my work discursive tactics first and foremost are verbal expressions of actors in the field that position the actor in relation to the local past. My choice of speaking of tactics rather than of strategies refers to Michel de Certeau's distinction between tactics and strategies; whereby a tactic enables individuals to make space for themselves in a field of power, while a strategy is the calculation of power relationships linked to institutions. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

6. Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2004), p. 56.

7. Though most authors agree that memory cannot be studied without its counterpart forgetting, few studies explicitly deal with forgetting, gaps and silences. Dealing with gaps and silences confronts the researcher with methodological difficulties. It is not only hard to interpret silences but even harder to locate them. Passerini quite rightly asks: "How can we find traces of forgetting and silence since they are not themselves observable? We know that certain silences are observable only when they are broken or interrupted, but we want nonetheless to find them (...)." Luisa Passerini "Memories between silences and oblivion," in Katharine Hodgkin and Susanne Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memories* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 239. It is true that the ability of researchers to identify and interpret silences is restricted, but long-term fieldwork is a way of meeting this methodological challenge since relationships of trust often are achieved only after months or even years.

memory of the same events, as well as the unacceptable ghosts of our own pasts.”⁸ Taking this seriously means to acknowledge that what we remember may tell us more about the present and aspirations for the future than it tells us about the past.⁹ We can easily see how the collective memory of a nation is carefully managed by those in power, most obviously when official history is rewritten after regime change or other significant changes in power. However, as Cornelia Sorabji rightly argues, we should not neglect the fact that individuals too ‘manage’ their memories.¹⁰ As I will show, this active engagement of the past finds expression in discursive tactics employed by young Mostaris.¹¹

The data presented here is part of a wider project that examines narratives of the past encountered in Mostar today from the point of view of both generational differences and differences between official and personal narratives. Data for this article comes from semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, minuted informal interviews and fieldnotes taken during participant observation conducted between 2005 and 2008. I conducted interviews with members of all generations and also with representatives of NGOs and international organisations. Of the generation, this paper focuses on I interviewed 20 people. In addition to these interviews, I had the opportunity to meet and talk to many more people of this generation when I attended history lectures at both the Bosniak- and the Croat-dominated universities in Mostar as well as in youth centres, cafés and other places commonly frequented by young people in Mostar. Most interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Some of the interviewees I knew well already before the interview, and I stayed in contact with them for the entire period of my stay in BiH. These long-term contacts of up to three years allowed me to gain a different insight into their lives than the encounters centred on interviews did. Formal and informal interviews as well as the ethnographic fieldnotes were analysed using the method of qualitative analytic coding.¹²

This paper focuses on the generation of those who were children when the war broke out. Members of this generation were teenagers or in their early 20s when I met them, between two and 10 years old when the war started, and between

8. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘You must remember this’: Autobiography as social critique,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 85. No. 2. 1998. p. 440.

9. See Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: Beck, 2007).

10. Cornelia Sorabji, “Managing memories in post-war Sarajevo: individuals, bad memories, and new wars,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 12, No. 1. 2006. pp. 1–18.

11. Though the paper builds on Maurice Halbwachs’ insight that individual remembering is embedded in the social environment, I give more leeway to the individual than Halbwachs who, as a follower of the Durkheim school, stresses the impact of the social environment and leaves little room for agency. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

12. See Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), pp. 142–168.

five and 14 years old when it ended. This means all of them lived more years of their lives in post-wartime than in pre-wartime. The majority of my interlocutors spent at least part of the war as refugees away from the war zone (either in BiH or outside the country), some of them accompanied by a sibling or parent and others by themselves. Though a minority of my interlocutors were of Serb background or from mixed marriages, all of the people I refer to in this paper have either Bosniak¹³ or Croat¹⁴ background. Today, the vast majority of Mostar's population identifies itself as either Bosniaks or Croats. Among my interlocutors were old and new citizens of Mostar.¹⁵

Although there were significant differences in the way members of the generation in question here narrated autobiographical experiences of the war compared to the way those who were only a few years older did, we need to keep in mind that the boundary drawn between the generations is not impregnable and the age of the narrators does not always correspond with their generational positioning. By exploring generational differences of positioning oneself towards the past, I do not by any means attempt to downplay differences between Bosniaks and Croats concerning the content of the respective nationalised historiography. Nor do I deny other differences, such as gender.¹⁶ The remainder of the paper, however, will analyse the way narratives of the war and its aftermath differ in respect to generation. As I will argue, the experience of certain events, such as the war, alone does not signify a generation, rather the interpretative act of making sense of it, whereby individuals position themselves by following certain discursive tactics.¹⁷ Generational identity is constructed by sharing memories but also by collectively

13. Today, *Bosniak* is the official term for Bosnian Muslims.

14. In this text Bosnian Croats are referred to as Croats as is common practice in Mostar.

15. In the course of the war Mostar's population changed drastically, many residents left – among them a large part of the intelligentsia and middle-class professionals – while refugees from other parts of the country settled in Mostar. “The largest and most influential majority of contemporary Mostar residents are of rural origin and have come to the city as victims of ethnic cleansing campaigns that took place in surrounding areas in 1992–1993.” Bose Sumatra, *Bosnia after Dayton: Nationalist Partition and International Intervention* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002). See also Nebojsa Bjelakovic and Francesco Strazzari “The sack of Mostar, 1992–1994: The politico-military connection,” *European Security*, Vol. 2. No. 2. 1999. p. 92.

16. For an insightful contribution to the topic of gendered narrations of the war in BiH, see Elissa Helms “‘Politics is a Whore’: Women, Morality and Victimhood in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina,” in Xavier Bougarel et al., eds., *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 235–253.

17. Other than in the case of studies on the generational memory of the Holocaust, which are able to analyse changes in public and autobiographical memory discourses over a period of more than sixty years, this long time frame is not available when analysing memories of the war in BiH, which took place only recently. We cannot predict yet how the generation in focus will narrate autobiographical memories at a later point in their lives and which memories they will pass on to their children and grandchildren. But we can assume that narratives may change during the course of the lives of my informants, due to political changes and changes in the historiography of the local past and due to their progressing age and the different social statuses they will inherit over time. For an insightful study on the transmission of memories of World War II based on family and group interviews in various European countries (including Croatia and Serbia), see Harald Welzer, *Der Krieg der Erinnerung: Holocaust, Kollaboration und Widerstand im europäischen Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2007).

silencing them. Thereby generations recruit their identity and at the same time differentiate themselves from other generations.¹⁸

Mostar's War and Its Aftermath

Before the war broke out in 1992, Mostar stood for peaceful coexistence and was often cited as 'little Bosnia', a miniature example of Bosnia's multinational character within socialist Yugoslavia. Mostar best exemplified what BiH supposedly stood for: good coexistence among individuals of different national backgrounds. It was represented as the place where 'East' and 'West' peacefully meet, symbolised by the old Ottoman bridge. Accordingly, statistics showed Mostar to be the city with the highest number of cross-national marriages in all of Yugoslavia. This image of Mostar came to a sudden end with the outbreak of the war, which in Mostar began in April 1992. This war is better described as two wars than as one. This is consistent with the way locals experienced it. In the first months of the war, Bosniaks and Croats allied to fight the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army and Serb troops, until the latter retreated. When the enforcement of the Vance-Owen-Plan, foreseeing a division of the Bosniak-Croat Federation into nationally divided cantons, became feasible, the former allies, Croats and Bosniaks, became fierce enemies in the fight for territory. In May 1993 the conflict between Bosniak and Croat forces escalated into a brutal war. Mostar was the most important city for the Croat aim to establish a quasi-state, *Herceg-Bosna*, within BiH with future aspirations to annex it to Croatia proper at a later stage. This led to the expulsion of non-Croats from West Mostar and to a division of the city in a Bosniak-dominated east and a Croat-dominated west side with a nine month siege of the former.¹⁹ For those who stayed in Mostar, essential means of survival were put in question, such as the provision of food and medicine.

The war between Bosniak and Croat forces ended with the Washington Agreement signed in March 1994 whereupon Mostar was put under the interim European Union Administration (EUAM) from July 1994 to January 1997. However, up until 1997 citizens were being wounded and killed by grenades and expelled from their homes, even though the war was officially over.²⁰ As a consequence of the war the national composition of Mostar's population has changed drastically. The once nationally mixed city (35 percent Muslims, 34 percent Croats, 19 per-

18. See Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations" in Karl Mannheim, ed., *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1952 [1928]), pp. 276–322.

19. Nebojsa Bjelakovic and Francesco Strazzari, op cit.

20. "Reunifying Mostar: Opportunities for Progress," in *International Crisis Group Balkan Report No. 90*, Sarajevo/Brussels, 2000.

cent Serbs and 12 percent Yugoslavs and other minorities²¹) became divided, split half way between Croats and Bosniaks, together forming the vast majority of the population.²² Even after Mostar's residents were able again to move about the city freely, it remained separated in all aspects of life: politically, economically, culturally, and also in terms of health care, education, the media and jurisdiction.²³

The lives of most Bosniaks and Croats are still separated. If they do not actively seek to interact and exchange, Bosniaks and Croats share little time with one another: Bosniak and Croat children visit different schools, youths study at different universities, adults have separate workplaces and leisure time is predominantly spent on 'one's own' side of the city.²⁴ Although no exact numbers exist, my fieldwork observations suggest that only a minority of Mostaris feels at home on both sides of the city. Another minority (almost) never crosses the line between East and West, while the majority does so only under special circumstances. Today, crossing from one to the other side is not unusual, but many do so only if there is particular reason for it. For example, young Bosniaks prefer to go shopping in West Mostar because shopping malls are bigger and fancier. Sometimes such shopping expeditions are combined with having a coffee in one of the chic cafés close by. On the other hand, a modern beauty salon opened during the time of my stay in East Mostar, attracting Mostar's Croats.²⁵

In the course of the war, the cityscape became not only marked by bullet holes and ruins but also by symbols (often of religious nature²⁶) that clearly mark territory as exclusively belonging to one group. This policy of exclusion is supported by publicly remembering (within commemorations and through memorials) only the victims belonging to one's own nation. In Mostar, new memorials and commemorations as well as recently renamed streets are dedicated to victims

21. "Stanovništvo Bosne i Hercegovine. Narodnosni sastav po naseļjima," in *Republika Hrvatska, drzavni zavod za statistiku*. Zagreb, 1995.

22. In 2006, the *Federalni Zavod za Statistiku* estimated the population of Mostar to be 111,259. Of the around 20,000 Serbs, the majority fled, only about a thousand remained during the war and only a minority returned thereafter.

23. For further elaboration on Mostar's division, see Sumatra Bose op cit. See also Larissa Vetter "The Power of Administrative Categories: Emerging Notions of Citizenship in the Divided City of Mostar," *Ethnopolitics* Vol. 6. No. 2. 2007. pp. 187–209. See also Heiko Wimmen, "Territory, Nation and the Power of Language: Implications of Education Reform in the Herzegovinian Town of Mostar," *GSC Quarterly Report* Vol. 11. 2004. pp. 1–21.

24. See Hannes Grandits and Kristof Gosztonyi, "Nationalismus und diskrete Versöhnung – Das neue interethnische Zusammenleben im Süden Bosnien und Herzegowinas," *Südosteuropa* Vol. 52. No. 4–6. 2003. pp. 198–228.

25. However, many parents I talked to preferred their children to stay on 'their side'. They feared their children would be insulted or physically threatened by nationalist radicals on 'the other side' although they knew the likelihood for this to actually happen was small.

26. Like in the entire country and in the surrounding region, new churches and mosques have been built in Mostar to a point where a considerable part of the population has started rejecting the amounts of spending involved and would prefer to see the money invested in new schools, hospitals and other public institutions.

of either Bosniaks or Croats.²⁷ On the Croat-dominated west side, streets named after Partisans of World War II were renamed to make room for new heroes and victims. On the Bosniak east side, reburials of victims' remains are an effective means of strengthening national ties (apart from the importance such rituals may have for the victims' family members).²⁸ Any ceremony commemorating atrocities committed during the war in the 1990s in Mostar is sure to draw plenty of media attention. Even if the number of direct participants is small, the evening news and local newspapers ensure that a good part of the population does not 'forget'.

In the remaining text I analyse three selected narratives of young Mostaris. These three narratives exemplify key observations I made among members of the generation in question. Despite of this, we have to keep in mind that none of the young people introduced in this text represent their generation or their nation as such but their individual narratives provide an opening through which we can explore discursive tactics of young people in Mostar.

Ethnographic Encounters

'Distancing' Personal Experience from that of the Collective

Mario²⁹ was 22 when one of his friends introduced me to him. Like many other young Croats, Mario came to Mostar to study history at *Sveučiliste u Mostaru* (University of Mostar), the only Croat university in BiH, as he repeatedly said to me. He grew up in a city that was part of *Herceg-Bosna* during the war, some 50 kilometres away from Mostar, and was divided along similar conflict lines. There, too, Bosniak and Croat forces first fought as allies while during the second part of the war they fought each other. Mario was born in 1984, and was eight years old when the war began. Although he does not glorify the war, he believes that it brought an end to the 'dark and worn-out' period of communism in his country and enabled Croats to freely practice their language, culture and religion. His personal memories of pre-war times, however, are not as dark. He still fondly remembers the building complex he grew up in where families of different nationalities used to live. Although he has always been aware of his Croat

27. On the east side, the attitude towards Tito's Yugoslavia is more ambivalent and a good number of Partisan busts and memorials are still in place (while new memorials have been erected) and the main road is still named after Tito.

28. On reburials in the successor states of Yugoslavia, see Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 95–127. See also Xavier Bougarel, "Death and the nationalist: Martyrdom, war memory and veteran identity among Bosnian Muslims," in Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms and Ger Duijzings, eds., op cit. pp. 167–192.

29. All interviews cited in this article were conducted in the local language(s) and were translated by the author. The names of all interlocutors and some of the places have been changed to ensure anonymity.

identity, he only sensed the impact of it when war broke out and some of his classmates did not attend classes anymore.

Generally, Mario liked to talk to me about BiH's history. This used to change, though, when I showed interest in his personal experiences of the war. His answers then became brief and he was quick to point out how young he was when the war broke out. He claimed the war would surely have had a completely different effect on his life if it broke out now and he had to take up a rifle and fight. Although the war had a traumatic influence on people, this was not the case for him personally, he told me. Mario's narrative of the war is ambiguous. While he states that this war, like any war, did leave behind many scars, he simultaneously removes himself from that experience by stating he had been too young to understand what was going on. He explained why he was spared any feelings of hate due to his age and his lack of direct war experience:

Because when my town was shelled I was in Split, I went to excursions on islands, I went swimming, I didn't feel the war and later on when I came back to my community I didn't have anything against Muslims or Serbs. (...) Coexistence (suzivot) is good, especially among young people in my age who didn't feel the war a lot.

When narrating the war, Mario shows that he distances his personal story, and to some extent also that of his entire generation, from what is often described as a collective experience. Other interlocutors of his age narrated their war experiences to me in a similar way, especially when they had been evacuated to safer places. This was also the case for Lejla, a 16-year-old, who will be introduced in more detail below. Lejla told me the following:

It is for sure easier for us than for our parents, because they are familiar with everything, with the situation that led to war and everything else, while we were protected from everything; we were just facing some consequences of the war.

In this citation Lejla clearly expresses what I so often encountered in conversations with young Mostaris; namely, that they present themselves as the 'unspoilt' generation due to their young age. Lejla does so with the phrases, "we were protected from everything" and "we were just facing some consequences of the war". These phrases also show that Lejla (as others of my young informants) speaks of youth in Mostar (at times at least) as a 'we'-group although the lives of young Bosniaks and Croats are separated and points of encounter are rare. Most of the time, my young informants removed their personal memories from the discourse of victimisation, which is a strong element of the dominant Bosniak and Croat public discourses as well as of the older generations' narratives. In these nationalised discourses of victimisation, Bosniaks blame Croats for the division of Mostar and speak of *Herceg-Bosna* as a revival of the Ustasa and its Nazi puppet state dur-

ing World War II. Croats on the other side blame Bosniaks for simply wanting to steamroll the Croat nation thanks to their majority status and to Islamize the country. From this perspective *Herceg-Bosna* was necessary to protect Croats in a time when their nation was threatened by Serbs and Bosniaks alike.³⁰

Even if most of the time my interlocutors 'downplayed' their war experiences, most of them also had an alternative story to tell, indicating that neither their young age nor the fact that they were evacuated to safer places spared them from feelings of fear and insecurity. Three immediate realms were essential in these narratives: the family, neighbourhood and school. It was first and foremost in these places that children sensed changes, changes that were often left unexplained. There were the fathers who began to dress in military uniforms (an item of clothing the children had never seen at home before) and to leave the family for days or weeks. Plus the silence upon their return about what they had experienced. There were the pupils who disappeared without saying good-bye, leaving behind empty desks in the classroom. In particular, those who had just reached primary school age when the war started described how confused and threatened they felt, sensing that something was going on without ever being told what it was.

First, their Serbian schoolmates suddenly disappeared. Then, during the following weeks, more and more friends stopped attending classes and their schooling was often interrupted by shelling. For many of my interlocutors this was the point when they first realised that they belonged to a nation or at least became aware of the importance of such an identity. There were long periods when many of the children were parted from their families (or part of their families) after being evacuated to safer places in and outside BiH. In accounts of the time they were away from their family, young Mostaris expressed the anxiety and fear they experienced on behalf of the family members who stayed behind. Lacking any means of communication with their loved ones, they were entirely dependent on the news on foreign TV channels broadcasting images of war and destruction. Some of them even imagined burying their parents in their minds since they had lost hope they would ever see them again. One informant, who had been evacuated abroad, learned only months after the event that his little brother had died

30. Though the identity as victims is strongly emphasised (even more so on the Bosniak side), the dominant public discourses on both 'sides' also draw on a myth of being the defenders of Mostar. On the Bosniak side, the battle fought against the Croat forces is narrated as Mostar's liberation struggle (often directly linked to the Partisan liberation fight in Nazi-occupied Mostar). Croats, on the other hand, speak of the defence of *their* city (as opposed to Sarajevo and Banja Luka, which are seen as cities belonging to the Bosniaks and Serbs respectively). Mostar, it is said, needs to be preserved as a Croat city to protect the interests of the Croat nation, which due to its numerical disadvantage in BiH would otherwise face assimilation. In the dominant public Bosniak as well as Croat discourses, the respective 'other' is portrayed as a traitor after allied fighting against the Serbs. Since the Croat forces took a central role in fighting against Serb forces when Bosniaks were not sufficiently armed, Bosniaks in the Croats' eyes have turned against their former protector. Bosniaks, on the other side, portray Croats as those who turned against their former allies after negotiating a deal with the Serbs to split BiH between themselves.

after being shot by a sniper. He told me this during a stroll through Mostar when we passed by the graveyard where his brother is buried. Such events made it very clear that my young informants had also experienced the war in its fullest sense. Nevertheless, their narratives showed signs of their attempts to dissociate from the experiences of the wider society.

Mario only told me about experiences of fear, including the fear for his father who joined the HVO (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane*, Croat Defence Council) when I explicitly asked him about it. Otherwise, he spoke about the war without showing much emotion. Without planning it, I obtained a direct reaction to Mario's narrative from Marina, a Croat woman who is only eight years older than him, when she helped me with the transcription of Mario's interview. Apologising for her indiscretion, she told me how irritated she was by the ease and light heartedness with which my interviewee spoke about the war and especially about present-day Mostar. She became very emotional and started cursing and accusing 'these kids' of being ignorant of what had happened in and to Mostar. In her view, they do not and cannot know better because they possess too few memories of Mostar before the war; they do not understand that the war ruined a whole world, her old Mostar, over whose destruction she still grieves. I heard many similar statements from other young adults who were sometimes only a few years older than those they blamed to be ignorant.

Although Mario's words did not provoke me as they provoked Marina, I was still puzzled to hear from Mario about the good coexistence of members of his generation across national lines since in Mostar most young people, including Mario, have little contact with their peers on the other side. To a good part this is to blame on the division of schools and universities introduced during the war, an effective way of institutionalising the division of Mostar.³¹ Bosniak and Croat students are taught in separate schools and under different curricula.³² Even if the curricula under which pupils are taught in Mostar's schools do not cover the period of the war (1992-1995), it does not mean that the war is completely absent from the classroom.³³ The situation presents itself in a similar fashion at the universities, with *Sveučiliste u Mostaru* attracting mostly Croat students while at the *Univerzitet 'Džemal Bijedić' Mostar* (University 'Džemal Bijedić' Mostar) the majority of students are Bosniaks. When attending history lectures on the history of BiH (and Croatia) in the twentieth century, I learned that books used for these

31. Interview conducted with two members of the OSCE Education Department, Mostar, 21 August 2008.

32. See "Tailoring catchment areas: School catchment areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina," OSCE Status Report, September 2007. See also Pilvi Torsti, *Divergent Stories, Convergent Attitudes: A Study on the Presence of History, History Textbooks and the Thinking of Youth in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Helsinki: Taifuuni, 2003).

33. See Heike Karge, *Twentieth Century History in the Textbooks of Bosnia and Herzegovina: An Analysis of Books used for the Final Grades of Primary School*. Report by the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Braunschweig, 2008.

lectures end in 1992. Though at both universities little room was given to explicit discussion of the war, it was still overly present; references were made frequently linking experiences of the recent war with injustices and atrocities the respective nation experienced earlier in history.

As described above, young Mostaris have a story to tell that includes fear and hardship connected to the war. At many times, however, they distance themselves from the nationalised discourses of victimisation. In the following section, I suggest that such apparent ambivalences in my interlocutors' narratives are strongly bound to the specific social context of their present lives.³⁴ Let us first explore the immediate environment of my interlocutors, and the attitude towards the experiences of the young generation that they confront. A study by Freedman and Abazovic³⁵ on secondary school students in Mostar and Vukovar, focusing on those who experienced the war as children between the age of five and eight, states that adults tend to belittle the war experiences of this age group or deny them altogether. Freedman and Abazovic report: "Some said that their parents thought they were too little to remember very much and that their parents thought that they themselves were the ones who really suffered most in the wars."³⁶ I heard similar complaints from some of my interlocutors, such as Lejla, a teenager, who was introduced briefly above.

Lejla is from a Mostar family whose members identified themselves as Yugoslavs before the war but today declare themselves as Bosniaks. Lejla left Mostar with her parents and sister in 1992 for Italy and only returned six years later, while her grandparents, cousins and other family members remained in Mostar throughout the war. At the time I met Lejla, she was a student of Mostar's prestigious old grammar school (*Stara gimnazija*) that was officially reunited in 2004. Although uniting 'two schools under one roof' was sold as a big success by the international community (OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was active in the reunification process), it needs to be said that Bosniak and Croat students attend different classes following different curricula even though they share the same building.³⁷ Lejla was disturbed by this division and thus became active in school politics. Lejla is highly aware of the serious shortcomings existing in her hometown. In spite of her young age, Lejla is

34. Maurice Bloch reminds us that "the past is an ever-changing resource according to the situations or moods in which the persons find themselves, situations and moods which will often be due to organised social contexts." Maurice Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p. 119.

35. Sarah Freedman and Dino Abazovic, "Growing up during the Balkan wars of the 1990s," in Colette Daiute, et al., eds., *International Perspectives on Youth Conflict and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

36. *Ibid.*, p. 64

37. See Azra Hromadzic "Discourses of Integration and Practices of Reunification at the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Comparative Education Review* Vol. 52. No. 4. 2008. pp. 541–563.

active in one of the youth NGOs and full-heartedly fights for more participation of youth in the political decision making process.

Lejla claims the right of young people in Mostar to engage with war and post-war issues, which older generations claim for themselves. When it comes to war-related issues, however, she faces a situation in which adults do not find it appropriate to discuss them with her due to her young age. In the following story, she illustrates this experience:

I wrote [in an article for the youth magazine she works for] how sad it was to see that art, which shouldn't be divided, shouldn't be put under any conditions of national division, had been divided after all. In our city we don't actually realise this anymore because it has become normal to us to have two sides, to have this and that side, left and right side, left is their side and right is our side and so on. I realised that nobody wants to speak about it; everybody was avoiding the topic saying that I'm too young and cannot write about it. But it's not only about me! (...) When I tell them that I am 16 [Lejla appears older] their faces freeze and they suggest changing the topic. Why? We students, especially from Stara gimnazija are faced with this ugly situation of separatism every day, and I really hope it will improve.

It is not only due to her age that Lejla does not feel taken seriously enough but also due to the fact that she left the town during the war. On one hand, she feels privileged not to have had to experience the war in Mostar and believes that this gives her the opportunity to be more impartial (in a similar way to Mario). On the other hand, Lejla stresses to always have cared about her hometown and to have feared for her loved ones remaining in Mostar. When she returned she sensed that those who had remained in Mostar did not believe she cared about her hometown since she and her family had decided to leave.³⁸ Most of the time, Lejla downplays her experiences related to the war, disentangling her experiences from the Bosniak victimisation discourse. However, at other times she contests her exclusion from debate and claims the right to have her experiences accepted as part of the national experience of victimisation.³⁹ Lejla, moreover, claims the right of young people in Mostar to engage with war and post-war issues, which older generations claim for themselves.

38. She not only shares this experience with others of her generation but also with other returnees who did not necessarily receive a warm welcome by those who had stayed. The latter saw themselves as defenders of the city (nation) and those who left as traitors. On the other side, those who stayed wished that they had left the city too, sparing themselves and their families the direct experience of war.

39. The exclusion of those who fled the country during the war from the discourse of victimisation and suffering has become increasingly contested by the people in question, even if feelings of guilt coexist. By questioning the authenticity of the war experience, multifaceted experiences of the war may be acknowledged.

'Normalising' Mostar: A Way of Dealing with the Impact of the War on One's Life

I observed another phenomenon among my young interlocutors that I see connected to what I have analysed above as 'distancing', namely the attempt to present Mostar as just another city; both phenomena represent ways of dealing with the war and its aftermath. In both cases individuals disentangle their personal experience from (what is claimed to be) collective experience. Not only did my interlocutors distance their personal memories of war from that of their nation, but they also removed their (and their generation's) present life from the wider society by narrating their lives (at least at times) as if they were not affected in the same way by the aftermath of the war as the older population was. Interestingly, I also encountered such attempts from individuals who at other times were extremely critical of the impact of the war on Mostar, like Lejla who I introduced above. After a long conversation pointing out how the division has manifested itself in all spheres of life, Lejla eagerly defended her hometown during the same interview:

Mostar, no matter how hard we try... when I meet people from Bosnia [as opposed to Herzegovina with Mostar as its largest city] they say: "Uh... it's a really ugly situation down there in Mostar", they are totally unfamiliar with the fact that you can talk normally with everybody here and nobody would say anything bad to you, everybody is keeping those bad things to themselves, without saying them in public. They all still believe that the situation in Mostar is really bad, that we still live in some post-war period, and I don't know why they think like that, probably we have created our own image that way and living in Sarajevo or Banja Luka appears to be better than in Mostar... but it is the same everywhere, the only difference is that other parts of BiH presented themselves differently.

This statement came as a surprise after Lejla had pointed out the difficult situation Mostar was in. However, it can be seen as a defence against the outsider's exoticising gaze on Mostar. Since the war, close to all international news coverage has concentrated on tensions between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, as do most international NGOs active in BiH and, not to leave them unmentioned, researchers who visit the city sometimes for short periods only.⁴⁰ But also people from other parts of BiH look at Mostar as a 'worst case scenario'.

Lejla's defence of her hometown Mostar as a normal city certainly cannot be explained as a result of ignoring tensions persisting in Mostar (even in the cited description she points to stereotypes that remain and are not told out loud). Though it is presented as defence against the exoticising gaze, I suggest that it is more and that it can be understood as a defence leaving room to hope for the

40. Here my own person needs to be taken into account since my interlocutors of course were aware of my identity as a foreigner and a researcher. However, they were also aware that I had lived in Mostar for a long period and that this circumstance helped me to gain a more nuanced picture of the situation.

city she lives in and to which her future is tied. Adults among my interlocutors (locals as well as foreigners) frequently referred to these youths as a lost generation – lethargic and disillusioned – which cannot rely on a memory of a better life and has fallen subject to grave manipulation by nationalist propaganda. Young people, aside from being seen as the part of society most seriously affected by manipulation, are also described as traumatised, often by foreign experts. We can see a general trend in the recent literature dealing with children who experienced war to diagnose these children as traumatised and leave young people with little hope for recovery if they are not willing to work through their past with professional help.⁴¹

Considering these attributes ascribed to my interlocutors, normalising present-day Mostar can be seen as a discursive tactic that detaches the actor from the legacy of the war, in defence against the stigmatisation of being trapped in the realm of the ‘lost generation’. This is complemented by the act of distancing personal memories from the collective. While the latter represents an attempt to disentangle past experiences from that of the nation, the act of normalising present-day Mostar has a similar role for present experiences. I was supported in this interpretation by the observation that those who felt the consequences of war in their personal lives the most were likely to be those who skilfully avoided addressing their experience as related to the wider problems Mostar’s society faces today. I encountered this vividly with Elvira, a woman in her early 20s whom I became friends with at the beginning of my fieldwork and whose life I followed for the three years I was based in BiH.

Elvira faced the difficulties of the city’s division in her private life more than most others I knew. She had been in a relationship with a Bosniak man for a couple of years but had to keep it entirely secret since she was from a Croat family; neither her friends nor her family were allowed to know about it as they would have greatly disapproved. Unlike her parents who avoided crossing to the Bosniak-dominated east side of the city, Elvira crossed sides almost every day because she studied at the Bosniak-dominated university. This choice was approved by her parents only because the Croat-dominated university did not offer the subject she had chosen. When asked about the experience of being a Croat student

41. Allan Young makes us aware that psychiatric diagnoses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, have to be seen as historic products embedded in specific political contexts. See Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). In this respect, we have to acknowledge that earlier studies attested children greater resilience and resistance to trauma, especially as long as they were not parted from their parents. Only from the 1960s and 1970s onwards did the perception of children’s resistance to trauma change, and it was claimed that exposure to violence damages a child’s psyche (post-traumatic stress disorder) and that such children are likely to turn antisocial even after the conflict has ended; thereby the victims of yesterday face the destiny of becoming the perpetrators of tomorrow. See, for example, David de Levita, “Child psychotherapy as an instrument in cultural research: treating war-traumatised children in the former Yugoslavia,” in Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, eds., *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

at the Bosniak-dominated university, she told me she had not encountered any problems, after a while adding that indeed nobody knew of her Croat origins as her first and last names are not clearly and exclusively identifiable as Croat. I was surprised she never complained about having to keep the issue about her Croat background as yet another secret.

When from time to time I went for coffee with Elvira and her fellow students in a café on the university campus, I understood how it was possible for her to keep her national identity out of conversations. Elvira and her friends talked about exams, professors, fellow students, fashion and similar topics but avoided any conversations about local politics. Their dissatisfaction with Mostar's present situation was expressed only through sharing their mutual dissatisfaction with the bad economic situation and bleak job prospects. Like others of her generation, Elvira would consider leaving Mostar if the right opportunity presented itself.⁴²

It was only Elvira's Bosniak partner who, from time to time, challenged her way of presenting Mostar's reality as removed from politics. Once in a coffee bar at the beginning of my stay in Mostar, Elvira, her boyfriend and I discussed in which parts of the city it would be good for me and my family to live. Elvira suggested West Mostar (where she lived) since it was greener than East Mostar. Her Bosniak boyfriend, however, found this statement provocative, adding that the east side used to be green as well but during the war people needed heating material so they had cut down most of the trees. I never felt quite comfortable challenging Elvira's depoliticised presentations in such a way and assumed that once we knew each other better she would share her thoughts on such matters anyway. But I was wrong; all my subtle attempts to engage her in conversation about the political situation of her city failed despite the fact that we met frequently over a period of almost three years. By offering me only monosyllabic answers she clearly indicated her desire to change the topic and talk about more light-hearted things such as parties, shopping, holiday plans, etc. When once she and I attended a photograph exhibition in the Bosniak dominated university showing images of a heavily destroyed Mostar, I was sure she would be moved to share her thoughts about Mostar's recent past with me. However, she only said three words: "That is horrible!"⁴³

42. Several opinion polls in BiH have shown a high percentage (more than 70 per cent) of young people wanting to leave their country, especially for economic reasons. In my judgment this high percentage expresses the frustration experienced by youth due to grim job prospects and other difficulties they face. However, I believe that a much smaller number than those who declare their desire to leave the country would actually decide to move when given the chance. See, for example, *Review of the World Programme of Action for Youth. Independent Evaluation of the National Youth Policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina* conducted in 2005. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpaysubmissions/bosnia.pdf>. [03.01.2008].

43. Not all of my interlocutors were as reluctant to talk about the war as Elvira. Especially among Bosniaks the collective responsibility to remember the victims of the war was felt but always in conflict with the need to suppress the memory of those times in order to master everyday life. A young man in his early 20s once explained it to me like this: "We have to suppress these memories, but we are not allowed to forget". I remember his words

The silences I encountered among young Mostaris about the war and the effect it has on their lives puzzled me until I realised that it is a tactic they use in order to cope with the legacy of the city to which their lives are bound. According to Jacob Climo, distancing autobiographic memory from the collective memory can be a personal decision.⁴⁴ Although individuals tend to embed their personal memories into wider officially accepted narratives, one is likely to also encounter dissonance between stories of individual experience and their larger social and historical context. Climo demonstrates this in an example of memories from World War II and suggests it may be a conscious choice when people do not make a connection between their personal and social memories. This can occur when it feels too threatening to put oneself into the recognised historical context. So, by separating personal memories from collective memories, the person feels protected from the difficult collective experiences.⁴⁵ This would suggest that past events of war are so overwhelming and threatening that young Mostaris prefer to remove their personal stories from the wider social context.

Similar observations by Lynne Jones (2004), a psychiatrist working in Gorazde and Foca a year after the war had ended, support this understanding:

The fact that for some children, in some situations, distancing is an effective means of coping challenges widely held assumptions about the psychological impact of stressful events. It suggests that we might do well to pay more attention to avoidance as a constructive rather than pathological coping mechanism. (Jones 2004: 247)⁴⁶

Jones takes the stories and claims of the children seriously and shows that by listening carefully to what they have to say we learn about their needs to recover from war time and concludes that “(...) the children knew that their recovery did not depend on individual therapy but was intimately bound up with the recovery of their social and political communities.”⁴⁷ One of the greatest concerns of my interlocutors regardless of their age was economic insecurity, while the international community’s concentration on reconciliation was met with criticism (or sometimes rather with cynicism). There seems to be a consensus among Mostar’s

so well because he told them to me during a stroll through the old town. When we passed the graveyard he pointed towards it and told me that this is the place his brother is buried at. He had been eleven years old when he was shot by a sniper. On the subject of morality of remembering, see Michael Lambek, “The past imperfect: Remembering as a moral practice,” in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

44. Jacob Climo “Memories of the American Jewish Aliyah: Connecting individual and collective experience,” in Climo Jacob and Maria Cattell, eds., *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002).

45. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

46. Lynne Jones, *Then They Started Shooting: Growing up in Wartime Bosnia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 247.

47. Jones, *op cit.* pp. 244–245.

population that the improvement of living conditions would ease tensions and thus is an important prerequisite for a shared future.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Although there is a general discrepancy between the public sphere in which the war takes a dominant role (e.g. in memorials, commemorations, media and speeches of politicians and clerics) and private everyday life in which the war is a much less explicit topic, this discrepancy is most pronounced among those who experienced the war as children. Their discursive tactics include strong elements of silencing and distancing the effects the war may have had on their lives. Although those belonging to older generations sometimes express the wish to forget about war atrocities they themselves or their nation experienced, the war and its aftermath sneak into almost every longer conversation. This is particularly true for those who experienced great loss (of family members, property, social and economic status, etc.) during the war and do not think that it has changed anything for the better.⁴⁹

As shown in this paper, the way young Mostaris position themselves towards the past and defend their lives and to some respect also their generation is not bound to national affiliation but can be described as generational experience of Bosniaks and Croats alike. Although their lives are separated and points of encounter are rare, they speak of youth in Mostar (at times at least) as a 'we'-group. These observations indicate that there is a generational identity although there is little exchange and opportunities for sharing memories in daily interaction. Even if Bosniak and Croat youths do not share what we may call 'national historical consciousness', they share certain discursive tactics utilised in order to position themselves in relation to the past and in so doing also in present-day Mostar. Though we have to acknowledge that the experience of the war as well as its interpretation (as destruction of good coexistence or as a path towards national self-determination or both) differs among young people, members of this generation share means of dealing with the legacy of their and their country's past reflected in their shared discursive tactics. By pointing out generational experiences that cross national lines, this paper hopes to encourage more research that looks be-

48. In Mostar the biggest concern on people's minds every day is the economic situation, see *UNDP Early Warning System Quarterly Report*, December 2008.

49. Remembering their good lives back in Yugoslavia is experienced as a painful loss, but at the same time it serves as a valve to relieve pressure caused by the difficulties people face in everyday life. Clearly, there are more Bosniaks among those who nostalgically remember Yugoslavia but also a good number of Croats. The latter tend to keep their nostalgia more to themselves, so as to avoid being called anti-patriotic or disloyal. See Monika Palmberger, "Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future," *Sociologija: Casopis za sociologiju, socijalnu antropologiju i socijalnu psihologiju*, Vol. 50. Nr. 4, 2008. pp. 355–377.

yond national divisions in the successor states of Yugoslavia, taking other lines of identification serious as well.

Abstract

This paper analyses ways young people in Mostar position their lives in relation to the past, particularly to the war that was fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. It reveals that youths in Mostar employ selected discursive tactics to disentangle their lives from experiences of their nation regarding war and its legacy. This phenomenon cannot be explained by simply referring to the ignorance of youth in Mostar but needs to be contextualised in the wider social environment of the generation in question. The paper proposes that even when historiographies are strongly nationalised in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina we should not overlook the significance of identities other than national identities in understanding mnemonic practices.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les façons par lesquelles les jeunes de Mostar positionnent leur vie en relation au passé, en particulier à la guerre qui eut lieu en Bosnie-Herzégovine entre 1992 et 1995. Il montre que les jeunes de Mostar emploient des tactiques discursives sélectives pour détacher leur vie des expériences de leur nation en ce qui concerne la guerre et son héritage. Ce phénomène ne peut pas simplement s'expliquer par référence à l'ignorance de la jeunesse de Mostar, mais se doit d'être contextualisé dans l'environnement social plus large de la génération en question. Cet article suggère que, même si les historiographies sont fortement nationalisées dans la Bosnie Herzégovine d'après-guerre, il ne faut pas occulter l'importance des identités autres que les identités nationales dans la compréhension des pratiques mnémoniques.