

Don't Talk About the Elephant: Silence and Ethnic Boundaries in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Published online: 20 February 2018
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Abstract In December 1995, the guns fell silent on Bosnia-Herzegovina and so did much dialogue. Silence is omnipresent in this postwar society: People conceal their suffering; they remain silent about their potential responsibility and guilt and—in interethnic encounters—the violent past is often wholly screened out. Drawing on a literature analysis as well as own interviews and ethnographic observations conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2007, the article focuses on the interplay between silence and the constitution of ethnic boundaries. In accordance with the literature, it argues that silencing in-group atrocities reinforces the boundaries between former enemies by strengthening ethnically biased collective memories. However, existing research also suggest that not speaking about war in interethnic encounters most likely contributes to the integration of Bosnian society because it enables members of different ethnic communities to interact ‘peacefully’ in everyday life, thereby creating ‘new’ realities within which ethnic boundaries become less important. This conclusion assumes that silencing necessarily leads to forgetting. The following paper challenges this perception and argues that silence about war and the avoidance of conflict in interethnic communication can, in fact, also promote a further consolidation of ethnic boundaries. When conversations about past realities only take place between like-minded people, the likely result is that their pre-existing shared perspective on this reality will become solidified. In other words, silencing war in interethnic encounters impedes any potential revision or restructuring of interethnic relations and therefore stabilises the boundaries between ethnic groups.

Keywords Bosnia-Herzegovina · Collective memory · Ethnic identity · Postwar · Silence

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Introduction

Throughout history, individuals, regimes, and worldviews as well as historical facts have consistently been banned from the (collective) memory to construct or reconstruct a consistent image of the past that serves present (political) objectives. After the Second World War, Josip Broz Tito and the Communist Party drew a veil not just over the atrocities committed by Tito's Partisans against Croats and Germans in the direct aftermath of the war, but also over those committed by the fascist Croatian Ustasha and Serbian Chetniks.¹ With the aim of furthering the integration of all the South Slavic peoples, Tito tried to create a common history of Partisans, which transcended the former enmity between the nations and thereby laid the foundations for his Yugoslavian project (Jambrešić Kirin 2006). During the disintegration of Yugoslavia, this perspective of reality, embodied by a shared history, was reversed. Thus, after the declaration of independence in Croatia—although similar processes could be observed in other (Post-)Yugoslav republics—hundreds of Partisan monuments were destroyed and streets dedicated to Partisans were renamed (Radonić 2013a, b). The aim shifted from the integration of all the South Slavic nations to the exclusion of everyone and everything not genuinely Croatian. In both cases, *damnatio memoriae*—the practice of silencing certain aspects of the past—can be considered as a strategy for solving a societal integration problem: the integration of former enemies in Yugoslavia and the integration of all Croats under the common umbrella of Croatian Nationalism during and in the aftermath of the Yugoslavian breakup.

For various reasons in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter BiH), the situation developed differently. In 1995, after nearly 4 years of bloodshed, the ethnicised war between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs ended with the ratification of the Dayton Peace Agreement. To date, however, ethno-nationalistic parties continue to dominate the political landscape of BiH; one-sided '(hi)stories' are told and taught in ethnically divided schools, and the media landscape is divided along ethnic lines. Structurally considered, major agents of socialisation are ethnically organised. As a result, people in BiH still identify themselves most strongly with their ethnic in-group, which is—according to the prevalent ethnic narratives—perceived as solely a victim of war (Mijić 2014). That is, in today's Bosnia there are competing perceptions about what happened. The past is not *canonised* (Assmann 2011: 140; Luckmann 1995: 55) and there is no common "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1980). Rather, there are various—not only different— but also competing collective *memories*. In literature, this is also attributed to the fact that the war ended without a clear victor and "there is no strong national leadership able to impose its hegemonic model of reconciliation and national 'truth' on the population, like Tito and the Communist Party had the power to do in the aftermath of WW II in Yugoslavia" (Stefansson 2010: 64). The past as

¹ The Ustasha, the Croatian Revolutionary Movement, was a fascist organisation founded in 1930. Installed in power by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in 1941, the Ustasha were responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Roma. The Serbian nationalist Chetniks were re-established as an anti-Axis movement during the Second World War. However, they primarily fought against the Yugoslav Partisans under Tito.

well as the present are still contested. Although, at first glance, it seems as if the memory of war and its consequences is banned.

Within a broader empirical research project about the transformation of identity-related interpretation patterns in postwar BiH conducted by the author of this paper between 2007 and 2013, it became increasingly apparent that in this context, characterised by ethnically divided and competitive reality perspectives, the more or less conscious silencing of certain facets of the past seems to be ubiquitous. People conceal personal experiences of violence; within ethnic boundaries, they remain silent about their in-group's potential responsibility and guilt and—in interethnic encounters—the violent past is often entirely screened out. However, hitherto the phenomenon of silence in postwar BiH has not been systematically examined. The following article focuses on the analysis of the social impact of silence after the experience of war and seeks to illuminate the interrelation of silence, collective memories, and ethnic boundaries. With this focus, one important manifestation of postwar silence is excluded from further consideration: the silence after personal suffering.

It is quite remarkable that in the conducted interviews, many interviewees were initially not willing to discuss their personal experiences of war. A several participants stated quite explicitly that they did not want to speak about what happened to them and that they want to forget—proof that they have in fact not forgotten! Nevertheless, all declined the offer to interrupt the interview, and during the course of the continued conversation, most opened up and introduced personal experiences, although these were often wrapped up in generalised stories. In literature, there is a broad consensus that people who have experienced violence use silence as a coping strategy in order to continue their lives in a 'normal' way (Assmann 2013: 57f.; Guthrey 2015: 40; Hayner 2010). By remaining silent about what happened, victims try to regain their dignity and overcome shame and humiliation as well as protect themselves from further attacks (Guthrey 2015: 40). Even if people are willing to talk about their suffering, it is not always socially acceptable to do so. In particular, sexual violence is a tabooed topic, which has been noted as well over the course of my research in BiH. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 60,000 women were raped during the Bosnian war (Wood 2013: 140). However, there are no reliable numbers, not least because only a few women talk about the sexual violence they suffered. Male victims of sexual violence appear to be even less willing to talk about their experience. In BiH, only in recent years has male-on-male rape been mentioned at all (Williams Institute 2017). Eviatar Zerubavel points out that virtually every society engages in "conspiracies of silence" about the subject of rape (Zerubavel 2006). This shows that the silencing of individual experiences of violence could indeed be socially originated. However, this topic is not of primary interest for the article at hand which specifically focuses on the interrelation of silence and the boundaries between ethnic groups.

It will be shown that in BiH, the silence within ethnic boundaries works according to the aforementioned principle of *damnatio memoriae*. Inconvenient facets of the past were silenced and thereby excluded from the collective narratives to construct a morally pure image of the in-group and thereby strengthen the ethnic boundaries. This result is foreseeable, as it is in accordance with empirical studies on collective memory as well as theoretical reflections on the topic (see below).

When it comes to the silencing of war in interethnic encounters, the paper contradicts previous research on this phenomenon, which argues that not talking about war with members of the respective out-groups contributes to an integration of the Bosnian society (Stefansson 2010). *Prima facie*, it might seem reasonable to assume that the silencing of the war-torn past in interethnic communication is conducive to interethnic integration, since it is only by avoiding the most fiercely disputed issues that members of the different ethnic communities are able to interact ‘peacefully’ in everyday life and thereby create ‘new’ realities (Berger and Luckmann 1966), realities within which ethnic boundaries become less important. However, this conclusion presupposes that silence is inevitably followed by forgetting. The article challenges this perception. Drawing on the empirical data conducted in BiH as well as existing theoretical reflections on the topic, it argues that silencing particular facets of the past in postwar BiH produces variable results depending on the context: In some cases, it indeed fosters forgetting; in others, however, it supports and preserves memory.

The paper is divided into three further sections. The following section introduces the empirical analysis’ methodology as well as the data corpus used in the study. Subsequently, a theoretical approach to the (inter-)relations between (collective) remembering, forgetting and silencing as well as their connections to ethnic boundaries is outlined. Finally, the paper moves to an empirically founded reflection on the questions of how and why people in postwar BiH remain silent in intra-ethnic as well as in inter-ethnic encounters.

Data and Methodology

The empirical reflection draws on thirty in-depth (narrative) interviews conducted within a broader empirical project by the author about the transformation of identity in postwar BiH (Mijić 2014). The interviews were collected in three successive cycles with individuals from different ethnic allegiances in several regions of BiH between 2007 and 2009. The selection of interviewees was based on maximum variation sampling to ensure a broad range of perspectives. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The confidentiality of information supplied by the interviewees and their anonymity was respected. The interviews were largely unstructured, i.e., they were organised around one or a set of predetermined open-ended questions to derive rich, detailed narratives about the experiences and perspectives of individuals about their life in postwar BiH. The aim is to gain insights into the speaker’s perspective of reality without her/him being over-influenced by the interviewer’s questions. The interviews were analysed using *objective hermeneutics*, a reconstructive approach developed by the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann (Endreß 2013; Maiwald 2005; Oevermann 2013; Oevermann et al. 1987; Wernet 2013). Unlike different types of content analysis, this approach does not focus on the information content of a text (e.g., an interview), but on the reconstruction of a specific case structure. Put differently, the primary interest is not the issue of what people are talking about but rather the issue of how they talk about specific contents and in which ways they express them. Furthermore, this approach does not ask about the speaker’s intention

but rather for the 'objective' meaning of the text. The key strength of this approach is its capacity to uncover the 'strategies' for dealing with crises of knowledge by reconstructing the 'latent meaning structures' that underlie social practices. Because these strategies for coping with interpretation problems are usually deployed unconsciously, they cannot be ascertained simply through direct questions. Thus, objective hermeneutics is the proper tool for dealing with the special problems presented by researching silence. This poses the question: How can something be analysed that usually remains unsaid? One possible way to do so is to focus on breaches of silence, i.e., on situations where people express more than they intended to. An objective hermeneutical sequence analysis offers the best means for identifying these breaches of silences. For that purpose, the aforementioned interviews were examined for inconsistencies. This article presents the results of the analysis of these sequences together with only selected examples from the interview material—to render the entire analysis process would go beyond the constraints of the article. The hermeneutical analysis is complemented by ethnographic observations of interethnic encounters conducted by the author during field research between 2007 and 2012 and compared with the results of other, both qualitative and quantitative, research.

Collective Memory, Collective Amnesia, Collective Silence—A Theoretical Framework

Collective memory, understood “as an active process of sense-making through time” (Olick and Levy 1997: 922), assists in the construction of social solidarity and “collective identity,” since it “identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future” (Wickham and Fentress 1992: 25). Collective memories define the social and symbolic boundaries between ethnic groups or nations (Assmann and Friese 1999; Ben-Amos and Weissberg 1999; Gillis 1996), which could be considered as “communities of memory” (Misztal 2003: 155) or “mnemonic communities” (Zerubavel 1996, 2004). Simultaneously, collective memories are constituted by these groups: they define what should be remembered and what should be silenced and forgotten. Hence, the relation between collective memories and symbolic or social boundaries² are reciprocally constitutive (Giesen 2002).

In doing so, collective memory must be understood—as memory research shows—as an interplay between individual and group. According to Maurice Halbwachs, the founder of sociological memory research, only an individual person can remember, but he or she “remembers only by situating himself [or herself] within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought” (Halbwachs 1980: 33). By referring to Émile Durkheim's concept of *collective consciousness*, Halbwachs first introduced the idea of memory as something necessarily “socially framed”. Memory is not organised by the individual mind, but by shared cognitive structures, which Halbwachs refers to as “frames of memory”:

² Regarding the difference between social and symbolic boundaries, see (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168; Wimmer 2008: 975, 2013: 9).

“One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realises and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs 1992: 40). In other words, the connection between individual and collective memory is “intimate, immanent, the two types of memory interpenetrate one another” (Ricoeur 2004: 393).

Furthermore, there is also an interrelation between the past and the present. The present is shaped by the past, while the past is shaped by the present (Schudson 1989). In this respect, collective memories are not always³ but frequently reconstructions of the past against the background of a group’s current interests (Schwartz 2003: 18). They satisfy present needs and accommodate the demands of a social constellation by sorting out relevant or useful from irrelevant or useless information. In other words, collective memories are not only about protecting the group’s past, but also its present and future. For this purpose, mnemonic communities must not only remember, but also forget.

According to Ricoeur, memory always “negotiate[s] with forgetting, groping to find the right measure in its balance with forgetting” (Ricoeur 2004: 413). Indeed, Luhmann (1996: 311) considers forgetting as the “primary function” of memory: Only by forgetting does the system become capable of remembering and learning. Memory and forgetting are “two sides of one process” (Brockmeier 2002: 21; Endreß 2011; Mannheim 1928) and forgetting is as social as memory and can serve social purposes. Hence, canonisation does not only mean that the same things are remembered, but also that the same things are forgotten. Here, remembering has a strategic advantage over forgetting: “One can remember that one remembers, but one has to forget that one has forgotten” (Boyden 2003: para. 5). Against this backdrop, silence seems to be as necessary a condition for forgetting as talking is for remembering.

According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, reality—and with it, memory—is continually sustained and modified by a “conversational apparatus” that “maintains reality by ‘talking through’ various elements of experience and allocating them a definite place in the real world” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 173). Jan Assmann differentiates more precisely between “situation-transcendent” cultural memory, which is “exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms” (Assmann 2010: 110f.) and communicative memory, which “is not formalised and stabilised by any forms of material symbolisation; it lives in everyday interaction and communication” (Assmann 2010: 111). The observation that memory requires some kind of medium often leads to the assumption “that silence is the space of forgetting and speech the realm of remembrance” (Winter 2010: 4). As stated by the historian Jay Winter, this conjecture must be re-evaluated. He as well as several other scholars note that silence should be considered an object of study distinct from memory or forgetting. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, for instance, argue:

³ Michael Schudson argues against an ‘instrumentalist’ perspective on memory: “But the recollection of the past does not always serve present interests. The past is in some respects, and under some conditions, highly resistant to efforts to make it over” (Schudson 1989: 107).

While acknowledging that silence is often coupled with forgetting and talk with memory, we wish to expand on the ways in which silence can also be used to facilitate recollection, while talk can be used to enhance amnesia. In other words, we suggest that silence be understood as a complex and rich social space that can operate as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting and thus can be used by various groups for different ends. (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010: 1104)

In the following, silence will be considered in more detail. First, and following Eviatar Zerubavel, it is important to acknowledge that being silent,

involves more than just absence of action, since the things we are silent about are in fact actively avoided [...] Moreover, it involves avoiding things that actually beg for our attention [...] if we ignore [their] presents it can only be as a result of active avoidance, as otherwise it would be impossible not to notice [them]. To ignore the 'elephant,' in short, is to ignore the obvious. (Zerubavel 2010: 33)

That is, being silent must be considered as a social action (Winter 2010: 11f.). Like Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, Winter defines silence as a "space," or more precisely as "a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken" (Winter 2010: 4). What is enclosed in this space is specified in social processes within which groups of people differentiate "between the sayable and the unsayable"; they "codify and enforce norms which reinforce the injunction against breaking into the inner space of the circle of silence" (Winter 2010: 4). The reasons for being silent are multifaceted. Within the first chapter of the anthology *Shadows of war. A social history of silence in the Twentieth Century*, Winter distinguishes three reasons for silence in the context of war and violence: First, the liturgical silence as a part of mourning practices, "since not speaking enables those experiencing loss to engage with their grief in their own time and in their own ways" (Winter 2010: 4). Second, the essentialist silence, which "arises from considerations of privilege. That is, who has the right to speak about the violent past?" (Winter 2010: 6).⁴ Finally, the political or strategic silence "in order to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence" (Winter 2010: 5). As a striking example for this kind of silence, Winter refers to the "pact of silence" after the fall of the Franco regime in Spain: "Not seeing what everyone saw and not saying what everyone knew became a strategy accepted by everyone at the time to ensure the success of a peaceful transition to democratic rule" (Winter 2010: 5). This conclusion applies *mutatis mutandis* to post-WWII Yugoslavia. By silencing the former enmity and crimes committed during and in the aftermath of the Second World War, the integration of all Yugoslavians was intended. However, Winter also points out that such accords frequently fail:

⁴ According to Winter (2010: 6), it is widely believed that "[o]nly those who have been there [...] can claim the authority of direct experience required to speak about these matters". The essentialist silence must be considered as "a strategy of control, of cutting of debate, of *ad hominem* assertions of a kind unworthy of serious reflections" (Winter 2010: 8).

With time, their hold over the parties begins to loosen, a new generation comes to power, and though silence is still ordained at the national level as wise and necessary, people start talking, looking, digging, writing and inevitably accusing. [...] Here we can see that silence, like memory and forgetting, has a life history, and—when new pressures or circumstances emerge—can be transformed into its opposite in very rapid order. (Winter 2010: 5)

Because this paper asks about the interrelation between silence and ethnic boundaries, political or strategic silence is at the centre of the presented analysis. However, to illuminate the connection between silence and the “(un-)making of ethnic boundaries” (Wimmer 2008), it is necessary not only to recognise that the impulse behind the political silence is the avoidance of open conflict but also to ask for the reasons for this avoidance itself. This will be considered in more detail below. Before proceeding to the empirically-founded analysis of silence in postwar BiH, a sensitisation for the different manifestations of silence is appropriate.

In his treatise about restrictions on communication (*Kommunikationsverbote*), Alois Hahn elaborates a typology of forms of silence (Hahn 1991, see also 2013). Referencing Niklas Luhmann, Hahn distinguishes communication restrictions along three dimensions: temporal, material and social. From the temporal point of view, there are, for example, *awkward or uncomfortable silences* (Hahn 1991: 101–104) as well as *preliminary concealments* (Hahn 1991: 99–101). However, according to Luhmann (1989: 7), every communication depends on temporary silence, since the ban on talking is a necessary condition for speaking (Hahn 1991: 97). With regard to the material dimension, first, there are *tabooed forms of expression and style*—i.e., the tabooed is not a specific topic as such, but its ‘uncivilised’ processing (Hahn 1991: 90) Second, there are *tabooed topics*, which must be avoided, since they are considered as “generators of dispute and embarrassment” (Hahn 1991: 87) and hence as a threat to social interaction. Third, there are *tabooed issues*. In this case, it is possible to talk about a specific topic, such as the war, but it is impermissible to address particular issues related to this topic such as the atrocities committed by members of one’s own in-group. In reference to the social dimension, Hahn distinguishes between first, *silence due to informational autonomy* (Hahn 1991: 95f.)—a person does not have to disclose everything about herself/himself; second, *silence by reason of secrecy*—shared secrets constitute social boundaries; third, *status-related silence (which corresponds to Winter’s essentialist silence)*—not everybody is authorised to speak,⁵ and fourth, *tactful silence* (Table 1).

These types of communication restrictions were all relevant for the analysis of the interview transcripts and the observation protocols, because the analysis required

⁵ In postwar BiH, women particularly seem condemned to silence. It is striking that during the data collection for my research, almost every woman who agreed to an interview simultaneously refused the request for it to be recorded. They were willing to talk, but only in private and without leaving any evidence. This suggests that in this postwar situation, women were actually silenced. According to Winter, it can be observed that soldiers, for instance, in some cases “express a kind of sexist rejection of the very capacity of women to enter and understand this masculine realm. Others take an essentialist line, in defining experience as internal and ineffable” (Winter 2010: 6).

Table 1 Restrictions on communication according to Hahn (1991)

Dimensions of communication restrictions	Temporal	Material	Social
	Uncomfortable silences	Tabooed forms of expression and style	Silence due to informational autonomy
	Preliminary concealments	Tabooed topics Tabooed issues	Silence by reason of secrecy Status-related silence Tactful silence

considering if the observed silence is (just) a preliminary concealment (e.g., the speaker tries to create a tension in her/his narration), an uncomfortable silence (e.g., the interviewee is not sure how to answer a question or how to continue her/his narration), or if the interview partner does not want to talk about her/his own experience of suffering, for example. However, the following outline will not elaborate all the identified types of silence. Instead, it will focus on those types which are immediately connected to the (un-)making of ethnic boundaries. Regarding the material dimension, it will concentrate on the identification of tabooed topics and tabooed issues; regarding the social dimension, it will particularly focus on the tactful silence and the silence, respectively, which is arguably often mistakenly considered as tactful.

Simmel (1969: 4f.) and later Goffman (1982) previously pointed out that tact fulfils a pivotal social function (see also Assmann 2013: 58f.). According to Goffman, being tactful means to act in a way that enables others to save face. Hahn emphasises that the peculiar thing about tact-related bans on talking is the fact that there are no specific contents, topics, or forms of expressions as such that are forbidden, but rather that the social characteristics of everyone present in a situation determines what is permitted and what is prohibited (Hahn 1991: 94). In other words, content is not primarily what counts, but context. However, what Hahn describes here does not only apply to tactful silence. The social context is in general of the utmost significance when it comes to silence. As the following presentation of the empirical analysis shows, silence within ethnic boundaries and silence across ethnic boundaries, i.e., silence in interethnic encounters, ultimately serve the same purpose.

The Sounds of Silence in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

Silence Within Ethnic Boundaries

The analysis of the interview material clearly reveals that within the in-group, there is an imperative of silence regarding everything that challenges the “group-charisma” (Elias and Scotson 1965). The group’s heroism and suffering are an integral part of its collective memory and the narratives that constitute the ethnic boundaries.

It is socially expected if not obligatory to address the subject of war, as only by addressing the war could one's own heroism be emphasised. However, it is simultaneously forbidden to thematise certain specific issues related to it, such as atrocities committed by members of the in-group. Using the terms to describe silence introduced by Hahn, within the in-group, the topic of war can be considered as approved whereas the issue of the in-group's war crimes is tabooed. In the following, this point will be illustrated by two examples from the conducted and analysed interviews. Prior to this, some methodological clarifications are needed: Both examples are from interviews with self-identified Croatian interviewees of approximately the same age (Interviewee 1 was 50 years old and Interviewee 2 was 55 years old). They experienced the war in their thirties, Interviewee 1 as a soldier and Interviewee 2 as a civilian and Catholic priest, respectively. Both interviewees recognised myself, most likely because of my name, as a member of their in-group, i.e., as Croat. Thus, these interviews are particularly suitable to exemplify the silence within the ethnic boundaries, because the interview situation itself is considered as ethnically homogeneous. As mentioned above, one possible way to research silence is to focus on breaches of silence. Following Hahn, one might differentiate between 'breaches of secrecy' and heresy, i.e., the violation of a taboo by denial of approved dogmas (Hahn 1991: 91). However, these types cannot be clearly empirically distinguished since the lines between (secret) knowledge and ideology are not always straightforward. Nevertheless, breaches of silence often 'happen' unintentionally as the following examples shows, where both interviewees stumble over their in-group's fascist past, which typically remains hidden since it challenges the Croatian we-ideal.

...that we have lost a lot because of the Ustasha. It was ... that is in, in ... by the manifest ... by the manifestation of the Ustasha propaganda by us Croats, that is, that we were second-class citizens in that Yugoslavia. (Interview 1)

During most parts of the interview, the interviewee's speech is rather fluent and apparently coherent. Against this background, it is striking when suddenly he starts to stammer and becomes inarticulate. He is obviously not able or not willing to clearly enounce who the Ustasha were and what they did. It also would be reasonable to assume that the speaker does not want to go into details, since he supposes that the interviewer already knows all about the historical context. However, it is more plausible to assume that the interviewee introduces the Ustasha by accident or because he is needing them to explain something else—the discrimination of Croats in former Yugoslavia. He addresses the topic of the Ustasha regime and simultaneously disregards the most critical issue about it: their fascist alignment and their murdering of hundreds of thousands 'non-Croats,' particularly Jews, Roma, and Serbs as well as political opponents during the Second World War. Instead, he designates the Croats themselves as the main victims of the Ustasha.

In the following extract from Interview 2, something quite similar could be recognised: Interviewee 2 completely omits the fascist past, while simultaneously making it quite obvious that there is something missing in his explanation.

The Serbs wanted to take revenge on the Croats, but I don't know why [...] there was no war in this parish (3) it was just open vengeance. It was just the Serb revenge. (Interview 2)

By emphasising the fact that, in the parish he is talking about, there was no war (he refers to the 1990s war) and only the Serbian revenge, the interviewee differentiates unambiguously between the Croatian victims and the Serbian perpetrators, since—in contrast to war—revenge is a one-sided action. However, it does not make any sense to talk about revenge if there is nothing to be vengeful about. In light of this, it is reasonable to assume that the speaker is omitting something—the obvious candidate for this omission being the atrocities carried out by the Croatian Ustasha against the Serbs during Second World War.

In his aforementioned text about silence in context of war and violence, Winter points out that “[g]roups of people construct scripts which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past. Repeated frequently enough, these scripts become formulaic or iconic, which is to say, they tell truths rather than the truth. Consensual silence is one way in which people construct the mythical stories they need to live with” (Winter 2010: 23). For the Croatian case, this omission reveals itself most clearly with regard to the crimes of the Ustasha regime in the Second World War and with regard to *Operation Oluja* (Operation Storm) in 1995. *Oluja* was a military action carried out by the Croatian Armed Forces to regain control of the Croatian Krajina region around Knin that had been occupied by Serbs since 1991. According to the UNHCR, during this operation and its aftermath, a total of 500 Serbs were killed and 200,000 Serb civilians were displaced (Human Rights Watch 1996). Whereas the liberation of the Croatian territory itself is an integral part of the collective memory in Croatia, the war crimes committed during the operation were typically omitted. People who violate the taboo, who demand the acknowledgment of the crimes and the recognition of the victims, continue to risk being denounced as traitor, as heretic.

A group's constitutive narratives are not only protected by silencing its wrongdoings. The analysis of the interview material reveals that all those facets of the past, which cannot be frictionlessly integrated into a homogeneous (hi-)story, were concealed. All Croatian interviewees, for instance, share a rather negative perception of Socialist Yugoslavia. This is unsurprising since the negative evaluation of a common past is a necessary condition to legitimate the Croatian independence efforts before and during the war in the 1990s and it fell in line the negative perception of today's multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina. Upon closer consideration, however, it becomes apparent that this collectively approved and requested negative perspective on the common past does not tell the whole story, as the following extract from Interview 1 elucidates:

Whether we want to admit it or not, at least our freedom was assured back then [in former Yugoslavia]. (Interview 1)

The comment “[w]hether we want to admit it or not” implies that something which in fact exists—an uncomfortable truth—is typically not admitted and that people remain silent about it. The interviewee suggests that members of the Croatian

in-group will most likely not admit that at least “freedom was ensured” in former Yugoslavia. It is reasonable to assume that the recognition of the positive aspects of the former Yugoslavia would contradict the in-group-narrative according to which Yugoslavia must be considered a repressive system dominated by the ethnic others. In this respect, the speaker implicitly confirms that such a narrative exists—a narrative which does not necessarily have to be ‘true’.

A reversed perspective could be identified in the interviews with Bosniak respondents: They typically share a positive image of Socialist Yugoslavia—probably because a positive description of the common past serves as proof that a common future in a multi-ethnic Bosnia is possible. And, unlike the Croats, they typically remain silent about negative aspects of the common past, as the following paragraph exemplifies:

I was born in 1953 under the Socialist system, where life was easy-going and beautiful—I don’t know how to describe it—without any physical or mental burdens. During the Tito years, life was beautiful. For me. I am speaking just for myself. For some people, probably not. But that doesn’t bother me. (Interview 3)

The speaker seems to be aware either about the fact that there are other perspectives on the Yugoslavian past or that there are people whose lives “under the Socialist system” has not been as beautiful as his own. Nevertheless, he considers the divergence as irrelevant for himself and diminishes it. In order to effectively ignore alternative reality perspectives and therewith protect one’s own worldviews, it is necessary to avoid people with differing perceptions, i.e., to remain within the boundaries of the in-group, or to avoid controversial topics when it comes to interethnic encounters, as the following reflections show.

Silence Beyond Ethnic Boundaries

The analysis of the interviews as well as the ethnographic observations reveal that in interethnic encounters, people usually remain silent about everything related to the violent past. Questions regarding responsibility and guilt are typically not addressed and the most fiercely disputed political issues, such as the legitimacy of BiH’s division into the Serb-dominated *Republika Srpska* and the Bosniak-dominated Federation of BiH or the treatment of war crimes, are strictly avoided. In the rare cases when the violent past actually becomes the subject of discussion, people tend either to subjectify the war—presenting it as a kind of natural disaster independent from human action (Mijić 2014: 402)—or to project all responsibility onto a third party such as the international community or whatever ethnic group is not represented in the current discussion (Mijić 2014: 403–404). Thus, the preferred approach in situations of interethnic encounter seem to be the silencing of war or, in other words, the ignorance of the elephant in the room.

This observation is mirrored by findings in other research. In a survey conducted in 2010 by *Prism Research*, a social research institute based in Sarajevo, 1600 Bosnians were asked “[h]ow often [they] personally launch a discussion about the past

war in BIH with other ethnic groups” (Popović and Pajić 2011: 19). Most of the respondents answered “rarely” (30.3%) or “never” (26.2%). In contrast, just 4.1% claimed that they initiated such a discussion “whenever [they] get a chance,” while 9.5% replied that they launched one “rather often”. 28.2% of the respondents stated that they “sometimes” initiated such conversations (Popović and Pajić 2011: 19). Furthermore, the majority believed “[m]ost people do not want to discuss the war with other ethnicities”. However, 28.6% were “fully prepared” and 36.9% “prepared to some extent to discuss it with other ethnic groups” (Popović and Pajić 2011: 18). It can be presumed that this claimed preparedness to discuss the issue arose because most of the respondents were of the opinion that they had the better arguments, i.e., that their perception of the past was the right one. However, they are ultimately unwilling to put their arguments to the test.

In his article *Coffee after Conflict*, Anders H. Stefansson explains that “some Bosnians strategically silenced their different political attitudes in order to make local co-existence possible” (Stefansson 2010: 67). Stefansson analyses the relations between Serb inhabitants and Bosniak returnees in postwar Banja Luka. Through ethnographic research, he determined that,

some level of interethnic co-existence and tolerance had developed [...] among other things based on economic interdependence, an emerging sense of solidarity, and a pragmatic need to avoid conflict in everyday life. In the absence of a genuine atmosphere of reconciliation at the political or national level, peaceful co-existence between these communities in Banja Luka was brought about by collectively silencing sensitive political and moral questions related to the recent war that could lead to renewed conflict. (Stefansson 2010: 66)

Therefore, the question of—for example—why non-Serb inhabitants of Banja Luka had left during war is typically not addressed: “According to the returnees, the Serbs usually acted as if nothing bad had happened to them, asking questions like ‘Oh, have you had a good time in Scandinavia?’ as if the refugees had merely been away for a holiday” (Stefansson 2010: 67).

Janine Natalya Clark concludes that for people “on all three sides, in short, the war remains a taboo topic” and the “fact that people feel unable to broach the subject with members of another ethnic group necessarily restricts the possibilities for deep contact to occur” (Clark 2014: 115). It is apparent that the mode of interethnic relations also depends on the opportunity structures, e.g., the spatial proximity of members of different ethnic groups. It certainly makes a difference if people are living in multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic areas, for example. However, there are multifarious economic and other superficial and non-personal contacts between members of the different ethnic groups in contemporary Bosnia, while personal or intimate relationships like friendships or marriages are still rare and must be justified. Many interviewees argue that their interethnic relations are mostly based on necessity and usually confined to courtesy. In many cases, they are simply the result of economic interests.

The following extracts are from an interview with a Bosnian Serb in his early thirties, i.e., a man who experienced the war as child and a teenager. As the owner

of a small transportation business, he travels the entire country and interacts with people of different ethnic allegiances.

It happens that people ask me ‘Who are you?’ I say ‘I am a driver’. ‘And what are you?’ and I say ‘I am a purchasing agent’. You get it? I am avoiding that topic [...] There are people who are nationalists and people who are not. However, I am only interested in money. Money and profit, that’s capitalism. (Interview 4)

As the further course of the interview shows, his private life is, however, to a large extent mono-ethnic. He confesses that he prefers to socialise with people from his own ethnic group (“*sa svojim ljudima*”), that he feels “safer” and “more comfortable” when spending his holidays in Montenegro than in Croatia, and reveals not just that almost all his relatives are Serbs but also that ethnically diverse families are quite extraordinary:

In my family, there is even one case, you know, where a Serb, one of those cousins of mine, has married a Muslim or a Croat, and it doesn’t matter at all. (Interview 4)

In almost every interview, people emphasise that they feel “more comfortable” and “free” within their own ethnic community, that they “do not trust” members of the ethnic out-groups in the same way, and that there are “visible” or “invisible boundaries” or “walls” separating them. These findings were also mirrored in a quantitative survey. In his study about *Interethnic friendships in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*, John O’Loughlin establishes that 41% of his respondents (n = 2000) declare that all or most of their friends are from their own ethnic community (O’Loughlin 2010: 40). According to Berger and Luckmann, this can be attributed to the fact that “in situations where there is competition between different reality-defining agencies, all sorts of secondary-group relationships with the competitors may be tolerated, as long as there are firmly established primary-group relationships within which one reality is ongoingly reaffirmed against the competitors” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 172).

The following passage from Interview 1 (the interview with the Bosnian Croatian soldier) provides key insights into the connection between the constitution of the group (ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous) and the modes of talking or silencing.

After a short period, just a few months after the end of war, we began to visit each other. As if nothing had happened [...] As if this hole had never existed. As if the lines had never existed [...] I go there and sit with my FORMER friends. We sit together and talk about this and that. We make jokes about this and that. But it doesn’t feel right, it isn’t the same anymore. Somehow we have fallen out. The topics we are talking about aren’t the same anymore. (Interview 1)

By using the subjunctive, the speaker indicates that something actually had happened, that the hole and the lines had existed. However, they act as if all of that hadn’t happened, they ignore the facticity of what has been, they don’t talk about it.

The omission of the war-torn past makes the resumption of contact after the end of war actually possible. However, the quality of contact has changed. It is striking that the interviewee is speaking about “former friends”: Most likely, these former friends had once been significant others but, due to the war and the consolidated ethnic boundaries, they were “downgraded” and lost their “central position in the economy of reality-maintenance” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 170). The interviewee emphasises that it “doesn’t feel right, it isn’t the same anymore,” and explains that the topics they are talking about are not the same anymore. Asked to give an example, he continues:

The topics, the topics ... how shall I put it to you? These stories lead us to political issues and both of us have a mutual understanding, since we are on the same page. We have ... we could have different opinions about something, but we also have a common objective, the objective we are aiming at is the same. However, it’s not the same with them, since they only see that somebody else is guilty. Whenever we talked about war, he would always say that somebody else imposed it on us. However, I know that it wasn’t somebody else but them alone. (Interview 1)

As mentioned previously, the interviewee identifies the interviewer as ‘one of his kind’. In the paragraph above, it becomes clear that he is conceiving ethnic homogeneity as presupposition to true “mutual understanding” and common objectives. To him, interethnic encounters are characterised by a lack of significant commonalities and by very diverse and incompatible perspectives on what has happened. For this reason, the topic of war should be completely excluded from any interethnic conversation. According to Stefansson,

the phenomenon of collective silence on specific issues in interethnic social life is a sort of unarticulated existence of empathy. It shows that ordinary Bosnians of different nationalities were generally keenly aware of the different attitudes and worldviews of the Other and, with some exceptions, abstained from challenging those feelings in direct interaction with the Other. If they had been lacking in empathy, they would have been unable to know on which subjects to keep silent in order not to hurt the feelings of the Other, or be unwilling to do so. (Stefansson 2010: 70)

However, while tact could indeed be a reason for silencing the past in interethnic encounters, it is not the most important one. As the aforementioned paragraph (where Interviewee 1 describes the expected behaviour of his former friends when confronted with the subject of war) suggests, and the analysis of further interviews and observations reveals, people do not primarily remain silent in order to protect the feelings of the ethnic Other or to “downplay differences” (Stefansson 2010: 70).⁶ They actually do remain silent to avoid conflicts. In her research about the impact of

⁶ However, such taboos or restrictions are often violated under the pretext of humour (Winter 2010: 15–16; Zerubavel 2006: 67–68, 2010: 42). Some research has indeed been undertaken on humour in postwar situations (Horton 2003; Sheftel 2013; Vucetic 2004; Zelizer 2010).

the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Clark reaches a similar conclusion: “Interviewees consistently maintained that they avoid speaking about the past with members of other ethnic groups due to fear of provoking arguments and creating new problems and tensions” (Clark 2014: 115).

However, drawing on the analysis of the conducted material, people arguably fear these conflicts, not because they do not want to be offending and not because they prefer to have good relations with the ethnic Others, but because they fear challenges to their established worldviews. That is, people remain silent to prevent their own perspective of reality from being externally reappraised. In this sense, silence could be considered as a mode or practice of confirmation of one’s own worldview *ex negativo*: They avoid the topics whose discussion would be a potential threat to their own we-ideal (and with it, their own self-ideal); they remain silent by the reason of self-protection and in order to stabilise one’s own biography.

Furthermore, the fact that people know which subjects they should avoid is hardly a result of empathy, as it is claimed by Stefansson. They ‘know’ the positions of the ethnic Others—not because they are particularly empathic towards them, but rather because this knowledge is part of the in-group’s narrative. This is articulated clearly in the previously-quoted excerpt and also echoed in many further interviews—for example, in the conversation with Interviewee 3:

Just go to the Serb [sic!]. He [sic!] will say to you that Muslims and Croats started the war. You know, because they wanted their own nation-state. They will certainly respond that way. They will claim that we attacked, but then they should also find just one town that was first attacked by us. (Interview 3)

As a part of the ethnic narrative, the knowledge about the Other’s attitude is simplified and biased and characterised by moral alchemy, i.e., a process within which in-group virtue is transformed into out-group vice (Merton 1948: 201; Mijić 2014: 398–401; Elias and Scotson 1965). However, it must also be considered a result of the “understanding of the Other” (*fremdverstehen*), which according to Alfred Schütz is made possible in everyday life by two idealisations: the interchangeability of standpoints and the congruence of relevance systems (Schütz and Luckmann 1973: 60). It is reasonable to assume that both idealisations are working rather well in this case, since for all the ethnic groups discussed in this paper, the ethnic narrations share the same purpose: preserving victim status in order to sustain one’s own positive we-image and one’s own positive self-image. Only in that very specific sense is it possible to talk about “a deep-seated cultural knowledge of living with difference” (Stefansson 2010: 66).

Thus, the silencing of war in interethnic encounters means avoiding conflict, avoiding conflict means stagnation, and stagnation—at least in the case at hand—means maintaining ethnic boundaries and perpetuating ethnic mobilisation. In the end, silencing war in interethnic encounters impedes any potential revision or restructuring of interethnic relations and therefore stabilizes the boundaries between ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Based on theoretical reflections about the interrelation of memory, forgetting, and silence as well as the realisation that—depending on the situation—silence can be conducive to memory or to forgetting, this paper has posed the question about the role of silence during the social construction of (postwar) social reality in BiH. The empirical analysis of the interviews and the undertaken observations reveal not only that silence is a prevalent way of dealing with the past in postwar BiH. It also shows that there are significant differences regarding the silence within ethnic boundaries and the silence across ethnic boundaries, i.e., the silence in interethnic encounters. Within ethnic boundaries, silence operates as a vehicle for the in-group's integration: The concealment of atrocities committed by members of the ethnic in-group as well as the concealment of interpretations of the past, which are not compatible with the group's collective memory, reinforces the group's we-ideal and hence consolidates the symbolic boundaries between the ethnic groups.

Regarding the silence across ethnic boundaries, there is a perception—in political discourse as well as within the social sciences (e.g., Rigby 2001)—that the silencing of former enmities contributes to social integration beyond ethnic belonging. Reasoning that way is not unfounded: The exclusion of fiercely contested issues from communication could indeed be a necessary condition for developing common grounds for further interaction. Additionally, only interaction can lead to new and shared perspectives on reality within which ethnic boundaries become less significant for the people's identities. This assumption is compatible with the results of classical social psychological experiments according to which goals shared by members of antagonistic groups are conducive to the integration of these groups (Sherif et al. 1988). However, the analysis made in this article suggests that the exclusion of disputed issues from interethnic communication does not impair the relevance of ethnic belonging for the individuals. Quite the reverse: By silencing the war in interethnic encounters people protect their existing world views from external contestation and in the end maintain ethnic boundaries. When conversations about the reality of the past take place only between like-minded people, it must be expected that this perspective of reality will become solidified.

Acknowledgements Open access funding provided by University of Vienna. I would like to thank Colin Meade and Leora Courtney-Wolfman for copyediting, which was financially supported by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Vienna.

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