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Review Essay: Twenty-Five Years on: Trauma, Peacebuilding and Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract: This review essay assesses two new books which will be of particular interest to human rights and peacebuilding practitioners working in post-conflict settings: Ann Petrila and Hasan Hasanović's *Voices from Srebrenica: Survivor Narratives of the Bosnian Genocide* and *Healing and Peacebuilding after War: Transforming Trauma in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, edited by Julianne Funk, Nancy Good, and Marie E. Berry.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina; genocide; peacebuilding; testimony; trauma

Year 2020 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. It took place in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in July 1995, when more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed. This quarter-century landmark has generated a renewed international interest in the events and the aftermath of the genocide, including a number of (virtual) commemoration events, conferences and a range of publications for both specialised and general audiences. The two books under review here – Ann Petrila and Hasan Hasanović's *Voices from Srebrenica: Survivor Narratives of the Bosnian Genocide* and *Healing* and *Peacebuilding after War: Transforming Trauma in Bosnia and Herzegovina,* edited by Julianne Funk, Nancy Good, Marie E. Berry – contribute to current discussions seeking to reflect on and learn from Bosnia's past and present. Renewed international interest also

reflects continuing involvement in and support for peacebuilding in the region, since BiH has received official development assistance (ODA) more than USD 13.8 billion to date (The World Bank 2020).[1] The two reviewed books share a recognition that, despite this financial investment, much peacebuilding work remains to be done in BiH. After offering an overview of these books and considering their achievements, I will focus in this essay on ways in which trauma, gender and the complex dynamic between the individual and groups or the collective are addressed in these works and how these factors have shaped the aftermath of the war and genocide.

Petrila and Hasanović's *Voices from Srebrenica* narrates and contextualizes testimonies of those who survived the Srebrenica genocide and the ongoing work of some human rights activists in the region. Perhaps surprisingly to those who have encountered well-known testimony collections that respond to other genocides, such as Jean Hatzfeld's (Hatzfeld 2000, 2003, 2007) on the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Voices from Srebrenica is only the second book widely available for Anglophone international audiences that places survivor experiences in dialogue with one another.[2] The book is invaluable in recording and translating these experiences for the benefit of outside audiences. The survivor testimonies included in the collection are organized around the positionalities of survivors: the execution site survivors, death march survivors, UN base survivors, and mothers of Srebrenica victims. The 14 narratives stemming from meetings and interviews that

[1] Between 1995 and 2015.
[2] Selma Leydesdorff's *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* was published as English translation in 2011, but it only includes women's testimonies.

are included in the collection share some key components: all survivors experienced the siege of Srebrenica and recount the events of 11 July 1995. On that day, women, children and the elderly fled towards the UN base in Poto————————————cari, outside the town of Srebrenica, from where able-bodied men and most teenage boys headed through the woods to walk to Tuzla—a town under the control of the Bosnian Army. Only a very limited number of the thousands of men survived the journey (now being called the death march), escaping the Army of Republika Srpska, the Bosnian Serb forces. The survivors' distinct experiences are harrowing, following the reader beyond the pages of the book. As the authors themselves recognize, the book's strength lies in the words of the survivors (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 22).

In creating a space of encounter between the survivors and the reader, Petrila and Hasanović's book encourages practitioners to pause and reflect on the experiences of those they might work with in a context like BiH. The book may be especially helpful to those who are new to the human rights or peacebuilding fields and who may benefit from thinking through the interviewees' experiences and ways in which Ann Petrila as an outsider responds to them. The testimonies are embedded within a narrative frame that contextualizes, explains and adds to the content. For example, Ahmo Hasić's testimony is intersected with Petrila's voice as she wonders how much his family, who are listening to their Skype conversation, knows about his story (Petrila and Hasanovic 2020: 36). Later on, when the authors met with Ahmo Hasić face to face, there were children listening to his every word (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 42). The presence of children made Petrila 'uncomfortable'

but she notes that it was not her place ‘to decide who listened and who did not’ (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 42). Such reflections on the interview situation make it transparent that the survivors speak in the specific social context of their family and everyday life, which may influence how they choose to talk about their experiences. Petrila’s observation of her reaction and decision to not to voice it allows the reader to reflect on different social codes and norms. In addition to reflections on the interview situation, Petrila’s narrative describes travelling to meet the survivors; the survivors themselves and their homes – and occasionally she draws attention to the nature of questions or points of omission in the testimony. These descriptions, such as the suggestion that Ramiz Nukić is ‘a shameless flirt and wickedly funny’, allow the survivors to become recognisable as fellow human beings outside their testimony (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 120). The practice of making the interview situation and some editing choices visible also offers the reader an opportunity to evaluate the subjectivity of different forms and moments of truth-telling and truth-sharing.

Even though the comments and descriptions can be helpful for the reader, they also interrupt the narrative flow of testimonies. The extent of the interventions varies from testimony to testimony, but the most captivating ones are those with fewer interruptions. Some of Petrila’s comments in the narrative also paraphrase what the survivor has said, or even suggest to the reader how to react to the testimony emotionally or intellectually. For example, there is a suggestion that Hakija Huseinović survived thanks to his strong will, even though he himself offered another explanation (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 44). Additionally,

Petrila's voice explains to the reader that it is difficult to imagine the fear that Hasan Sejfo Hasanović experienced when encountering a tortured man slowly dying of his injuries (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 98). The author's need to explain the horror of the senseless violence demonstrates very little trust in the humanity and moral compass of the reader. In these moments, a lighter narrative frame would have given the survivors' stories more space to interact with the reader as they are.

In Petrila and Hasanović's book, the personal testimonies are not only embedded within the narrative frame but are also preceded by lists of acronyms, definitions, people and places, maps, and a timeline – in addition to a foreword by Emir Suljagić, the director of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre; Petrila's preface; and an introduction. Moreover, towards the end of the book, 'Part Two: Aftermath' includes a number of short chapters that educate the reader about the events following the genocide, including the present political situation, international responses, and the emotional consequences in the survivors' everyday lives. While the framing content clearly is intended to contextualise the personal stories, it has some shortcomings. The target audience is not specified but is presumably US-based and without any prior knowledge of BiH. Catering for this audience has resulted in the inclusion of a slightly odd paragraph that notes the availability of televisions, washing machines and supermarkets in Srebrenica before the war (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 28). Moreover, the Holocaust and the global significance of genocide is evoked frequently in the framing materials, which threatens recognition of the significance and uniqueness of the BiH context in its own right (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 22, 33, 198, 203, 207, 211).

Whereas *Voices from Srebrenica* by Petrila and Hasanović solely focuses on the genocide in Srebrenica with very few references to other events, *Healing and Peacebuilding after War: Transforming Trauma in Bosnia and Herzegovina* takes a more general focus on the Bosnian War, in which approximately 100,000 people were killed, thousands went missing, 20,000 people were raped, and over two million Bosnians became refugees or internally displaced persons (2020: Introduction).[3] In a small country with a pre-war population of just over four million, these numbers demonstrate extensive loss, damage and suffering. Recognising the diversity of local war experiences, Good, Funk and Berry refer to violence in BiH as a war, as in the title of the collection. This signals that the chapters draw upon different case studies across post-war BiH. In *Voices from Srebrenica*, Petrila and Hasanović do not reflect on the complexity of the term genocide beyond pointing out that the Srebrenica genocide was the only crime judicially designated as a genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 31). By suggesting that the area of Srebrenica and the city of Sarajevo suffered the worst crimes in the conflict (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 25), the authors demonstrate little solidarity with survivors from Prijedor and the surrounding areas whose suffering in prisoner and torture camps has been found to constitute a crime against humanity by the ICTY. This unintentionally evokes a hierarchy of suffering, which may indeed have emerged in much public understanding of these crimes but which is nonetheless misleading, particularly as there is no judicially-determined hierarchy among these

[3] The e-book edition does not include page numbers.

crimes (Sands, 2018: 171). The difference between the crimes is not in scale or horror but only in the requirement of an intention to destroy a group in whole or in part – instead of individuals – which is difficult to prove.

Focusing chiefly on individual suffering, the core premise of Good, Funk and Berry's collection is that war-time trauma must be transformed through peacebuilding or transitional justice measures to prevent it being transferred to the second generation (Good, Funk and Berry 2020: Introduction). The collection includes eleven main chapters divided into four parts: 'Incorporating trauma healing into peacebuilding practice'; 'How to remember and tell stories of trauma'; 'Women's resilience'; and 'From justice to artistic expression'. It is targeted at policymakers, peace practitioners, donors, international organizations as well as students and researchers of 'conflict resolution, social psychology', Balkan politics and international relations (Good, Funk and Berry 2020: Introduction). While slightly uneven, as conference proceedings of broad scope sometimes are, all the contributions foreground the experiences of people as individuals and as components of a collective or of civil society. This emphasis on people is welcome, following on from some recent extensive analyses of politics and international relations such as *Bosnia and Herzegovina's Foreign Policy Since Independence* (2019), edited by Jasmin Hasić and Dženeta Karabegović; or Dražen Pehar's *Peace as War: Bosnia-Herzegovina Post-Dayton* (2019). The two publications discussed in this review share the focus on local people and recognise the significance of their voices in the global discourse.

Although some chapters, such as Stephanie C. Edwards's on multidirectional memory, would have benefitted from more detailed examples and further reflections on how practitioners might learn from their insights, as a whole this diverse collection is likely to appeal to a practitioner audience since it theorises and conceptualises by building upon the solid basis of examples and case studies. For example, Alma Jeftić's chapter, 'I can(not) remember', focuses on the creation of collective narratives in post-war BiH and discusses the significance of the lack of shared understanding of the history of the war and how it should be taught in schools. Her discussion of the problems stemming from the division of the school curricula along ethnic lines is framed through the concepts of episodic and narrative memory. Mapping the connection between the individual and collective memory, Jeftić demonstrates why it is necessary to achieve even a vague collective narrative to enable some kind of post-war co-existence. An understanding of the concepts of memory may help practitioners to facilitate bridging the gap between the personal and collective memory in their work. Good, Funk and Berry's collection reminds the reader that societal change is rooted in people and social relationships.

Part One of *Healing and Peacebuilding after War* seeks to identify ways in which trauma is or at least should be an integral part of peacebuilding efforts. In their chapter, 'Fundamentals of trauma', Nancy Good and Julianne Funk debunk misunderstandings of trauma and describe it as an individual and collective experience that consists of physical, social, mental, and spiritual components. Such a broad view of trauma is welcome for increasing both practitioners and researchers' understanding of the limits and omissions of earlier trauma theories,

including work by Cathy Caruth (1996). While the chapter will offer little that is new to some readers, its recognition that social context and beliefs may influence ways in which trauma is expressed reminds us to move beyond the lists of specific symptoms, or tools of diagnosis, associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The lists of symptoms, while occasionally useful—and included by Petrila and Hasanović (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 198)—are also problematic in potentially excluding from support those whose trauma is expressed in less common ways. Good and Funk also maintain that trauma does not only affect survivors but also their children, amongst others. Such insights complement the survivor accounts in *Voices from Srebrenica*, and the two books read together well. In *Voices from Srebrenica,* the survivors talk about their decisions to share their stories with their children. While the survivors are concerned with not transferring hate to their children (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 61, 88, 102), they do not discuss intergenerational trauma and second generation trauma, even though the explanatory chapters at the end do so (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 198).

The other two chapters on trauma in Good, Funk and Berry's collection are meant for distinct audiences. Chapter Three by Kristina Hook is best suited to those planning peacebuilding priorities or trying to convince donors of the benefits of including trauma-sensitive approaches. For those not working in the everyday of peacebuilding activities, it may come as a surprise that there still appears to be a need for justifying trauma-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding. The final chapter of the section by Barry Hart further demonstrates the extent to which psychosocial support and peacebuilding are interwoven. The model that he proposes may allow

some practitioners to identify how their work fits within the whole of post-conflict peacebuilding. Hart’s use of a peace-building wheel to illustrate the interwoven nature of peacebuilding components is well worth considering. However, the edited collection, with its distinct, stand-alone chapters, such as Hook and Hart’s, also makes it easy for each reader to select and engage only with those chapters that appear relevant to their interests. While trauma has been extensively discussed and sometimes criticised when transferred to areas and belief systems beyond the Anglo-American context (Craps 2013), the authors in the edited collection demonstrate the ways in which the term can continue to be useful in peacebuilding and in understanding those projects that have successfully facilitated the management of pain or a diminishing of its place in the lives of the participants.

As a specialist in the practice of social work, Ann Petrila shows in *Voices of Srebrenica* careful consideration of trauma and the general well-being of her research subjects – some of whom are also identified as friends, such as Saliha Osmanović, whose brother’s funeral the author was invited to attend (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 156, 190). Petrila explains that the authors offered to stop the interviews whenever an interviewee found the situation difficult, took breaks, and allowed the interviewees to decide the place and language of discussion (Petrila and Hasanović 2020, 23–24). Beside these practical measures of fostering the interviewees’ sense of safety and being in control, Petrila explains in ‘Chapter Seven: Ramifications’ how different forms of grief and trauma can be understood and how they may affect the lives of the survivors. Nevertheless, the most poignant reminders of the mental or emotional pain with which the survivors struggle come

from the testimonies. For example, Haso Hasanović explains that his wife – who also lost family in the genocide – understands him and can calm him down when he struggles with nightmares, which occur despite him taking sleeping pills and sedatives (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 118). Such moments serve to highlight the way in which even those who appear strong and see giving testimony as their duty to speak and educate can simultaneously be vulnerable and in pain. This pain is still part of the interviewees' life more than 20 years after the war.

Although the discussion on trauma opens *Healing and Peacebuilding after War* and lays some groundwork for the following chapters, the collection soon shifts focus to the possibilities for narratives to facilitate positive change – as covered by 'Part Two: How to remember and tell stories of trauma' and 'Part Three: Women's resilience'. The latter part depicts women as actors in the aftermath of war. For example, Jessica Smith's chapter discusses photovoice that is an arts-based method in which participants take photographs that are used as a visual tool to frame narrative construction and personal reflection. Smith suggests that photographing and narrating the everyday life or surroundings allows the women participants to present themselves as the agents and narrators of stories instead of being their subjects (Good, Berry and Funk 2020: Chapter 10). This method may be beneficial in a number of different contexts, and Smith's chapter offers a highly practical discussion on interacting with women and the ways in which centring their voices can be facilitated.

The third section also includes a particularly strong chapter by Zilka Spahić Šiljak. She discusses the limitations of the labels of victim and survivor, identifying

ways in which ethno-national victimhood discourse continues to silence raped women and to alienate them from their surroundings (Good, Funk and Berry 2020: Chapter 8). The primary data on which the chapter is built includes moments of clarity and reflection that may benefit other practitioners and researchers. A woman Šiljak interviews states:

> When I reported my rape for the first time everybody was talking about me as a victim, and in the beginning I did not mind. When I noticed that people felt pity for me, referring to me as "that poor woman" (*jadnica*), I could not accept it anymore, so I decided to embrace the label survivor, which was something powerful and something that tells people "she is not some "poor woman", she is a fighter, she can handle this." But over time I realized I could not handle it, I did not feel better, and despite all the therapy I have been through, I am really scared and have the same fears… and yet everybody expects me to feel better and be courageous as a survivor (Good, Funk, Berry 2020: Chapter 8).

This comment captures the difficulty of living with externally imposed labels and expectations in the aftermath of war. The interviewed woman does not fit into the given roles or identities. This encourages readers to consider how they might encounter survivors of rape. Whilst Šiljak's discussion is specific to raped women, some of whom she explains prefer this specific label, it has a broader relevance to peacebuilding. Šiljak draws attention to the limits of labels in identifying positionalities and support needs. Bringing attention to questions of who is included and who is excluded with regard to different labels – and in turn, in post-war

peacebuilding activities – is helpful for reflection and ensuring more precise targeting of initiatives.

In *Voices from Srebrenica*, the narratives of women surface in the chapters about the death march, about the mothers of Srebrenica victims and about human rights activists in Serbia. The Mothers of Srebrenica have a prominent public presence internationally and the inclusion of their stories helps us to understand the extent of loss and loneliness. These narratives also place women as a driving force of grassroots activism. Whilst these women truly deserve our admiration and respect, Petrila's framing portrays them as heroes. Writing about Saliha Osmanović, Petrila suggests that 'she is a hero in her own right' (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 150). This depiction may hide the complexity of this survivor's particular experiences and may affect her ability to communicate vulnerability. However, the reader cannot know how Osmanović responds to this description. Unintentionally, Petrila's narrative serves here to remind the reader that highly individual experiences lie behind the generalized labels. Even though the two publications approach the labels attached to the survivors from different perspectives, they help us question the extent to which the people we encounter in our work are perceived through the expectations attached to various post-conflict categories. An increased awareness of the different discourses and their structures may help practitioners in encountering survivors.

Despite their focus on the people living in the aftermath of genocide and war, *Voices from Srebrenica* and *Healing and Peacebuilding after War* touch upon the role of different collectives and groups in perpetrating violence, in intervening

to curb it, and in implementing transition afterwards. The complex dynamic between the individual and a collective emerges strongly in the two publications. In a chapter entitled, 'Towards social restoration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: exploring the place of symbolic forms of transitional justice', Mina Rauschenbach, Stephan Parmentier and Maarten Van Craen discuss symbolic forms of justice—such as naming a street after a notable person, constructing a museum, apologies or public discussions—and consider their contribution to truth-telling and the acknowledgement of suffering. Such means of signalling broader attitudes and societal change and recognizing past events are shown to be important to individual survivors, particularly if these are context sensitive (Good, Funk and Berry 2020: Chapter 11). Observing the dangers of a disingenuous use of symbolic forms of justice, this chapter raises the question of who is in a position to implement such symbolic measures and to ensure that they have impact locally and are inclusive and respectful.

In a similar manner, the question of individual and collective responsibility shapes the aftermath of genocide and war. The two publications include some scathing evaluations of the role of international actors in solidifying the ethnic divisions through the Dayton Peace Agreement and the (lack of) impact of the ICTY. Notably Stephanie C. Edwards in Chapter Six of *Healing and Peacebuilding after War* and Petrila and Hasanović in Chapter Eight of *Voices from Srebrenica* draw attention to the issues of the ICTY. While these criticisms are crucial for future reflection and learning, these discussions would have benefitted from further contextualisation by relating the criticisms to the legal framework and the ICTY

Statute, including its opportunities and limitations. The larger question of the role of legal institutions remains unanswered. Can or should they be expected to write history; establish a general sense of justice; or facilitate reconciliation? The discourse surrounding the ICTY after its establishment and in early 2000s claimed some of this broader impact without foundation, but the core issue may not be how to conduct trials that achieve a broader range of goals but rather a consideration of other, more suitable means for achieving these goals (Fletcher and Weinstein 2002; Klarin 2015). Moreover, the discussion of practical challenges, such as the absence of state support pre-2000 for conducting investigations, finding the accused and the necessarily limited scope of the prosecution of individuals, would have complemented the existing comments. The two publications also leave out any discussion of the role and impact of domestic war crimes proceedings. Often flawed and political, the limitations of the domestic justice proceedings in the region influence the ways in which justice more broadly has disappointed Bosnians and is one of the reasons why justice still requires consideration.

The overall evaluations of the present and future in BiH are presented slightly differently in the two books. Petrila and Hasanović's *Voices from Srebrenica* foregrounds the magnitude of genocide denialism in Republika Srbska, suggesting that the stark divisions between the Bosnian Muslims and Serbs continue to shape daily life in the region. The narrative offers little hope for a better future, but at the very end it draws attention to the community, laughter and resilience that allow life to continue (Petrila and Hasanović 2020: 220–222). This position differs from the conclusion of *Healing and Peacebuilding after War*, in which some

positive examples of post-conflict change lead towards Marie E. Berry's suggestion that:

> Many things have changed in Bosnia and the world since the early 1990s, and there are reasons to be optimistic that the days of armed conflict are in Bosnia's past. But this fear of the potential for future violence must be taken seriously in order to prevent it from ever becoming a reality. (Good, Funk and Berry 2020: Chapter 13).

Here there is general optimism about lasting peace, but with a warning. Thus, the two publications serve as a record of the current balance between daily life as it is lived but also ongoing struggle and suffering. The authors' reiterate the need to continue peacebuilding efforts in BiH.

The publications reviewed here add to the wealth of knowledge of post-war BiH. They emphasise the lack of an end-date to the aftermath of war and genocide that is still ongoing a quarter of a century later. Since this temporal scope is ill-fitting for project-based peacebuilding initiatives, in which donors require results within a funding cycle, the two books allow practitioners to reflect on these challenges in their work and the field in general. The perspectives of survivors – but also those of practitioners and scholars – can help shape future peacebuilding initiatives, and *Voices from Srebrenica* and *Healing and Peacebuilding after War* contribute to these necessary discussions. These works advocate learning the lessons from BiH, and, as such, will make for valuable reading for many in the field.

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