Joking about the Violent Past: Humor, Memory, and Narrative in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina

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The Balkans is a region notorious for being populated by people with a dark, biting, and witty sense of humor; this was one of the reasons I fell in love with it when I first visited as a tourist in 2001. It therefore did not surprise me to laugh so often during the oral history interviews that I conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2005 and 2006, even amidst discussions of some of the most painful moments of my interviewees’ lives. We talked about World War II, the Croatian and Bosnian Wars, and many other difficult memories, and yet many interviews were peppered with jokes, many of them deeply ironic or sarcastic. Nevertheless, it took me several years of listening and writing about these interviews to realize that humor meant something beyond the fact that I was lucky to know some exceptionally funny people. It was a way of speaking about the Bosnian past and present, and as a narrative form, one that could communicate subversively about a difficult past sometimes better than a literal recounting of experience would. And so I began to listen to the jokes I had heard a thousand times already with a new sense of purpose.¹

¹ I published a piece on humor in Bosnian War narratives and art in Memory Studies in 2013. This essay draws largely on the research conducted for that article.

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One of the most often-cited explanations of what oral history aims to accomplish as a methodology comes from the essay “What Makes Oral History Different?”, which initially appeared in Alessandro Portelli’s seminal book, The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Form and Meaning in Oral History (1991). Taking on concerns that it is difficult to evaluate the veracity of events described in an interview, Portelli points out that the subjective and sometimes unreliable nature of memory is precisely what is so interesting to study. He says, “The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning…. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (1998, 67).

Indeed, an inquiry into subjective experiences of political turmoil and atrocity was precisely what drew me to conduct oral histories in northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina. If remembering the past does not consist of a straightforward retelling of events, then what does that mean for how societies, governments, and organizations instrumentalize—that is, make use of, usually for political purposes—that memory? This question is important not only for initiatives to make peace with a troubled past, such as tribunals, truth commissions, and commemorative projects, but also for governments and national groups that have used memories of violence as a way of promoting divisive nationalist narratives and identities. Both tendencies have been influential in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past few decades. During the Yugoslav period, the memory of World War II was sanitized to promote an account in which all Yugoslavs banned together and resisted the evils of fascism together. This was an integral part of the Titoist mythology that prioritized the creation of a coherent Yugoslav identity as a means of unifying the country’s constituent regions and peoples. Following Tito’s death in 1980, historical memory of violence, particularly that of World War II, was revived as a major tool for constructing nationalist identities and making a case for war in the 1980s and 1990s (Banac 1995; Djordjevich 2003; Ramet 2005), and these narratives have persisted since the wars that dissolved the Yugoslav state. The models that have existed for talking about the violent past during the past century in Yugoslavia therefore waver between the extremes of a sanitized, but harmonious national narrative that explicitly unifies all the constituent Yugoslav ethnicities, and several conflicting, ethnic nationalist narratives that create friction and promote division.

In the post-war context, memory of ‘what happened’ remains divided among ethnic lines; Serbian, Bosniak and Croat politicians, interest groups, and other public organizations all promote narratives of their own histories that serve to construct the legitimacy of their ethnic identities and national claims. At the same time, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), beyond its judicial mandate, has been seen as the international arbiter of what happened in the wars of the 1990s, its process creating an official memory of the violence. Considering the use and abuse of memory in recent Yugoslav history, scholars of transitional justice have argued that Bosnia-Herzegovina and other ex-Yugoslav states necessitate a body such as a truth commission, to find productive ways of speaking about the violent past that do not feed nefarious ambitions (Gisvold 1998; Minow 1999). The question is how, when memory has previously been used to stoke ethnic differences and to promote violence, it could then be transformed into a tool for peace. It is important to note that scholars such as Robert Hayden (2007) have been very critical of the tendency to impose a prescriptive Western understanding of what it means for a place like Bosnia-Herzegovina to reconstruct and reconcile, and have called on us to try to understand, more closely, how reconstruction and moving forward are understood by communities on the ground. Are truth commissions, necessitating an open discussion about the violent past, the only way to right historical wrongs?

Where does humor fit into this weighty context of the uses and abuses of memory? Portelli has devoted much of his writing on oral history to convince us not only that we should be studying meaning rather than fact, but also that the way to
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do so must involve studying form as much as content. If remembering is complex and does not relate directly back to the event in question, then our ways of expressing it will be too. They may involve omissions, repetitions, myths, nostalgia, and song, among other ways of speaking about the past. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, it involved many such narrative strategies, as well as a way of speaking that has been largely neglected in discussions of oral history and post-conflict memory: humor. That humor took various forms: dark jokes about wartime experiences; recollections of ‘funny’ moments from the war; sarcastic and ironic comments about both past and present politics; and absurdism that highlighted the ridiculous nature of what had happened, and the difficulty of gleaning meaning from it.

While humor has been subject to much philosophical inquiry for hundreds of years, intriguing such notable thinkers as Descartes (Farb 1981) and Kant (1951), Freud was among the first to take humor seriously as a mode of expression worthy of profound study. In “Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious” (1938), he spends nearly 200 pages laying out every type of wit possible, and how each affects both the speaker and the listener. He connects wit to dreams, seeing it as another way of interpreting and parsing reality. Like dreams, wit is subversively structured and allows for expressions of the taboo, making it another means of exploring the subconscious. More recent scholars have recognized the subversive and expressive potential of humor and looked at how it relates to times of political instability and violent conflict (Payne 2005; Scott 1990). Where Freud was interested in how wit could express taboo emotions and ideas within an individual, contemporary researchers are keen to see how it facilitates expression about what is, or was previously, taboo within a society. In writing about memory in post-authoritarian societies, Leigh Payne has argued that humour allows for bottom-up expression in places where there had been very little space for individual voices to express themselves politically. She refers to humor as “a way of making trouble, doing politics, by other means: an alternative form of truth-telling” (72). Similarly, James Scott has argued that humor is one of many means used to communicate and organize hidden resistance among oppressed peoples (1990). Holocaust scholars have also begun to explore humor as a means for survivor and community expression of seemingly incommunicable experiences (Lipman 1993; Rosen 2004; Gilman 2003). What is clear from theoretical, sociological, and historical studies of humor, particularly within difficult political contexts, is that it offers a way of speaking about troubled or taboo events and experiences, opening up new spaces for discourse. What is not clear, however, is what this means politically. While the premise that humor says something real and incisive about a community’s experience is unlikely to be controversial, what one then does with this non-literal way of speaking about a troubled past remains to be seen. How seriously do we take humor? Do we start telling jokes at commemoration events or within international criminal tribunals?

My own research in Bosnia-Herzegovina sought to understand how individuals reconciled their own memories of war in twentieth-century Bosnia with the larger mnemonic forces at play, as described briefly above. The frequent presence of humor in my interviews was therefore significant. While humor is able to do a great many things, in this paper I would like to focus on three ways it was used in my interviews in Bosnia, in particular: First, it allowed people to express counter-narratives of the recent past that resisted manipulation by nationalists and politicians, and thus felt less dangerous to express. Second, it highlighted topics like community and cooperation that challenged international perceptions of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a backwards and violent place, as presented in widespread understandings of the war. Third, it critiqued dominant narratives and highlighted the absurdity of the war and of contemporary politics. Below, I will use interview excerpts to briefly demonstrate and discuss each of these three tendencies. Regarding the former, in a region where

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2 It is important to note that theorists of humour are very particular about their choice of vocabulary, making distinctions between wit, jokes, comedy, etc. It is not within the scope of this piece to explore such definitions, and so I generally use ‘humor’ as a catch-all term here.
memory of violence has been so instrumentalized by nationalist politicians, and where, previously, a Titoist national mythology of Yugoslav cooperation made for relatively smooth day-to-day living, my interviewees were skeptical of the project of speaking openly about the past. Remembering the war earnestly could never be politically neutral; my interviewees saw open discussion of their experiences of inter-ethnic violence as something that could only lead to further division. Making jokes about what had happened was less dangerous. Alen, for example, told me:

We have these sayings that we say about each other, what all of our weaknesses are, I guess. So we will say things like that Montenegrins are lazy, and there is a joke: How do you hide something from a Montenegrin? Put it under a shovel. In the same way, Bosnians are stupid. How do you hide something from a Bosnian? Put it in a book. These are old jokes that we all make about each other, we are just joking, but you know, when I look at how this happened to us, we were so naive, we allowed ourselves to be slaughtered like this because we did not believe it could happen, I wonder ... I think maybe these jokes are really a little bit true. I think maybe we are a little bit stupid, that’s how all of this happened (Alen, 2006).

Much has been written about Bosniak victimhood and complicity within the war, but I found many of my Bosniak interviewees reluctant to either declare themselves as victims or as proud soldiers. They were wary of allegiances to identities that implied a particular political narrative. Instead, I heard jokes like the one above, in which victimhood turned into stupidity, which evades political categorization. Alen did not paint himself as the long-suffering noble victim, but rather as one unworthy of pity or admiration. This discussion of ethnic belonging and difference spoke to a deep sense of mourning and shame about how this could have happened, but it resisted instrumentalization; you could not easily transform this way of seeing Bosniak suffering into political propaganda.

On a similar note of resisting dominant ways of categorizing people’s roles in the war and what it was about, interviewees also suggested that humor was not only a way of communicating their experiences to me, but also, with one another. Alma told me:

I guess there were some really bad things like the shelling and being in constant fear, not sleeping in the night ... but also there were some good things and some feelings, some sense of security when you are with other people in the same position, when people help each other, and stuff like that. Like funny things that happened, because we did not have electricity, so we had to do all sorts of stuff to watch television, like ... take out the accumulator [battery] from the car to plug it in to our own television ... A lot of very funny situations, but also horrible things that happened (Alma 2006).

The majority of my interviewees had spent much of the war under siege in Bihač, and they often explained that what they discussed the most, when recounting the war with one another, were these funny stories of ingenuity and clumsiness in the pursuit of day-to-day survival. These stories were told alongside, as Alma put it, a recollection of life under siege as something that involved a whole community being in the same lot together, and therefore helping each other out due to necessity. I was told stories of ridiculous exploits, songs, and jokes. Why focus on the positives of life under siege? This served not only to paint a more human picture of those years, but also to focus on community and cooperation, which most interviewees explained they felt had been lost after the war. The majority of my interviewees still openly identified as Titoists, and thus invoked Titoist values in their narratives, which included a strong sense of community cohesion and common struggle. Recounting the cooperative side of the war allowed them to express their values, as well as how they had

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3 All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
been lost in the post-war period. It shifted the conversation; humor demonstrated a psychological kind of resistance, rather than a physical one.

And finally, when attempting to discuss what the conflicts of the 1990s meant, interviewees turned to absurdist humor seemingly to communicate how pointless the violence had been, and how pointless the present post-war landscape had become. For example, Vanja told me:

What was the war about? ... You know the Eurovision song contest? In Yugoslavia we took the song contest very seriously. We love music here, we love Eurovision, but it is very, very difficult to win, especially when countries are making alliances with each other, voting is not fair. I think that Milošević and Karadžić and all these men ... really they are great lovers of music, and they wanted to give Yugoslavia more chances to win the contest [as each country gets its own song entry]. Now we have so many entries in the contest ... Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, soon even Montenegro, it is really a service that Milošević provided us, to be able to display our musical talents in so many different ways ... This is a joke, a joke ... but it is a better answer than the real answer, it is possible. It makes more sense (Vanja, 2006).

I heard many comments like Vanja’s that played on the absurdity of making sense of senseless violence: comments about how wonderfully they were able to lose weight thanks to the deprivation of the war; about how the most effective thing about the presence of peacekeepers was being able to improve one’s English; and about being jealous of the cushy residences of those indicted and transferred to the ICTY for trial, in which people reflected that committing war crimes allowed you a heated cell with three meals a day, counter to civilians who were now living in half-built unheated homes, struggling to feed entire families often on less than one income. In his work, Freud refers to a category of wit that he dubs ‘nonsense humor’, consisting of “advancing something apparently absurd or nonsensical which, however, discloses sense that serves to illustrate and represent some other actual absurdity and nonsense” (1938, 665). The playwright Luigi Pirandello says that humor shows that “the pretense of logic is much greater in us than real logical coherence” (1966, 50). In his review of the Sarajevo Survival Guide (1993), the satirical guidebook to Sarajevo under siege published by a collective of journalists during the war, Stephenson (1994) argues that “the guide does not rely so much on its gallows humor to score points, but on the cumulative effect of the whole absurd gesture. Sometimes, just the sheer honesty of a statement cuts through the gimmick with a force that leaves one with seemingly no conceivable response” (96). That the most prevalent kind of humor I heard during my research in Bosnia-Herzegovina was absurdist, or ‘nonsense’ can partly be attributed to the aesthetic tendencies of the region, but it was also incredibly effective in explaining the myriad of ways in which post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite a transition to a market economy and democracy, has left the majority of its citizens worse off and disempowered. While scholars have argued for two decades now about exactly why Yugoslavia fell, my interviewees wanted to tell another story; it fell for no reason at all. Returning to Portelli’s invocation about the purpose of oral history, then, what is important here is not to determine the actual reason for the violence; rather, it is to understand why so many people interpret its meaning as a total lack of any meaning at all.

The use of humor, irony, and joking about...
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war, violence, and its aftermath in Bosnia-Herzegovina complicates the pictures painted by nationalist politicians and those focused on purely ethnic accounts of the war. It allows people to talk about the war without aligning themselves directly with a particular political or ethnic group. In a region where memory has been so used for political ends, the ingenuity of using humor to resist the co-opting of one’s narrative to promote dominant discourses cannot be underemphasized. However, as I suggest above, the real challenge is asking what we can do with all of this. How do we understand non-literal ways of communicating about a troubled past as legitimate and real ways of engaging with the political system, particularly in post-conflict and transitional states? Can humor be a true contribution to post-war political discourse? Increasingly, discussions of post-conflict memory turn toward official mechanisms for addressing divisive pasts, such as truth commissions, tribunals, national history projects, and commemorative events. What is the place of non-literal truth-telling within them? If there are things that cannot be said through open speech, but which are better expressed through humor, then it is the job of scholars to understand how such necessarily informal and subversive modes of expression can interact with the formal processes that now accompany any post-conflict process. While truth is tricky to define when historicizing such a contested past, the jokes that I heard about the war in Bosnia avoided literalism in favor of figurative truths. Humor also asserts the agency and cosmopolitanism of a group of people who have been through hell; it counters popular imagery of the Bosnian War, which gives the impression of a country that is backwards, violent, and uncivilized. Humor takes wit, sophistication, and a capacity for critical reflection to truly succeed. As such, those who invoke it remind the world that they are human. That, in itself, is a deeply political and necessary act.

References


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