

# **“My Parents Never Taught Me to Hate”**

**A Study of Inter-ethnic Relations and Reconciliation  
among Youth in Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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**Master's Thesis**  
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*"My Parents Never Taught Me to Hate". A Study of Inter-ethnic Relations and Reconciliation among Youth in Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is based on six months of fieldwork among youth of various ethnic backgrounds in Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It explores inter-ethnic interaction and processes of reconciliation 20 years after the end of the Bosnian war (1992-1995). Brcko is an ethnically mixed city, where all the three major ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniaks, the Croats and the Serbs, are represented. Through an analysis of interaction between young people of different ethnic backgrounds, my objective is to show how ethnic belonging affects and structures interactions and relations among youth. Ethnic belonging is highly relevant, and ethnic divisions permeate the society in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brcko, both in everyday interactions between people, and on a systemic level. The existence of three major ethnic groups with strong identities is to a large degree institutionalized in areas such as politics, media, the educational system, and in the family. In spite of this, interaction and friendships between youth of different ethnic backgrounds are not uncommon in Brcko. However, such interaction is characterized by the silencing of topics which are seen as controversial and possible sources of disagreements and conflicts. These topics mainly concern the past, and the 1992-1995 Bosnian war in particular. There exist different interpretations and versions of the past among the three major ethnic groups, and this is central in understanding continued ethnic divisions among youth. The three groups all tend to perceive themselves as victims and the others as perpetrators in the latest war, and as a result there is a general lack of acknowledgment of crimes committed in the war. These views of the past are produced and reproduced in media discourses and in politics, as well as in the educational system and in the family. As a result of this, there is a preference and a pressure among many to engage in deeper relations with people of their own ethnicity than with people of other ethnicities. Many of my informants illustrate that it is possible to interact and form relations with people without giving ethnic belonging relevance, but that this involves certain challenges and requires certain strategies in a society highly structured along ethnic lines.



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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Field Site.....	2
Motivation and Choice of Field Site.....	3
Research Questions.....	4
Thesis Outline.....	6
<b>2. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Ethnic Relations.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Ethnicity, Nationality and <i>Narod</i> .....	11
<b>The Past in the Present .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Collective Memory.....	11
Discourse .....	12
<b>Societal Structures and Social Practices .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Reconciliation .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3. Methodology.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Determining the Field .....	18
Access and Positionality.....	19
Data Gathering.....	20
Language.....	22
Limitations.....	23
Ethical Considerations.....	24
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4. Historical Overview .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>A Brief History of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brcko.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Pre-Ottoman Era.....	27
Bosnia in the Ottoman Era [1463-1878].....	27
The First World War and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [1914-1941].....	28
The Second World War and Socialist Yugoslavia [1941-1991] .....	29
The Bosnian War [1992-1995] .....	30
War in Brcko .....	32
<b>Establishing the Brcko District.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>5. Political Background .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>After Dayton: Ethnic Power-sharing in Bosnia .....</b>	<b>38</b>
One Country, Two Entities, Three Constituent Peoples .....	38
The Bosnian Constitution - Violating Human Rights? .....	40
Anti-Government Protests (2014).....	41
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>6. Mixed and Divided Communities .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>A Mixed Group of Friends.....</b>	<b>45</b>
"Here is Reconciliation for You" .....	48

Joking Relationships .....	48
<b>Brcko's 'Alternative Community' and the Youth Center Volunteers .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>A Mono-Ethnic Group of Friends.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>The Shared Silences .....</b>	<b>53</b>
When the Shared Silences are Broken .....	56
<b>Divided and Mixed Arenas.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Divided Arenas.....	61
Mixed Arenas .....	63
The Rationale behind Divided Arenas .....	64
The Brcko Youth Center as a Multiethnic Arena .....	66
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>7. Ethnicity in Everyday Interactions .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Integrated Schools, yet Continued Ethnic Contestation.....</b>	<b>70</b>
Characteristics of Education in Bosnia .....	71
Integrated Schools in Brcko.....	71
<b>Reproducing Ethnic Divisions within the Family Unit .....</b>	<b>75</b>
A Practice of Avoidance .....	80
"He is not a Perfect Guy, but He is Still a Serb" .....	82
<b>Transgressing Ethnic Divisions.....</b>	<b>84</b>
"Why Would I Support Serbia? I Live in Bosnia!" .....	85
Informal Sanctioning for Fostering Inter-ethnic Interaction.....	86
The Effects of Ethnic Quotas in Employment.....	87
<b>Future Perspectives .....</b>	<b>90</b>
A Desired Future outside Bosnia.....	90
"There Will be Another War" .....	91
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>8. A Contested Past.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Contested Spaces.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Monuments and Flags as Ethnic Symbols.....	96
The Luka Detention Camp .....	98
<b>Ethnically Interpreted Public Ceremonies.....</b>	<b>99</b>
Collective Funeral for Nine Civilian Bosniak War Victims .....	100
Collective Memories Produced and Reproduced .....	102
<b>Representations of the Collective Funeral in Media Discourse.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>112</b>

## Table of Figures

Figure 1: The Brcko bus station .....	2
Figure 2: Map showing the Brcko District .....	34
Figure 3: Election campaign poster in Brcko.....	37
Figure 4: Serb army commemoration in Brcko .....	94



## **1. Introduction**

*On a dark and wet February afternoon I arrived at the bus station in Brcko. I had travelled from Belgrade on a shabby bus that must have been in use since the times of Tito's socialist Yugoslavia. The bus trip from Belgrade to Brcko was flat and monotonous, totally different from everything I had seen on former visits to Sarajevo and the Hercegovina-region characterized by mountains, deep valleys and wild rivers. The two ten-minute smoking breaks during the three-hour bus ride reminded me that I was, after all, in the Balkans. The feeling of being in an unknown territory was exciting and frightening at the same time. Disembarking from the bus, the first thing I saw at the worn-down bus station, was an information board saying 'BRČKO – БРЧКО'. Signs in both latin script (used by Croats and Bosniaks) and cyrillic script (used by Serbs) is often a signal that a city is ethnically mixed. I was met by two employees from the organization where I had arranged to work as a volunteer, who brought me to my apartment. The apartment was located on the ground floor in a five-story building in the neighbourhood Novo Brcko (New Brcko), clearly built in the Yugoslav era. Novo Brcko is a predominantly Serb neighbourhood, but looking at the surnames on the door bells in my building, I also found Bosniak names. Having read and seen documentaries about the divisiveness of the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, it was undeniably intriguing to move into an apartment building which housed both Serbs and Bosniaks. Already on the bus, I met a young Serb from Brcko, who told me that young people of all ethnicities are getting along well, and that ethnic belonging is unimportant in Brcko. It cannot be this simple, I thought. And it turned out, it was not.*



**Figure 1: The Brcko bus station on a sunny occasion. (Photo by author)**

### **The Field Site**

This thesis is based on a six-month fieldwork in Brcko from early February until the end of July 2015. In the first half of 2016 I made another stay in Bosnia, when I had an internship at the Norwegian Embassy in Sarajevo. I did not gather data while working at the Embassy in Sarajevo, but this period provided me with increased knowledge of the political system and the work of civil society organizations in Bosnia. Moreover, I was able to make a handful visits to Brcko to meet my former informants.

Brcko is a city in northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia<sup>1</sup>), situated on the banks of the Sava river. Across the river lies Croatia, while the border with Serbia is located about 50 kilometers to the east of Brcko. The city has approximately 45 000 inhabitants, and is the administrative center of the Brcko District, which numbers a total of 83 516 inhabitants (Agency for Statistics

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of the country is Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Bosna i Hercegovina*). For simplicity, I will however refer to it as only Bosnia, as is the colloquial term among most people in the country.

of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016b:33). Brcko is inhabited by the three major ethnic groups in Bosnia, namely Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks<sup>2</sup>, in addition to different national minorities, like for instance the Roma. The city lies in the flat and agriculturally fertile Posavina region of Bosnia, and has traditionally been characterized by agriculture and industry (Farrand 2011). However, little industry is left due to unsuccessful privatization and lack of investments in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia in the 1990s together with the transition from Titoist socialism to market economy. The Brcko District is governed jointly by Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, and the national minorities are also guaranteed two seats in the 31 seat assembly of the parliament of the Brcko District (Bosnia and Herzegovina Beneficiary Parliaments 2017). Politically, contemporary Bosnia is characterized by the dominance of the ethnic group which is in majority in largely ethnically homogenous geographical areas. As such, the Brcko District represents a distinct administrative and political unit within the Bosnian context (see chapter four for a thorough outline of history and demographics of Brcko).

The Brcko Youth Center (*Omladinski centar Brcko*) is situated in the city center, and was a central part of my fieldwork. The Youth Center is a public institution that is home to a handful of local NGOs and an administrative unit of the Brcko District. The NGOs at the Youth Center arrange workshops and activities for children and youth, and they are based on multiethnic principles. Activities range from language workshops to creative activities and workouts. The staff and volunteers in the organizations are of varied ethnic backgrounds, as are the participants of the workshops and activities.

### **Motivation and Choice of Field Site**

In 2012, I made a three-week backpacking trip around the Balkans, which was my first visit to the region. I was immediately fascinated by the ethnic, religious and historical complexity of the Balkans. Over the years from 2012 until the

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'Bosnian Serbs' and 'Bosnian Croats' is the most precise way to refer to the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia, to distinguish them from Serbs in Serbia and Croats in Croatia. However, since my focus is on Bosnia only, I will refer to them as Serbs and Croats, and I will rather specify it if I write about a Serb from Serbia or Croat from Croatia.

fieldwork in 2015, I made many visits to the Balkans, and to Bosnia in particular. I also completed a bachelor's degree in Balkan studies and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language at the University of Oslo. At the planning stages of the fieldwork, I knew I wanted to go to an ethnically mixed city in the Balkans to study inter-ethnic relations. I was still not sure which area to go to, and numerous hours were spent on the Internet, looking up ethnic maps and relevant cities in the region. My main wish was to live in a city where no ethnic group made up a vast majority. The motivation for choosing such a field site was to see how identity is produced and how inter-ethnic relations manifest when there is no clear majority-minority relation between the ethnic groups. The obvious choices would be infamous cities like the Croat-Bosniak city Mostar in Herzegovina or the Croat-Serb city Vukovar in Croatia. However, when I came across an online article about the Brcko District, I knew that I had found the place I wanted to go.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic complexity and the institutional specificities of Brcko made me want to study ethnic relations through a focus on ethnic reconciliation, particularly how this was experienced by youth. Focusing on youth would let me explore how inter-ethnic relations manifest in the generations who did not experience, or have few memories of, the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia. As a result, the topic of the fieldwork came to be ethnic relations and ethnic reconciliation among youth in the ethnically mixed city of Brcko.

### **Research Questions**

Throughout the research process I have strived to be inductive in my approach regarding topic and research question. It has been important to focus not only on what I perceive to be relevant, but what is relevant to my informants. However, based on the abovementioned choices of topics and of youth of different ethnic backgrounds as the main focus in the fieldwork, I have operated with a threefold research question:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/may/14/brcko-bosnia-europe-only-free-city>

- How do young people of different ethnic backgrounds interact with each other, and how does ethnicity influence such interactions?
- What role do collective representations of the past, and representations of the Bosnian war [1992-1995] in particular, play in structuring society and interaction among people of different ethnic backgrounds?
- How do the two abovementioned questions relate to the processes of ethnic reconciliation among youth, and what are the future prospects regarding these processes?

The three questions are mutually connected through a focus on ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations among youth. The focus of the research question is on youth in Brcko specifically, though in the analysis, lines are drawn to the state-level. It is important to emphasize that the analysis represents the Brcko youths with whom I interacted, and not youth in general neither in Bosnia nor in Brcko. At the same time, I attempt to point to larger structures, dynamics and mechanisms relevant to the interactions among youth of different ethnicity.

The title of the thesis, “My Parents Never Taught Me to Hate”, reflects a central argument and, in my opinion, a paradox among youth in Brcko. Many Brcko youths claimed that the generation of their parents was to blame for the lack of ethnic reconciliation. They would emphasize that *their* parents had not taught *them* to hate or to keep a distance in their interactions with people of other ethnicities, but that this was a general problem among others. Some of the same youths mentioned in other conversations that their parents would not accept it if they found a partner of another ethnicity than their own. This shows that societal structures at times affect people more than they are aware of, and that people tend to perceive themselves to be less affected by ethnic divisions than others. To be able to grasp this discrepancy between perceptions and actions, I have chosen practice theory as one of my main theoretical outsets.

## **Thesis Outline**

This introductory chapter is followed by seven chapters and a short concluding chapter. Chapter two, three, four and five provide a theoretical, methodological, historical and political background and contextualization, while chapter six, seven and eight make up the ethnographic and analytical parts of the thesis.

Chapter two establishes a theoretical framework for the analysis in later chapters. The analysis is built around a range of different theoretical perspectives, from theories of ethnicity and practice theory, to theories of collective memory, discourse and reconciliation. Chapter three outlines the methodological choices involved in the fieldwork and discusses the consequences and limitations these choices have on the data material and the analysis. The history of Bosnia and Brcko is outlined in chapter four, while chapter five discusses the political system of Bosnia with a particular focus on the role of ethnicity in political structures. These two chapters constitute a historical and political background relevant in order to make sense of the later analysis.

The analytical part of the thesis begins with chapter six, which takes on the task of presenting the informants and the communities in which I spent time during the fieldwork. The presentations are followed by an analysis focused on group dynamics and topics of conversation among youth with a focus on ethnicity, before a discussion of divided and mixed public arenas in Brcko ends the chapter. In chapter seven, different societal structures and relevant factors in the structuring of ethnic relations among youth are outlined. The structures and factors are discussed through informants' personal accounts of ethnic identity and the relevance of ethnicity in their lives. Structures and factors range from educational system and family, to ethnic quotas in the public sector employment, as well as my informants perspectives of the future. Chapter eight features a discussion of how the past is represented in the present. The discussion, which aims to show how the past is interpreted and represented differently by different ethnic groups, is centered on public space symbolism, the content of public ceremonies and newspaper discourses. The thesis ends with a concluding

section, which sums up and connects the analytical conclusions from each chapter, and points to general conclusions in light of the research questions.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the different theoretical perspectives that are relevant for the later analysis of the empirical material from my fieldwork. The analysis does not lean on a grand theory explaining all social interaction within a single framework. Rather, I incorporate parts of different theoretical perspectives which resonate with my main argument; namely that the youth in Brcko are highly affected by living in a social reality where ethnicity, ethnic divisions and contestation of the past play a significant role in everyday interactions. This, in turn, creates certain conditions, which influence interaction between young people from the different ethnic groups. This influences perceptions as well as practices, and together, limits the potential for ethnic reconciliation.

One of the main tasks of the thesis is to explain and analyze social interaction. For this reason, the analysis pairs theories of ethnicity with practice theory, since this enables an analysis in which social interaction is seen in light of general aspects of ethnicity and ethnic relations. Furthermore, it also acknowledges and discusses the individual's role in relation to the societal structures. When the analysis focuses on systemic aspects of the Bosnian society, like the political system and how the past is remembered and contested, theories on collective memory and discourse are relevant. Ethnic reconciliation is another major topic of the thesis, and theoretical perspectives on reconciliation contribute to the discussions on the relationship between the social realities and processes of reconciliation in contemporary Bosnia and Brcko. In order to establish a theoretical framework for the later analysis, the different theoretical perspectives are outlined, discussed and problematized in this chapter.

### **Ethnic Relations**

Throughout this thesis, 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic relations' are recurring terms which form the basis for much of the analysis. The use of these concepts is built on an understanding of ethnicity as, "aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally



distinct” (Eriksen 2006:5). The main distinction between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats as ethnic groups is religion, following that generally Bosniaks are Muslims, Serbs are Orthodox Christians and Croats are Catholics (Bringa 1995). The relation between ethnicity and religion in Bosnia is complicated, and later chapters will introduce examples of people who for instance identify as Bosniak atheists. However, religion remains the main constitutive factor in the ethnic boundaries between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Furthermore, language is another dividing factor, since Bosniaks use the Bosnian language, Serbs the Serbian language and Croats the Croatian language. These languages are nevertheless very similar, and in socialist Yugoslavia the three languages were officially one language named Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg 2004).

According to Barth (1969), ethnicity is contextual and constructed, and can be seen as a form of social organization. One of the main objectives of the analysis is to show how ethnicity influences and shapes the social organization in the lives of young Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats in Brcko. The focus is predominantly on the relation and interaction between people *belonging to* these different ethnic groups, and to a lesser extent on the relations between the ethnic groups on a national group level. By focusing on relations and interaction, the aim is to point to qualities of ethnic relationships and thus show how ethnicity influences the ways people interact with each other. Another important element of the analysis is to discuss what constitutes the ‘cultural distinctiveness’ which creates and maintains ethnic boundaries between people.

Regarding the qualities of ethnic relations and production of ethnic identities, Barth’s introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) outlines several aspects relevant in the context of Brcko. One central notion is that ethnicity is relational, and that the boundaries between ethnic groups are negotiated and maintained through interaction and contact between the groups, and not by a lack of contact. To understand the persistence of ethnic groups and their divisions, the focus should then be on “the boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969:15). This implies that it is not only

relevant to explore what it means to be a Serb, Bosniak or Croat, but what it means to be a Serb *in relation to* Bosniaks and Croats.

The boundaries between ethnic groups “canalizes social life – it entails a frequently quite complex organization of behavior and social relations” (Barth 1969:15). This is a relevant outset when aspiring to grasp the social interaction in the multi-ethnic city of Brcko. Social interaction must be seen in light of people’s belonging to a certain ethnic group with certain values and frames of reference. One example of how ethnic boundaries shape the complex organization of social relations is how many of the cafés and pubs of Brcko are ethnically divided, at least informally. Another example is how the Brcko District uses ethnic quotas in employment.

Barth (1969:13) further argues that ethnicity is both self-ascribed and ascribed by others. This implies that it is not enough to self-ascribe a certain ethnic belonging, but that one’s ethnic belonging must be acknowledged by others’ ascription and definition as well. Furthermore, it results in experiences of restriction and expectation to identify and behave in a certain way or to interact or not interact with certain people. The youth of Brcko are under influence of their families, and might experience discrepancy between personal values and those of their families. When analyzing inter-ethnic interaction, it is also important to remember that ethnic relationships do not consist only of *contrasting* (Us and Them) but also of *matching* (We and You) (Eriksen 2006:34). I encountered many young people in Brcko who spoke of the similarities between themselves and the youth of other ethnicities, rather than the differences between them.

As Barth (1969) and others (see; Eriksen 2010; Jenkins 1997) emphasize, ethnic groups are not essential units, and there might be variation between members of an ethnic group in possessing the characteristics of the given group. In the analysis, both differences within and between ethnic groups are given focus. Furthermore, the thesis does not aim to present the ethnic groups of Brcko as essentialized and generalizable units, but aims to show how ethnicity plays a central part in the complexity of social organization in the city.

### **Ethnicity, Nationality and *Narod***

What terms people apply for the different ethnic groups of Bosnia, the Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats, varies depending on the contexts. In the Bosnian constitution, they are described as 'three constituent peoples' (*tri konstitutivna naroda*) (Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2017). In socialist Yugoslavia, the Serbs and Croats had the status as *narod* (people) from the beginning, while the Muslims (today Bosniaks) were first granted official status as *narod* in 1971 (Bringa 1995:27). My observation is that people in present day Bosnia predominantly speak of their groups as 'peoples' (*narodi*). When talking about the identity of one or more persons, people use the term 'nationality' (*nacionalnost*), example: "a person of Serb nationality" (*čovjek Srpske nacionalnosti*). The terms *ethnicity* and *ethnic groups* are scarcely used among people in Bosnia. In my thesis however, the analysis is built around the concept of ethnicity. The Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats are for practical and analytical purposes referred to as ethnic groups and the persons belonging to the groups as people of Serb, Bosniak and Croat ethnicity throughout the thesis.

### **The Past in the Present**

The societal structures in a given society will always be shaped by the past, as will people's interactions and attitudes. They must thus be understood in relation to the past. The war in Bosnia from 1992-1995, and the various ways it is remembered and interpreted, is crucial for understanding the structures, interactions and dynamics of contemporary Brcko and Bosnia. Theoretical perspectives related to collective memory and discourse are thus relevant for my analysis.

### **Collective Memory**

The people of Brcko remember and represent the past differently, and the multitudes of historical narratives often contradict each other. The three major ethnic groups are continuously reproducing three different collective memory discourses and understandings of the past, particularly of the 1990s Bosnian

war.<sup>4</sup> An important point here is that "every narrative depends on the suppression and re-pression of contrary, disruptive memories -other people's memories of the same events, as well as the unacceptable ghosts of our own pasts" (Hall 1998:440). This means that an analysis of the different understandings of the past, must not only investigate elements of the past which are highlighted, but also those which are suppressed. Processes of remembering involve both remembering and forgetting, and such processes play an important part in knowledge production (Radstone and Schwarz 2010). The divided understandings of the past are manifested in different ways in Brcko. Divisions in collective memory discourses can be seen in the use of ethnic symbols in public space, in writing (school books, media), in oral contexts (speeches, people's opinions), and they can be embodied (Connerton 1989).

Processes of remembering are complex, and "Individual remembrance, collective memory and narrative history interact in highly complicated ways, shaping each other as different versions of the past are constructed and reconstructed, modified and invented" (Linke 2015:181). As a result of this, an analysis of how the past is portrayed must thus take into account how individuals remember, for instance, the 1990s war. It must also focus on how the war is remembered on a collective ethnic group level, and how versions of the history are publicly narrated (e.g. in ceremonies, educational curricula, the media etc.). Moreover, memory and history are politicized topics, and these topics must be understood in relation to the shifting political and ideological forces present in the Bosnian society.

### **Discourse**

Discourse is a complex term which can be understood in different ways, but I lean on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, defined by Fairclough (1992:3) as "different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice". Discourse thus relates to knowledge production and social practices,

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<sup>4</sup> The other ethnic groups of Bosnia, like the national minorities, also have their own discourses and understandings of the war. The focus of this thesis is however on the three major ethnic groups.

and this is an important outset for chapter eight, which contains an analysis of newspaper discourses. One central notion regarding news media and the production of discourse is that the news are actively constructed (Van Dijk 1989). In other words, how an event is described, must be critically read and examined by acknowledging the orientation and agenda of the specific newspaper. There is no neutral position in media production, nor in communication in general.

Following Fairclough (1992), the production and reproduction of discourses relates to hegemony. When something is hegemonic, it is “part of the legitimizing common sense which sustains relations of domination” (Fairclough 2001:5). This implies that the newspaper discourses are best understood in light of the ruling political ideologies, and hence the ruling societal structures. The societal structures in Brcko and Bosnia are highly influenced by ethnicity and memories and experiences of the 1990s war. As chapter eight shows, three ethnically divided discourses are produced and reproduced in Brcko and Bosnia, and people are often exposed mainly to the discourse of their own ethnic group. As a result of this, ethnic discourses can potentially “become naturalized, and achieve the status of ‘common sense’” (Fairclough 1992:87). This in turn influences interaction between people of different ethnicities.

### **Societal Structures and Social Practices**

The theoretical perspectives with a focus on ethnicity enable an analysis of the characteristics and dynamics of ethnic relations and the role this plays in the shaping of interactions among youth. At the same time, the people whom I spent time with in Brcko are individuals with a great variation in attitudes, actions and individual agency. Although people are influenced by the societal structures, they are also able to influence or change these societal structures, at least to a degree. To grasp this dynamic, I find the theoretical perspectives of *practice theory* to be beneficial. Such perspectives are useful in explaining how people’s actions and attitudes are shaped by societal structures, while at the same time acknowledging people’s potential for opposing and possibly affecting the structures.

Practice theory developed as a new theoretical direction in the 1970s and '80s, as a reaction to earlier theoretical perspectives which largely aimed to explain cultural phenomena by referring to “systemic/structural mechanisms of one sort or another” (Ortner 1984:145). The aim of practice theory is rather to analyze the interdependence of practice and social structures, without over-emphasizing one over the other. Practice theory acknowledges that “society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction” (Ortner 1984:159). Such theoretical perspectives enables an analysis where interactions and attitudes among youth of different ethnicities in Brcko are explained in light of societal structures, while at the same time acknowledging the potential influences these young people can have on the structures.

Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977[1972]) is a central theoretical outset for the analysis of interaction among Brcko's youth. The concept of *habitus*, and the way in which social action or practice acts out within a given social system, is particularly relevant. Following Bourdieu (1977[1972]:72), “The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*”. These structures or dispositions are neither “the product of obedience to rules”, nor do they necessarily imply a conscious aim or a stated intent. In short, habitus refers to the way in which a person or a group perceive and react to the social world around them.

While Bourdieu, to a large extent, exemplifies habitus through social class, my analysis applies the concept to the ethnic groups of Bosnia, arguing that people's habitus are shaped by living in a society where ethnicity plays a central role. The analysis shows how people's actions and attitudes are shaped by the society they live in, but also how they at the same time through practice, negotiate, shape and possibly change the system. One example of the latter is how there, in addition to many ethnically divided pubs and cafés in Brcko, exist a handful of places that are ethnically mixed. These places are frequented by youth who deliberately interact and identify with people along other lines than ethnic ones.

Two other concepts relevant to my analysis are Bourdieu's (1977[1972]) concepts of *doxa* and *heterodoxy*. *Doxa* refers to beliefs that are dominant, undisputed and "appear as self-evident" within a society (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:164). *Doxa* is both a product of, and plays a central part in, the reproduction of power relations, and is by Bourdieu exemplified through social class. When the dominant and undisputed beliefs are challenged, *doxa* is broken and the "universe of discourse" is entered (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:168). Within this universe heterodoxy and orthodoxy operate. While heterodoxy refers to all discourses and opinions directly opposing the previous doxic beliefs and views, orthodoxy represents the aim to restore "the primal state of innocence of *doxa*" (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:169). When discussing conflicting views and understandings of the past among people of different ethnic backgrounds, I will argue that there is a lack of *doxa* in Bosnia, in other words a lack of a dominant and established understanding of the past. Rather, between the ethnic groups there is a continuous state of heterodoxy, where the ethnic groups advocate and reproduce conflicting understandings of the past. The heterodoxy regarding understandings of the past is central when understanding interaction and topics of discussion among youth of different ethnic backgrounds in Brcko.

## **Reconciliation**

Ethnic reconciliation is one of the central focuses of the thesis. Throughout the analysis, theoretical perspectives on reconciliation are applied in combination with the abovementioned theoretical perspectives. The aim is to keep the concept of reconciliation as an underlying topic throughout the thesis. I will refrain from making reconciliation, or lack thereof, the main explanatory concepts for the empirical material. Rather, the discussion of reconciliation is complimented by the inclusion of concepts such as ethnicity, social practice and discourse.

For a concrete definition of reconciliation, I lean on Gloppen's (2005:20) definition of collective reconciliation;

How a society torn apart by internal conflict can mend its social fabric, how it can reweave thread by thread the fabric of that society and reconstitute (...) the desire to live together.

Concretely, this means that the process of reconciliation in Brcko is one in which the ethnically mixed population of the city “reweave the thread” and “reconstitute the desire to live together” in the aftermath of the war from 1992-1995, a war in which they were ethnically divided.

It is necessary to underline that there is no standardized formula for reconciliation, and that a solution must be created in response to the nature of the given conflict (Lederach 1997). With that said, there are some general elements in reconciliation theory perceived to be central in working towards reconciliation. Lederach (1997:26-27) operates with four aspects that are important in order to achieve reconciliation. Firstly, social *relationships* are understood by Lederach to be at the basis of the conflict as well as the solution. Work towards achieving reconciliation thus implies (re-)engaging different sides of a conflict in relationships with each other. Following this, another central aspect is *encounter*. People from different sides in a conflict need a place where they can meet and express themselves, to address the past, including their pain and grievance. In relation to this, *acknowledgement* is also needed. In order to restore a relationship one needs to acknowledge the others’ feelings relating to the past and present experiences. The final aspect is the envisioning of a *shared future*. For lasting reconciliation, there must be an opportunity for the people to look forward and envision living together with the people belonging to the other side of the conflict. In a similar manner, Gloppen (2005:18) outlines the need for *truth, justice, restitution of victims* and *reform*. To reconcile a post-conflict society there is a need to hold the perpetrators accountable, punish and sentence them, as well as achieving transparency regarding what actually happened in the conflict. Victims’ physical, psychological and social suffering must also be acknowledged and restituted. To avoid new conflicts in the future requires a reform where institutions are strengthened and capable of preventing possible future conflicts.



This analysis does not involve a discussion of whether these elements are 'fulfilled' or not among the youth in Brcko. Instead, some of these elements are drawn into parts of the analysis, where they work as suitable tools for explaining how social interaction and societal structures relate to the process of ethnic reconciliation. As an example, ethnically divided public arenas in Brcko relate to reconciliation, and are discussed through a lack of *encounter*. Another example is how ethnically divided memory discourses regarding the 1990s war relate to *truth* and *justice*.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has established a theoretical framework, which incorporates different theoretical perspectives suited to analyze my empirical material. The framework aims to account for the major role ethnicity plays in Brcko and Bosnia, and how this influences the youth in the ethnically mixed city. Theoretical contributions from practice theory show how ethnicity is deeply embedded in the societal structures and how these structures influence the youth, without undermining the youth's possible influence on the structures. Moreover, theoretical perspectives related to collective memory and discourse enables an analysis of how and in which ways the past plays a central role in the present-day lives of people. The role of ethnicity, the relationship between social practices and structures, and the presence of the past in the present relate to a discussion of ethnic reconciliation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

To conduct fieldwork, and particularly a fieldwork in an urban setting, is to a large extent a process of serendipity and a continuous attempt to create the field. My plan when arriving in Brcko was to study ethnic reconciliation among youth. Upon arrival, I had established contact with a local NGO where I was to volunteer. The local NGO became my entry into a field that came to consist of youth of different ethnic backgrounds, where the majority of my informants were active in NGOs and at the Brcko Youth Center. To show how I ended up with the data that is analyzed in this thesis, this chapter will discuss the research methods applied in the field. Furthermore, the chapter will reflect upon the process of gaining access and possible limitations of the data I ended up with. In all ethnographic research, there are ethical considerations to be taken, and mine will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

#### **Determining the Field**

My main aim when planning the fieldwork was to spend time with Brcko youth of different ethnic backgrounds. The idea was that this would be a good outset to study inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation. I had decided upon Brcko as the *location* for my fieldwork, but I still needed to create a *field*. I followed Madden's (2010:38-39) advice, namely that "Constructing a field site is an attempt to put boundaries around an ethnographer's enquiries into a human group or institution". Upon arrival in Brcko, I was in touch with a local NGO working with youth, which accepted me as a volunteer. The employees at the organization provided me invaluable assistance with finding an apartment and with my visa application. They also got me an interview with the Brcko District mayor and introduced me to possible informants.

An introductory visit to the Youth Center on my second day in Brcko opened up what would become my field for the next six months, as I met some of my main informants on that occasion. Moreover, I held a Norwegian language course at the Youth Center twice a week, and this also proved useful in meeting new

people and possible informants. As a result, my field came to consist mainly of young people active in the NGO-sector and particularly the Youth Center in Brcko. In addition to these regular encounters with people within the NGO-sector, I was open throughout the fieldwork to encounters with people of all ages and from different segments of society. Such encounters with people “outside” of my main field gave me an important basis for comparison and provided a variation in attitudes and opinions.

The fact that my field came to revolve around the NGO-sector had its advantages. The organizations were ethnically mixed, and the people active were of both Bosniak, Serb, Croat ethnicity and from ethnically mixed marriages. This meant that I got informants of different ethnicities, which in turn enabled data gathering on inter-ethnic interaction, as I had hoped for upon arrival. On the other hand, it meant that I, to a large extent, gathered data among people belonging to a certain segment of the society. My informants thus had diverse ethnic backgrounds, but had, for instance, quite similar educational backgrounds.

### **Access and Positionality**

To conduct an anthropological fieldwork is as mentioned a process which involves serendipity, but also a process where your own background and your personal identity affect the research (Okely 2012). I am a young educated Northern European male who speaks the Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian language. These are factors which affected my access among the youth in Brcko. The men were the easiest group to get in touch with, and many people took great interest and showed appreciation in the fact that I had learnt their language. At the time of the fieldwork, I was in a relationship with a Bosniak girl who lived in Norway, and I was worried whether this would affect my access among people of other ethnicities, for instance Serbs. However, this proved to be unimportant when meeting young people, and I got at least as many Serb as Bosniaks informants during my fieldwork. Summed up, I experienced it as relatively easy to get in touch with young people in Brkco regardless of ethnicity, though as a male myself, it was easier to get in touch with men than women.

A central element in encounters with people during my fieldwork was to “categorize” them, with the most obvious factor being their ethnic identity. It was important to understand my informants’ backgrounds in order to make sense of what they said and did. However, it is important to remember that I was also categorized or positioned by my informants. Okely (2012:81) states that “Anthropologists cannot become entirely invisible, although their presence may eventually be taken for granted”. The anthropologist’s positionality is relevant to the outcome of the research and must be reflected upon. In the first phase of my research, I was positioned by many young people as a foreign volunteer. Some of the NGO’s in Brcko regularly receive foreign volunteers, and most of the young foreigners in Brcko are in fact volunteers. However, I also differed from many foreigners since I spoke the local language and had good knowledge of the history, sports and culture in the region. It became important for me to emphasize that I was first and foremost a researcher conducting an anthropological fieldwork, and that volunteering was one of many activities I did as part of my research.

### **Data Gathering**

My main method for data gathering was participant observation among youth. Participant observation “entails sharing space, events and day-to-day living” (Okely 2012:87). I spent time with youth in various contexts, and participated in their daily activities. The Brcko Youth Center was an important arena where I spent many hours. For four out of the six months I spent in Brcko, I held a Norwegian language course at the center two times a week. In addition, I attended workshops (German language, English language and lectures on various topics) on a regular basis. The people I met and the interaction that took place with these people outside the center was fundamental to my research, more so than the workshops. Activities at the center also provided a very welcomed structure to my daily life in Brcko.

One of my main everyday activities and means of participant observation was to spend time in the city center of Brcko. Normally, time in the city center was

spent talking to my informants while drinking coffee or beer. The conversations and the interaction on these occasions were generally informal and the topics spoken of were varied. The numerous hours spent in cafés and pubs provided me with insight into the daily lives of my informants, and it was also an important way to meet new people and possible informants. Furthermore, I spent time with my closest informants at their homes and in my apartment. The visits at home proved to be good opportunities to talk about topics such as reconciliation, ethnicity and the war in Bosnia in the 1990s.

In addition to the everyday activities at the Youth Center and in the city center of Brcko, I participated in various activities which took place less frequently. For instance, I accompanied my informants to festivals and concerts in Brcko and neighboring cities. I celebrated Orthodox Christian and Muslim holidays and May 1, the International Workers' Day, with them. Moreover, I attended different public ceremonies, like a commemoration of the 23rd anniversary of the establishment of a local Serb army unit, a collective funeral for nine Bosniak victims from the 1990s war, and the celebration of the Day of the Brcko District (*Dan Distrikta*). In the ceremonies my role was more of an observer than a participant, while I felt like an active participant in most other activities. In all of this participation I strived to get a general understanding of the everyday lives of the Brcko youth. I strived to keep particularly keen eyes and ears on parts of the participation and interaction which related to ethnicity and reconciliation.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were an important method of data gathering to supplement the daily participant observation. Informal interviews in anthropology are characterized by open-ended questions and allows for the interviewee to give extensive answers and get sidetracked (Madden 2010:70-73). I conducted about 10 semi-structured interviews with youths of various ethnic backgrounds. The interviews were conducted without a recorder and normally lasted for about an hour. The interviewees were typically people I did not interact with daily, but people I met in different contexts. These people showed interest in my research and were willing to talk to me about their lives and their thoughts and experiences regarding ethnic reconciliation. These

interviews usually began with a couple of general questions on the experience of living in an ethnically mixed city, before I gave the interviewees the opportunity to talk about whatever they found relevant.

I chose to conduct participant observation combined with semi-structured interviews for several reasons. The daily participant observation allowed me to gather large amounts of data material from my closest informants over a longer period of time, while the interviews enabled data gathering also among people with whom I spent less time. Another reason for this choice was that it provided me with a varied data material, which enabled a comparison of what people *do*, through participant observation, and what they *say* in the interviews.

### **Language**

Using the local language when conducting fieldwork has clear advantages as well as possible pitfalls (Madden 2010:61-62). In my case, I felt that knowing Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (B/C/S) enabled extensive participation and made it easy to establish contact with possible informants. Before going into field, I had completed two years of B/C/S language studies at the University of Oslo, and I therefore had a good grasp of the language when entering the field. This gave me an advantage in my research, as I was able to use exclusively B/C/S when interacting with people. My knowledge of the language made it possible to participate in the everyday activities of my informants, conduct informal interviews, follow local media, attend ceremonies and commemorations, and conduct an interview with the mayor of Brcko without having to use an interpreter.

I also experienced my knowledge of B/C/S to be a good way of gaining access and building trust with my informants. My knowledge of the language also made it easier for people to invite me along when a group of people gathered where someone did not speak English. One of my key informants did not speak English, hence I can say that my command of the language gave me data I would not have been able to gather otherwise. On the other hand, the language is neither my

mother tongue nor second language, and I might have missed out on details and nuances which I would have picked up in Norwegian or English.

### **Limitations**

There are obvious limitations to the fact that I met most of my informants and developed my social network around people belonging to the NGO-sector and an 'alternative community'<sup>5</sup>. The people the anthropologist spends time with necessarily influence the data he gathers and the analysis he conducts. The local NGOs in Brcko employ and value multi-ethnic principles, where one of the main aims of their activities is to offer an arena where youth of different ethnicity can meet and interact on equal terms. With this in mind, the data I have gathered among informants active in these NGOs does not represent all youth in Brcko. My data might give a more positive picture regarding inter-ethnic tolerance and interaction than would have been the case had I spent time in other segments of the society. On the other hand, having informants within the NGO sector and the 'alternative' segment gave me the opportunity to spend time with ethnically mixed groups of people. This gave me valuable insight into the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and gave me the possibility to observe such relations in depth and over time.

Another limitation to my data material is that I had more male than female informants, and that all of my closest friends and informants were men. It was not a deliberate choice to spend more time with men than women, but it was easier to gain access among men. However, among the people with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews there were almost as many women as men represented. In the analysis of ethnic relations, gender perspectives could definitely contribute to a more sufficient understanding, and I am open to the thought that a part of an understanding of the lack of reconciliation could be found in the patriarchal structures of the Bosnian society. In this respect, I acknowledge an insufficient exploration of gender perspectives due to this

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<sup>5</sup> A group of people who identify and interact with each other based on, among other things, their interest in rock music in English (see chapter six for further elaboration).

thesis' limitations in regards to over-representation of the male perspectives at the expense of female perspectives.

As outlined earlier, most of my contact with informants took place within various public contexts like at the Youth Center or in cafés and pubs in the city. To gather access to the private sphere proved difficult, since young people often live at home with their parents and prefer to spend time out in the city rather than at home. I was therefore rarely introduced to my informants' families and was not invited home to people to a large extent. I did however spend time with my main informants Neven, Dino and Nihad in the private sphere on several occasions, for example when celebrating religious holidays. However, these celebrations and other activities at their homes predominantly took place when the rest of their families were away. More data on how topics such as ethnicity and reconciliation are handled in the private sphere could have strengthened my analysis, but this unfortunately proved difficult to access.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The NGO sector and the 'alternative community' in Brcko are limited in size, and I have therefore anonymized all of my informants' names. When finding pseudonyms for my informants, I have been careful to choose names which are corresponding with the given informant's ethnicity. At all times during my fieldwork I was open about my research and my role as an anthropologist, and whenever I spoke to people about the topics of my research I stated that I intended to use what we spoke about in the thesis. This was especially important because many people quickly positioned me as a NGO volunteer. I had to explicitly state that I was an anthropologist and that volunteering at the Youth Center was only one of many activities I did in Brcko as a part of my research. In all formal contact with the official authorities, for instance when applying for a residence permit or when interviewing the mayor of Brcko, I was overt about my role as an anthropologist as well as my research topics. On certain occasions, such as attending public ceremonies, it was impossible to ask for an informed



consent. These ceremonies were however public, open to all and covered by the media.

## **Conclusion**

Reflexivity is one of the main pillars of anthropological research, and the anthropologist must be conscious about how methodical choices in the field affects the data material he is left with (Madden 2010). This chapter has outlined the choices which have resulted in the data material which is analyzed in later chapters. The main methods in the fieldwork were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. These methods were applied to a field which came to be made up of young people of various ethnic backgrounds, but with a connection to the NGO-sector and the Brcko Youth Center. My gender and my knowledge of both language and culture gave me access among many young Brcko males, but also some females. These are all important elements to bear in mind when reading the analysis in later chapters, and I strive to treat the data material in a transparent way.

## 4. Historical Overview

### Introduction

The Balkans region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, has historically been part of numerous different empires and has experienced several political changes throughout history. The region has been part of the Roman [2<sup>nd</sup> century BC-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD], the Ottoman [1463-1878] and the Austro-Hungarian [1878-1914] empires (Malcolm 2002). It has also seen two different Yugoslavias rise and fall; the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [1918-1941] and the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia [1945-1992]. It was not until March 3 1992 that Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as a sovereign state. As a result of the multifarious influences from the different empires, contemporary Bosnia is religiously, culturally and ideologically complex. Throughout history, the region has been a cultural and religious crossroad and has continuously experienced population movements and ethnic intermixing.

To be able to talk about and analyze questions of ethnic reconciliation today, it is crucial to understand the complex and many-sided history of Bosnia, as these two are interconnected topics. This chapter will give a brief historical overview of Bosnia, and also give some history and context on the Brcko District and its establishment. It is a hard task to write concisely about a topic so wide and complex, and given the formal limitations of the thesis, I have chosen to focus on the parts of the history which I see as relevant to the further discussion in the thesis. The history of Bosnia is subject to contestation, as will be discussed in later chapters. The aim of this chapter is to establish a historical context necessary to conduct the later analysis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding numbers and statistics, of victims in war and ethnic demographics, I lean on renowned academics as far as possible, but in some case I cite local sources in lack of other sources. I am aware that local sources often are disputable.

## **A Brief History of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brcko**

### **Pre-Ottoman Era**

When the Romans arrived in the Balkans around year 200 BC, the area had already been populated by different groups, of which the Illyrians, a group of Indo-European tribes, were the biggest ones (Hoare 2007). The period until the Ottomans conquered the region in the 15th century consisted of numerous changes of rulers, kingdoms and empires.

Slavs migrated from Central and Eastern Europe to the Balkans in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and the three major ethnic groups of Bosnia today, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks are all Slavic (Malcolm 2002). There were both a Croat [925-1102] and a Serbian kingdom [1217-1346] in what is Bosnia today. According to Malcolm (2002:12), it makes little sense to talk about whether the inhabitants of the area at the time were Croats and Serbs or not, since the ethnic groups we talk about today is a modern construction. Also relevant is the schism in 1054, when the Roman Empire was divided and brought the final split between western Roman Catholicism and eastern Orthodox Christianity (Mønnesland 2006). As earlier mentioned, the main distinction between the three ethnic groups today is based on religion: Islam, Catholic- and Orthodox Christianity. Bosnia belonged to the western sphere, but it was victim to rivalry between the eastern and western churches (Hoare 2007). To further complicate the picture, a separate Bosnian church in the semi-independent medieval Bosnian state existed from 1180 until the Ottoman invasion in 1463 (Malcolm 2002).

### **Bosnia in the Ottoman Era [1463-1878]**

Most of what is Bosnia today was a part of the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years, from year 1463 until 1878. The Ottomans took Bosnia and big parts of the Balkans under Sultan Mehmed II's firm leadership, and 150 years after the Ottomans first came to Bosnia, the population had an absolute Muslim majority, which first and foremost consisted of Christian converters (Malcolm 2002). This means that by the 16th century the three major religions seen in Bosnia today

were present. Hoare (2007:41) argues that “the nationalities of modern Bosnia-Herzegovina grew out of the religious communities of Ottoman Bosnia”.

The latter period of the Ottoman rule in Bosnia was one of conflicts, resistance and change, as the Ottomans started to lose their Balkan stronghold. At the Berlin congress in 1878, the Austro-Hungarian Empire negotiated the right to occupy Bosnia the same year, a rule that lasted until the start of The First World War in 1914 (Malcolm 2002). Cut off from their formerly strong Turkish state, the Bosnian Muslims, having weak national sentiments, were subjected to Croat and Serb forces trying to claim that the Muslims were originally Croats or Serbs. According to Mønnesland (2006:127), Muslim national sentiments started to grow in this period, while Hoare (2007:76) claims that the Muslim National movement in the Austro-Hungarian period was first and foremost focused on a defense of religious rights, not national ones. The Bosnian Muslims united as a group, and going into the 20<sup>th</sup> century we can talk about national sentiments and nationalism in the Balkans in the modern sense. There also existed sentiments towards a South-Slav unity, which would later make basis for the first Yugoslavia.

### **The First World War and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [1914-1941]**

In the First World War (WW1) the Bosnian and Croatian territories belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire that fought with the Central Powers, while Serbia fought with the Allied Powers (Mønnesland 2006). In spite of fighting on different sides in the war, the Croats and Slovenians signed the Corfu-declaration with Serbia in 1917. In the declaration, they agreed that they would work together for a South-Slav state, and in December 1918 the ‘Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes’ was officially established (Mønnesland 2006). In 1929 the name was changed to the ‘Kingdom of Yugoslavia’. The Kingdom, which lasted until 1941, was mostly characterized by a Serb-Croat fight for power and rule. The Bosnian Muslims were pulled between the two, but chose a unitarist Yugoslav way, something that gave them certain neutrality, but did not solve their question of national identity (Mønnesland 2006).

## **The Second World War and Socialist Yugoslavia [1941-1991]**

The Second World War (WW2) in Yugoslavia involved German invasion and different local nationalistic fractions fighting both with and against the Nazis. Hitler's Germany invaded Yugoslavia April 6 1941, and it was only a matter of days before they took control (Hoare 2007). The country was split between Germany, Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary, with the rest organized as two "independent" states of Croatia and Serbia, in reality under German control. The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a part of the 'Independent Croatian State' (NDH) under leadership of Ante Pavelic and his fascist movement named Ustasha. Serbia had a Quisling government, but Draze Mihailovic and his Serb nationalist group, the Cetniks, made a strong opposition. Josip Broz Tito, the future leader of socialist Yugoslavia, led the communist Partisans, who with Soviet support also made up a strong opposition.

The war was bloody, and the Jasenovac concentration camp on Croatian territory where between 50 000 and 100 000 people were killed (mostly Serbs, Jews and Roma), stands as one of the most gruesome examples (Ramet 2006:116-117). The Partisans grew strong under Soviet and Allied support, and at the end of the war in the spring of 1945 they took control over Bosnia and eventually the rest of the Yugoslav territory (Malcolm 2002; Ramet 2006). Tito and his partisans established the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and liquidated more than 50 000 people<sup>7</sup> (Ramet 2006:160). Yugoslavia was established as a country consisting of six republics; Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia and Montenegro. In addition, the two autonomous provinces Kosovo and Vojvodina were made in order to reduce Serbia's proportionally bigger territory (Ramet 2006).

Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only republic where one nation group (*narod*) did not constitute an absolute majority. Serbs and Croats in the Bosnian republic could declare themselves in ethnic categories as Serbs and Croats, but the Bosniaks did not have their own category in the Yugoslav system until 1968, and in the population survey in 1971 they could declare themselves as 'Muslims'

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<sup>7</sup> People perceived to be nationalists, among them civilians.

(Mønnesland 2006). Before that they were registered both as Yugoslavs, in 1953, and as 'ethnic Muslims' in 1961. The name of their ethnic category was 'Muslim' (*Musliman*) until after the war in the 1990s, when the term was officially changed to 'Bosniak' (*Bosnjak*) (Mønnesland 2006:302).<sup>8</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina was thus a truly multi-ethnic republic within Yugoslavia where the slogan of 'brotherhood and unity' (*bratsvto i jedinstvo*) stood strong. Inter-ethnic marriages were common in Bosnia, and the republic was often said to be a Yugoslavia in miniature (Rogel 2004).

### **The Bosnian War [1992-1995]**

In 1980, Yugoslavia's sole leader Tito died. Before that, a steady decentralization of Yugoslavia with more power transferred to the republics had been going on since the 1960s (Mønnesland 2006). Tito had planned that Yugoslavia after his death would be governed jointly by all the republics, with a system where the presidency was to circulate between the republics on yearly mandates. The nationalism firmly repressed under Tito's rule began to blossom again through the 1980's, and the country suffered major economic challenges further fueling a desire for change. On June 25 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia after holding referendums (Ramet 2006). Croatia had a Serb population of about 12%, and in particular Croatia's desire to achieve independence was not popular among the Serbs in Belgrade under Slobodan Milosevic's leadership (Mønnesland 2006). The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) under Serb control went into both Slovenia and Croatia, and a war broke out. In Slovenia the war lasted only 10 days, while it lasted until 1995 in Croatia (Ramet 2006). Bosnia and Herzegovina declaring independence in 1992 was even harder to accept for the Serbs because of Bosnia's more than 30% Serb population, and a war broke loose that was to become the bloodiest conflict in Europe since WW2 (Mønnesland 2006).

The war in Bosnia broke out in the spring of 1992, after Bosnia had held a referendum on independence on March 1 the same year (Hoare 2007). They

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<sup>8</sup> Many people in Bosnia, Bosniaks as well as Serbs and Croats, still use the term *Musliman* instead of *Bosnjak* in everyday conversations.

voted for independence, which made tensions rise. On April 1, Serb paramilitary forces went into the city of Bijeljina in northeastern Bosnia, and on April 4 the JNA under Serb control started shelling the capital Sarajevo (Malcolm 2002). The whole country was soon in a state of war. Serbs were fighting Croats and Bosniaks, but the Croats and Bosniaks also ended up fighting each other in certain areas (Mønnesland 2006). The Serbs, with JNA, the Army of the Serb Republic<sup>9</sup> (VRS) and a number of paramilitary groups, took large territories in eastern, northern and northwestern Bosnia proclaimed as *Republika Srpska* (the Serb Republic) (Hoare 2007). The Croats and their army, the Croatian Defense Council (HVO), held territories in the southwestern part (mostly the Hercegovina-area) in their self-proclaimed republic of Herceg-Bosna. The Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) consisting mostly of Bosniaks, but also of people of other ethnicities in favor of a sovereign Bosnia, mostly held territories in central and northwest Bosnia.

It was a complicated war where atrocities were committed on all sides, and it turned into an enormous humanitarian catastrophe where more than a million fled Bosnia and more than half a million became internal refugees, of a pre-war population of about 4.5 million (Bringa 2005:187). Killings of civilians, rape, death camps, mass graves and massacres became regular occurrences throughout the war. The Srebrenica massacre in 1995, where more than 7000 Bosniak men and boys were liquidated over the course of a couple of days by Serb troops led by Ratko Mladic, stands as one of the worst examples (Ramet 2006:459-460). The Bosniaks and Croats managed, with international pressure, to reach the Washington agreement in March 1994, making peace between the Bosniaks and the Croats and establishing the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mønnesland 2006). This did however not mean the end to the war.

Atrocities happened from all sides, and it might be both unfair and complicated to measure it in numbers, since it is a story of personal suffering for all of the

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<sup>9</sup> At that time, the Serb Republic, *Republika Srpska*, was a Bosnian Serb self-proclaimed republic. Today it is one of two official entities in Bosnia.

people involved. However, according to numbers presented in the Belgrade-based journal *Republika* (no. 274-275), 236 500 people lost their lives in Bosnia from 1992-1995: 27 500 Serbs; out of which 6500 were civilians, 31 000 Croats; 17 000 of them civilians, and 164 000 Bosniaks; 126 000 of them civilians (Perica 2002:166). Other sources also operate with similar numbers (see Ramet 2006:466-467). These numbers, in as far as we can trust them, tell us that it was a bloody war where large numbers of civilians and military from all sides lost their lives, but that the Bosniaks suffered the biggest losses both in terms of total losses, but also in percentage of civilians. I give these numbers attention because it has relevance in the process of understanding problems connected to the interpretation of history and ideas about victims and perpetrators that will be discussed later in the thesis.

The war was finally ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement December 14 1995 (Ramet 2006). The agreement established Bosnia as an independent sovereign country, but consisting of two entities; the Bosniak-Croat federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine*) making up 51% of the country's territory, and the Serb Republic (*Republika Srpska*) making up the remaining 49% (Ramet 2006). The peace agreement stopped the war after almost four years of heavy fighting, but it also cemented much of the ethnic cleansing and territorial fighting. The entity boarder lines to a large extent resemble the frontlines at the end of the war (Mønnesland 2006). The Dayton Peace Agreement also established a complicated state structure with a sovereign state, two entities (and later also the Brcko District) and three 'constituent peoples' (ethnic groups) (Bose 2002). The war ended, but as I will argue in later chapters, the political system and structure of the country remains a big obstacle to reconciliation today (see chapter five for an outline of the political structure of Bosnia).

### **War in Brcko**

In socialist Yugoslavia, Brcko was an industrial city and an economic center in the region, because of the harbor (*luka*) on the river Sava (Ferrand 2011). The



river today constitutes the border between Bosnia and Croatia. Prior to the 1990s war, the Brcko municipality had a population of 87,627 with a demographic composition of 44,4% Bosniaks (Muslims), 20,8% Serbs and 25,4% Croats (Mønnesland 2006:400). In the city itself, the Bosniaks were a majority with approximately 55%. Serbs made up 20% and Croats 7%, while the rest were Yugoslavs and others. According to a census carried out in 2013, the Brcko District now has 43,2% Bosniaks, 34,6% Serbs and 20,7% Croats (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016b:54). The total population numbers 83.516. Regarding the demographic structure of the city of Brcko no census results exist, but a Serbian website suggests that by 2010 there were 3-4% Croats, Roma and others, 41-42% Bosniaks and 55-56% Serbs living in the city<sup>10</sup>. By looking at the pre- and post-war numbers we can clearly see that the city and the surrounding area have undergone considerable demographic changes due to the war.

Brcko was occupied by the Serbs in 1992, in spite of having a pre-war Bosniak majority, and Bosniak and Croat women and children were expelled (Jeffrey 2006). Hundreds of men were sent to detention camps, with the biggest one located in the harbor, and many were killed (International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia 2017). Many fled to nearby Bosniak and Croat villages, and people also fled the country. A Bosnian NGO, named 'Research and Documentation Center', operates with a number of 1,658 people killed in Brcko during the war; 911 Bosniaks, 534 of them soldiers, 554 Serbs, 508 of them soldiers and 116 Croats, 111 of them soldiers<sup>11</sup>. This tells us both that Brcko was subject to heavy fighting, and that the pattern from Bosnia in general, where Bosniaks suffered the biggest civilian losses, also applies for Brcko.

Brcko had an extremely important strategic role for the Serbs in the war as it was the heart of the Posavina Corridor (*Posavski koridor*), often referred to as 'The Corridor of Life' by the Serbs themselves (Dahlman & Tuathail 2006:655).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nspm.rs/sudbina-dejtanske-bih-i-republika-srpska/nacionalna-struktura-distrikta-brcko-2010.html?alphabet=l> (acc. 28.09.2016)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=05&nav\\_id=53264](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=05&nav_id=53264) (acc. 27.09.2015)

The corridor connected the western and the eastern parts of the Serb-held territories and thus connected the, at that time, self-declared Serb Republic. The occupation of the city was a part of 'Operation Corridor' which took place in 1992, and out of the 1658 people killed in Brcko during the war, 944 were killed in 1992<sup>12</sup>. This shows that the heaviest fighting in Brcko took place during the process of the Serb occupation. The fact that they fought so hard for a narrow corridor in Brcko underlines the importance the city had for the Serbs. When the war ended with the Dayton Peace agreement, Brcko remained a city populated by Serbs mainly, as it had been during the war. The international community however also recognized the strategic importance of Brcko.



Figure 2: Map showing the Brcko District (blue), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (yellow), and the Republika Srpska (orange). (Credits: Wolpertinger)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=05&nav\\_id=53264](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=05&nav_id=53264) (acc. 27.09.2015)

## **Establishing the Brcko District**

When the Dayton peace agreement was to be signed, Brcko was one of the focal points (Mønnesland 2006). As already mentioned, the Posavina-corridor was important, and the Serbs held a small strip around Brcko while the Bosniaks and Croats had the rest of the prewar municipality (Bieber 2005). At the signing of the Dayton agreement, an arbitrational tribunal was given the task of deciding the future of Brcko, and the city was put under international supervision. The tribunal decided in 1999 through a final conclusion to establish "a new multi-ethnic democratic government to be known as "The Brcko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina" under the exclusive sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Office of the High Representative (OHR) 1999:paragraph 9). The district was established based on the borders of the prewar Brcko municipality.

Florian Bieber (2005:426) describes the administration of the Brcko District as "structured less along ethnic lines than in the rest of BiH." None of the ethnic groups have a veto, and a three-fifths majority is needed in most key decisions. This "prevents the marginalization of either of the two large communities [Bosniaks and Serbs]" (Bieber 2005:426). The final conclusion also encouraged returns of displaced persons. This involved Bosniaks and Croats returning to Brcko, but also for the 26 000 displaced Serb from all over Bosnia living in Brcko, and often in houses rightfully belonging to Croats and Bosniaks, to return to their prewar localities if possible (OHR 1999:paragraph 22-31). The Bosniak returns in the years following after the district was established were successful, Croat returns not to the same extent, while a large number of the displaced Serbs living in Brcko chose to stay (Dahlman & Tuathail 2006).

One of the arguments later in the thesis is that even though Brcko represents something special in the Bosnian context, it is not immune to the problems seen elsewhere in the country. The arbitrary final conclusion on the contested Brcko area aimed to establish a functioning multi-ethnic democratic system in which one ethnic group cannot bloc important decisions. However, Dahlman & Tuathail (2006:671) argue that in spite of the special system of governance, successful

minority returns, and multiethnic visions, Brcko remains contested and victim to nationalist politics, like the rest of the country.

## **Conclusion**

Through this outline of Bosnia's turbulent history, I have intended to show how the three major ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, came into being as ethnic groups, and how they have been involved in contestation and conflict repeatedly. It is the religious and imperial contestation from earlier times, paired with the ideological contestation of modern times, that makes Bosnia the ethno-religious mosaic that it is today. The historical developments outlined in this chapter are relevant when analyzing reconciliation among the youth of contemporary Brcko. As outlined in later chapters, inter-ethnic relations and interactions among youth are influenced by different interpretations of the past. Moreover, the political system of contemporary Bosnia is also highly affected by and concerned with the past. I therefore argue that ethnic identities and inter-ethnic relations cannot be fully understood without relating them to Bosnia's history.

## 5. Political Background



**Figure 3: Election campaign poster in Brcko for one of the major Bosniak parties. The slogan reads: “A successful Bosniak for a strong Bosnia and Herzegovina”. (Photo by author)**

### Introduction

The Dayton Peace Agreement brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina, a peace that granted the major ethnic groups certain powers and rights to given territories and to political participation. Contemporary Bosnia exists as a sovereign country, but the relationship between state, ethnic groups and political power is complicated. This chapter will outline the political system of post-war Bosnia, which is characterized by ethnic power-sharing and an embeddedness of ethnicity in politics. Furthermore, it will discuss some contemporary challenges and issues relevant in order to understand the dynamics between the different ethnic groups and the potential for reconciliation. Social interaction related to ethnic identity and ethnic divisions cannot be understood apart from the political and social realities that people live in and are influenced by. Thus the political system and contemporary issues in Bosnia constitute a necessary backdrop to the analysis of concrete social interaction in chapter six, seven and eight.

### **After Dayton: Ethnic Power-sharing in Bosnia**

The Dayton Peace Agreement (signed 14. December 1995) ended the war, and created the new constitution of the country, thus officially establishing Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign state. At the same time, it brought a complex political structure in which the three Constituent Peoples<sup>13</sup>, the Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, share power and govern the country jointly. The way the three Peoples govern the country is characterized by compromise and cumbersome political processes where decisions are hard to reach, and often vetoed by the different ethnic groups' nationalist oriented leaders. These nationalist leaders view decisions based on compromise as threats to their own group's "vital national interests" (Keil 2015:202). In addition, corruption and nepotism are widespread issues in contemporary Bosnia.

The major political parties of the country are ethnic in character, e.g. the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Croat Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) or the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) (European Parliament 2015). These parties are represented by politicians belonging to the ethnic group of the given party, and they have a clear ethnic agenda. For instance, the Serb and Croat parties often strive for increased self-governance and even independence from Bosnia (particularly in the Serb case). Though pro-Bosnian and supporters of an integrated Bosnia, the major Bosniak party, the SDA, is a conservative Bosniak and Muslim party founded by Alija Izetbegovic, the president of war-time Bosnia in the 1990s (Perica 2002). Although multi-ethnic political parties do exist in contemporary Bosnia, like the Social Democratic Party (SDP) or the Democratic Front (DF), they attract voters to a lesser extent than the ethnic parties.

### **One Country, Two Entities, Three Constituent Peoples**

As mentioned in chapter four, the Dayton Peace Agreement established Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country consisting of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Federation) with a predominantly Bosniak and Croat population and the Republika Srpska (RS), with a predominantly Serb population

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<sup>13</sup> The three Constituent Peoples are what I throughout the thesis term the three (major) ethnic groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(Bose 2002). Later on, the multi-ethnic Brcko District was established, and while being part of both entities, the district has a certain degree of autonomy (Mønnesland 2006). In addition, the Federation consists of ten cantons, and both entities consist of a larger number of municipalities. Furthermore, there is a complex structure of different ethnic quotas and electoral laws ensuring all three Constituent Peoples' political participation. Certain domains of government are the responsibility of state level institutions, e.g. foreign policy, trade, military and budget, while many domains, e.g. judiciary, education and police are on entity-level, and also on cantonal level in the Federation (Kasapovic 2005). Bosnia also has a foreign High Representative who leads the Office of the High Representative (OHR), an institution which monitors "implementation of civilian aspects of the [Dayton] Peace Agreement" and upholds powers to for instance remove "public officials who violate legal commitments and the Dayton Peace Agreement" (OHR 2017). OHR exceeded its powers and removed officials frequently in the first decade after the war, but serves today more of a watchdog role with little intervention (Banning 2014).

The executive political powers on the state level consist of the Presidency and the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bose 2002). The Presidency consists of one Bosniak, one Serb and one Croat, who are elected for four years, with the chairmanship of the Presidency rotating between the three presidents every eight months. The Council of Ministers consists of the different ministers of the country, who are appointed by the leader of the council (which in effect is the prime minister of the country). As of 2017, the Council has four representatives from Bosniak parties, three from Croat and three from Serb parties (Vijece Ministara Bosne i Hercegovine 2017). There are two legislative bodies on the state level, the House of Representatives, and the House of Peoples (Bose 2002). Members in the House of Representatives are elected based on entity proportionality, with one third of representatives elected from the RS and two thirds from the Federation (regardless of ethnicity) (Kasapovic 2005). In the House of Peoples, five Bosniaks and five Croats (two thirds) are elected by the House of Peoples in the parliament of the Federation, while five Serbs (one third) are elected by the National Assembly of the RS. To further complicate the picture,

the entities, cantons and the Brcko District have their own governments and legislative and executive powers, with their own quotas ensuring political participation of the three major ethnic groups.

The electoral laws of the country are intricate, and in the general elections the voters choose both their Bosniak, Croat or Serb candidate for the presidency, and they vote for (mainly ethnic) parties which constitutes the election of candidates to the House of Representatives, where 28 candidates will be elected with votes from the Federation and 14 with votes from the RS (Bose 2005). The members of the presidency are thus voted in as a Serb, a Bosniak and a Croat president. The 15 members of the House of Peoples are similarly appointed (not elected) as five Serbs, five Bosniaks and five Croats by the Federation House of Peoples and the RS National Assembly. Only in the House of Representatives are representatives elected without specific ethnic quotas after the principle of proportional representation, but as most major parties are ethnic, also these representatives are in effect elected with basis in their ethnicity (Kasapovic 2005).

### **The Bosnian Constitution - Violating Human Rights?**

The system of ethnic quotas in politics, ensuring Serb, Bosniak and Croat participation, not only gives ethnicity a central role in political processes both for voters and politicians. It also excludes people of other ethnic backgrounds than any of the three 'Constituent Peoples' the opportunity to hold high political positions like president or membership in the House of Peoples (Claridge 2010). In 2006, the Bosnian Jew Jakob Finci and the Bosnian Roma Dervo Sejdic lodged a case against the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina because of what they saw as discriminatory practices in the constitution and electoral laws of the country (European Court of Human Rights 2009). The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg in December 2009 deemed the system discriminatory whereby Bosnians of other ethnicities than the 'Constituent Peoples' are not eligible to become president or a member of the House of Peoples (ECHR 2009:3-4).



It remains paradoxical that the Bosnian constitution was deemed discriminatory in an international court, since the constitution to a large degree was constructed by the international community in the Dayton Agreement. On the other hand, this is an example of how the Dayton Agreement served a vital function stopping the war, but at the same time was not designed as a lasting solution. It was rather a “product of wrangling” among the Serb, Croat and Bosnian wartime leaders in 1995, and has proved dysfunctional (Ramet 2006:494). In spite of the ECHR verdict, concrete constitutional measures have not been taken to solve the Sejdic-Finci issue, even though it has on more occasions been mentioned as a pre-condition for Bosnian candidacy to the European Union (Gavric, Banovic & Barreiro 2013). This demonstrates a lack of will among the politicians of the country to give up any powers and privileges on behalf of their ethnic groups as well as skepticism to make significant changes to the Dayton Agreement, an agreement which brought peace to the country.

### **Anti-Government Protests (2014)**

In February 2014, anti-government protests started in the northern Bosnian city of Tuzla where thousands of workers in four formerly state-owned companies were made redundant when the companies were privatized and then filed for bankruptcy<sup>14</sup>. The protests soon spread across the Federation and to the Brcko District. Large groups of people gathered in protest. In some cities, protesters clashed with the police, and government buildings were set on fire in both Tuzla and Sarajevo. The protests were not ethnically motivated, and gathered thousands of Bosnians dissatisfied with the current government and the way the country had been ruled since the war<sup>15</sup>. After a period of protesting, so called ‘public plenums’ were established in many cities as an initiative to come up with alternatives to the current way the country was governed<sup>16</sup>. The enthusiasm around the plenums was significant in the beginning, and some cantonal

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/07/bosnia-herzegovina-wave-violent-protests> (acc. 18.01.2017)

<sup>15</sup> <https://florianbieber.org/2014/02/09/is-change-coming-finally-thoughts-on-the-bosnian-protests/>(acc. 18.01.2017)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.insightonconflict.org/blog/2015/07/bosnias-plenums-missed-opportunity/> (acc. 18.01.2017)

governments resigned, but the engagement around protests and plenums eventually faded away (Stiks and Horvat 2014). Afterwards, the political situation in Bosnia has remained more or less unchanged. The protests represented a concrete effort and wish for change among the population of Bosnia, but turned out to be unsuccessful in terms of concrete changes in the governmental structures of the country. The protests constitute a relevant backdrop when I, in later chapters, talk about people who express a wish for change regarding ethnic divisions or the economic situation. The point is that even though many people feel a strong need for change, it is hard to achieve change within a system of clearly defined political structures and with positions within the political system possessed by politicians who are influenced by corruption and nationalism.

## **Conclusion**

The administrative and governmental structures of post-war Bosnia are highly complex both in regards to the many levels of government as well as with the ethnic quotas for election to the different governmental bodies. This system was mainly created in the Dayton Peace Agreement, which must be seen as a compromise that brought the different ethnic groups of Bosnia to peace in 1995. Today, the agreement makes political decision-making unnecessarily complicated and manifests ethnic belonging as the main principle of government. The constitution of the country thus works as a structural obstacle to reconciliation among the citizens. The complex and fragmented levels of administration in combination with ethnic quotas in political institutions has given the leading politicians from the three major ethnic groups the opportunity to continuously contest ethnic relations and matters related to the 1990s war. In effect, this encourages and confirms relationships of division between people belonging to different ethnic groups. Moreover, by building the political structures around the three major ethnic groups and giving them ethnic quotas for political positions, the other ethnic minority groups of Bosnia are not eligible for certain political positions, as became evident in the Sejdic-Finci case in the ECHR. When analyzing social interaction among my informants in Brcko these

are all issues that are important to keep in mind, in order to understand why people choose and interact as they do.

## 6. Mixed and Divided Communities

### Introduction

This chapter will provide an account of my informants and the contextual spaces in which our interaction played out. In so doing, it will present two groups of informants, the first group being ethnically mixed while the latter consists of Bosniaks. In addition, a third group will be discussed. The members of this group are self-identified *alternativci* or an 'alternative community', a group of people characterized by identifying along other lines ethnic. By exploring these groups' interactions across and within ethnically defined contexts and in situations where ethnicity is seen as less important, this chapter will analyze how ethnic boundaries are maintained, negotiated and contested among Brcko's youth. It will also explore which areas of society are more and less ethnically contested. Ethnic identity must undeniably be understood within the wider context of the society in which they function because the society structures and influences people's understandings of identity and, consequently, the possible negotiations and contestations of identities. By juxtaposing these groups' practices with their perceptions of ethnicity, I will focus on how societal structures affect young people's interactions and explore the potentials of influencing the structures.

It is important to emphasize that the groups of friends, presented in this chapter as a mixed and mono-ethnic group, are analytical categories that enable comparison and analysis of interactions. The aim is not to generalize or present these groups as absolute categories that divide the youth of Brcko into either mixed or mono-ethnic friendship groups. As ethnicity is contextual and relational, the members of the mixed group were involved in mono-ethnic relations in other contexts, and the members of the mono-ethnic Bosniak friendship group also interacted with people of other ethnicities in other contexts.

## **A Mixed Group of Friends**

My fieldwork consisted of numerous activities and events that involved meeting a large number of people. Among the many people I encountered, one group became particularly important as I interacted with this group almost daily throughout my fieldwork. This group consists of Neven, who is of Serb ethnicity, Nihad, who is a Bosniak, and Dino, who is half Serb and half Bosniak. Wishing to explore inter-ethnic relations among youth, the three men of different ethnicities became important to my research. Neven, Dino and Nihad made up the core of the group, but it could at times extend to include other friends of theirs. Typical activities when spending time with Neven, Dino and Nihad ranged from going for coffee or beer in the city, going to betting shops (*kladionice*), spending time in one of our homes, sitting in the city park or down by the river Sava, or attending workshops at Brcko's Youth Center. I also spent time with them on special occasions. Together, we celebrated May 1 (the international workers' day), attended a Beer-festival in the neighboring city of Bijeljina, the Day of the District concert, Dino and Nihad's graduations from university, two biker-festivals (*motorijade*) and celebrated religious holidays (Muslim and Orthodox Christian). To get a better understanding of the group dynamics, the main members of the group will be introduced with an emphasis on some aspects of their lives and identities which I believe are relevant for the following analysis.

Neven, a Serb in his late twenties, works at the Brcko Youth Center for one of the local NGOs. He began as a volunteer, but now receives a small payment working as mentor for foreign volunteers. I met Neven on my second day in Brcko, when I was given a tour of the Youth Center by my contact person in the organization where I was volunteering. At the center, I met Neven and a few international volunteers briefly, who despite our short introduction invited me out for some beers the same evening. This evening I spoke with Neven about reconciliation and ethnic relations, topics which he seemed to be open about. I asked if we could continue having conversations and was happy when Neven suggested meeting for a coffee. The first time I met Neven he seemed friendly, but little did I know that he would become my closest friend and informant. Besides being important to my research, Neven became a trusted friend whom I could confide

in and spend time with. In many ways, Neven widened my field (of informants) by introducing me to a diverse group of people as well as inviting me whenever there was an event taking place. Soon after we met, he told me that he would “take me wherever” and introduce me to people in order to help me with my research.

Neven and his family are originally from the Sarajevo area where his family has lived for generations. After the war, this area fell under the Bosniak-Croat Federation in the Dayton Peace Agreement, and Neven and his family moved to Brcko. Neven recall going to school during the war in the outskirts of Sarajevo, likewise he remembers his whole extended family collectively leaving their homes, and moving into empty houses in Brcko which Bosniaks had left during the war. When the Brcko District was established and many Bosniaks returned, he and his family moved out of the houses rightfully belonging to Bosniaks and into a newly constructed neighborhood named Ilicka, built to house the Serbs who came to Brcko during or after the war.

Neven defines himself as a Serb and Orthodox Christian, but he does not go to church except on holidays like Christmas. In sports, he supports Serbia and pays minimal attention to Bosnia. His historical and political perspectives are mainly pro-Serbian, characterized by a strong nostalgia towards his family’s roots in pre-war Sarajevo. He admitted to me that he was more Serb nationalistic oriented earlier in his life, before he started volunteering at the Youth Center. I experienced Neven to be genuinely interested in meeting new people and making new friends, be it Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs or foreigners. To meet people of all backgrounds is also a large part of his job at the Youth Center. I once asked Neven if he had any preferences for the ethnic belonging of a possible future spouse, to which he answered: “It is not important to me what ethnicity my future wife has, but I would probably meet resentment from my family if I find someone not Serb”.

Another key informant is Dino who is in his mid-twenties and one of Neven's best friends. Although he is not working or volunteering at the Youth Center, he

is part of the wider volunteer community of locals and international volunteers. He finished a degree in economics at a private university during my stay in Brcko. As previously mentioned, he is from a mixed family background and his family lived in Brcko before the war, but stayed in the Bosniak majority village Celic some 20 kilometers outside Brcko during and after the war. They returned to Brcko some time after the District was established, and are living in a Serb majority neighborhood at present. Dino has a pro-Bosnian attitude towards sports, history and politics, but does not discard Serbia. In fact, his favorite athlete is the Serb tennis player Novak Djokovic. Dino orients himself towards a united multi-ethnic Bosnia, something that is understandable, as he has both Bosniak and Serb family ties.

Coming from a mixed Bosniak-Serb family, Dino defines as a Bosnian, resenting to define as either Bosniak or Serb. Regarding religion, Dino said that he is not religious, and does not care much about religion. Still he celebrates Muslim and Orthodox Christian holidays with the respective Muslim and Orthodox Christian sides of his family. He describes himself almost as a chameleon that could go to Belgrade and emphasize his Serb sides, and go to Sarajevo and boast his Bosnian identity. Whenever I told him about speaking to people who spoke negatively of reconciliation and inter-ethnic relations he would be deeply disappointed and tell me how these people were narrow minded.

Dino's friend Nihad is another central informant. Nihad knows Dino from University, and he is also a part of the community around the Youth Center. As a Bosniak and practicing Muslim, Nihad does not drink alcohol or eat pork, and expresses that he would like to find a future partner of Bosniak ethnicity, and preferably a practicing Muslim. He is open about the fact that he is pressured by his family to find a Muslim partner. Nihad lives in a Bosniak majority neighborhood on the outskirts of Brcko. He used to live in a village in Bosniak-Croat controlled areas within the old Brcko Municipality during and for some years after the war, and he moved to his current neighborhood some years ago. Nihad attends workshops at the Youth Center regularly and also volunteers at Brcko's main library.

Until a couple of years ago, Nihad did not know many people in Brcko, let alone many Serbs. Then he started university and attended a big internationally funded project at the Youth Center where he met Dino. Since then, he has been spending more time in the Brcko city center where he goes for coffee with friends, attends workshops, or volunteers at the library. He told me that his biggest dream after finishing university is to find a decent job and receive a salary. Nihad is open to the prospect of staying in Bosnia, as long as he can find a decent job. If he cannot find work, he will consider relocating to a country like the UK, Australia or the United Arab Emirates, if possible.

### **"Here is Reconciliation for You"**

Neven, Dino and Nihad have been good friends for some years, but not since childhood. On one of the first instances I spent time with this group, we went to a local pub and Neven, Dino and I were drinking draught beer, while Nihad was having sparkling water. They were interested to know what my research was about, and I explained that the theme was reconciliation among young people in Brcko. To this, Nihad replied: "Here is reconciliation for you, I am Bosniak, Neven is Serb and Dino is..." Dino interrupted: "I am mixed, my mother is Serb and my father Muslim (Bosniak)". I understood this as an attempt to show me that reconciliation and ethnically mixed groups of friends exist in Brcko. To spend time with the three of them was thus an interesting outset to get insight into reconciliation processes and inter-ethnic relationships among youth. Neven, Dino and Nihad became friends as much as informants over the six months I spent in Brcko, and I had the opportunity to make several visits to Brcko and spend time with them while residing in Sarajevo in the spring of 2016.

### **Joking Relationships**

I observed that joking was an important feature of this mixed group's dynamics, and some of the jokes were related to ethnicity and religion while other jokes were not. The concept of 'joking relationships' refers to how joking can play a central part in structuring social relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). The people involved in these relationships often stand in a particularly potent



relation to each other, and the joking functions as a mediation and stabilization of their social bonds. In particular the jokes related to ethnicity and religion can be seen as a strategy to handle the differences in ethnicity between the members. In Radcliffe-Brown's (1940:195) terminology, the joking within the ethnically mixed group is a 'symmetrical relation' where the three friends all make jokes on each other's behalf. One example of joking is how Neven and Dino joked with Nihad, who because of his Muslim faith does not consume alcohol. They said things like "you are on your second bottle of sparkling water, take it easy or else it will go straight to your head". Another example is how Neven the day after an argument about the 1990s war jokingly called Dino a Bosniak nationalist and Dino called Neven a Serb nationalist, referring to their different views of the past.

Not all jokes were based on ethnic differences, and to joke with each other seemed to be a way of confirming the relation between the three of them. To be a victim of jokes from the others could mean that they regard you as a friend and a member of the group. One example of a joke not related to ethnicity is that whenever someone received a text or a call from a woman who was not a family member, the others would be quick to call the person *papucar* (lit. slipper, a person who is henpecked). At the beginning, I was neither a victim to jokes, nor did I feel in a position to make jokes. As our relation grew stronger I was called *papucar*, my style of clothing was made fun of, and I even started making jokes myself. The fact that I became victim of the jokes was a sign of acceptance. A standing joke to the very end of my stay was to degrade my research, by telling me that I was lazy and not doing anything all day, just drinking coffee and talking to people. Joking is a way of building and confirming social relations, both to confirm who are accepted as friends, but also to normalize and disarm differences in ethnicity and possible conflicts.

### **Brcko's 'Alternative Community' and the Youth Center Volunteers**

When I went out in the evenings with Neven, Dino and Nihad, we alternated between four different pubs. These pubs differed from most of the other cafés and pubs in Brcko by the fact that they played rock music in English and were

more worn down and less polished than most other places. In these places we often met up with volunteers or employees from the Youth Center, both locals of all ethnicities as well as German and British volunteers. In the pubs there were also other people, and many of them describe themselves *alternativci* (alternative people). Some of the *alternativci* are also connected to the Youth Center as volunteers or employees, some have been active there earlier in their lives, while others have no connection to the Youth Center. This mix of international volunteers, local volunteers and NGO-employees and *alternativci* that frequented these pubs makes up a small community, at least within the context of the pubs.

Some of the *alternativci* always spent time in one particular pub, while others alternated between the four different pubs. I did not hear all of them refer to themselves as *alternativci*, but they all seemed to unite around genres of music and a style of clothing that differs from what is observed in most other cafés and pubs in Brcko. The city center of Brcko is scattered with cafés and pubs, probably around 30 of them. The vast majority play regional pop music or the Balkans specific *turbofolk* music. In the weekends in particular, most people that go to these “mainstream” places are dressed up. Women typically wear high heels, a dress or jeans and a blouse, and a considerable amount of makeup, while men often wear jeans and shirts. Most of the *alternativci* go to the cafés and pubs playing rock music, and dress more or less the same regardless of weekday or the time of the day. This tendency of dressing would typically include flat shoes both for men and women (often Converse All Star), wide pants and t-shirts (often a rock band t-shirt) or a flannel shirt.

My interaction with the *alternativci* mostly consisted of informal conversations when spending time in the same locations as them when out with my closer informants. However, a few of them showed interest in my project, and we had conversations about reconciliation and their experiences of living in Brcko. Some of them defined as *metalci* or *blekeri* (‘metal heads’ or ‘black metal heads’). These people dressed mostly in black clothes, like for instance band t-shirts, had long hair and had a passion for the music genre metal. Again, I would like to underline

that within the grouping of people I have termed *alternativci* there were variations in style of clothing, interest in music, and frequency of visits to the pubs. What did seem to be characteristic of these groupings of people and of the pubs they frequented was that they were ethnically mixed (divided and mixed arenas will be outlined later in this chapter).

### **A Mono-Ethnic Group of Friends**

The last two months of my fieldwork I spent time with a group of young Bosniaks. These Bosniaks knew who Neven, Dino and Nihad were, but were not their friends. This meant that I would not spend time with the two groups at the same time. When drinking coffee with the Bosniaks in the city, Neven, Dino and Nihad would often pass by, on their way to a café themselves. When this was the case, the three would come over to us, greet me and the other guys with a handshake and exchange a few words, before moving on. I did not experience any negative attitudes from the mixed group for spending time with the Bosniak group instead of with them. At times, I would go on to meet up with the mixed group after being with the Bosniaks, and this seemed unproblematic to both groups.

I was introduced to the Bosniak group through Dzenan, a Bosniak and practicing Muslim in his late twenties. Dzenan works at a marketplace outside Brcko, he goes to the mosque five times a day, and he frequents the city's nightclubs and pubs in the evenings. I met Dzenan in one of the alternative pubs one Friday night in May when drinking beer and playing darts with Neven and a couple of international volunteers. I told Dzenan about my interest in reconciliation and ethnicity and we started conversing, and he elaborated that he is a practicing Muslim and a Bosniak, and that he respects people regardless of ethnicity and religious belief. He even invited me to come with him to the mosque the next week, and meet some of his friends. Eager to both meet new people and finally visit a mosque in Brcko, I accepted the offer.

I met Dzenan the week after and went to Brcko's White Mosque, one of the six mosques in the city. I got a tour of the Mosque and sat at the back while a dozen

people attended the Tuesday afternoon prayer. Afterwards, we met a couple of Dzenan's friends who are also Bosniaks, but who did not attend the prayer. Two of the men are Bosniaks, but non-believers, while the last one belongs to a Sufi-mosque in Brcko. We went to one of the Bosniak owned cafés in the city center, where we over coffee and cigarettes talked about topics such as politics and history in Bosnia and Norway. I got to know the two non-believers, Nermin and Haris, well, and I often met with Dzenan, Nermin and Haris over the last months of my stay in Brcko. I would meet them either around noon or in the evening, and we always drank coffee. Often other Bosniaks joined us, and on Fridays after the noon-prayer at the mosque the group was always bigger. The café visit on Fridays seemed to be almost institutionalized among these Bosniaks.

The Friday café visit took place in the same café in the main square of Brcko almost every Friday after the noon-prayer. It would normally number between five and ten people. The people present were without exceptions male Bosniaks, but not all of them were religious. Examples of such are Nermin who identifies as atheist and Haris who identifies as agnostic. Since Nermin and Haris did not go to the mosque, I would typically meet them, go to the café, and then wait for the rest to come from the prayer and join us. Although this is an exclusively Bosniak group of friends, my presence did not seem to bother them, quite the opposite. Nermin and Haris are both students of political science and passionately interested in European history and politics. They asked numerous questions about Norway, and I asked them questions about reconciliation, inter-ethnic relations and the history of Bosnia. I drank coffee with the group during Ramadan, both in the daytime and in the evening. During the daytime café visits Nermin, Haris and I drank coffee, while Dzenan sat with us, but was fasting and thus refraining from food and drinks. In the evenings during Ramadan the group was at its biggest, often numbering close to ten people.

This mono ethnic group of friends appears to view their ethnic belonging as being one of the main aspects uniting them as friends. This stands in contrast to the ethnically mixed group's emphasis on common interest as being more important than ones' ethnic affiliation on the formation of friendships. The

degree of religiosity in the mono-ethnic friendship group varied, but they all define themselves as Bosniaks. It is important to note that this mono-ethnic Bosniak group was just one of many situations the members of the group engaged in, and that most of them spent time with people of other ethnicities on other occasions.

### **The Shared Silences**

During my fieldwork and my interaction and conversations with youth belonging to both mixed and mono-ethnic groups of friends, I experienced a difference in the topics discussed, which in turn affected the dynamics between the people within a group. The main argument is that it is easier to talk and have consensus about historical topics in a group of people who have the same ethnicity, than in an ethnically mixed group. An ethnic group according to Barth “makes up a field of communication and interaction” (Barth 1969:11). It would follow from this that people having different ethnicities, are influenced by different fields of communication and that their interaction is shaped by this.

A characteristic of the interaction in the ethnically mixed group is that Dino, Neven and Nihad do not touch upon topics of history and in particular the war in Bosnia in the 1990s. The members of the mixed group talk about music, sports, movies, women, travelling, parties, food, love experiences, cars, economic crisis and unemployment and to a certain extent religion. However, they never touch upon elements of history where the ethnic groups of Bosnia have been involved in conflict. The fact that these young people of different ethnicity avoid certain topics of discussion could be explained through Bourdieu’s (1977[1972]:169) concept of *heterodoxy*. Growing up in the same city, going to school together and belonging to the same generation the young people of different ethnicity have internalized much of the same *habitus*. But even though there is an overlap of *habitus* across ethnicity, there exists heterodoxy when it comes to perspectives on the war. On one occasion Dino, Neven and I ended up talking about the 1990s war. This displayed deeply conflicting views of the past, and ended in an emotionally loaded argument that will be discussed later.

A legitimate question is why Brcko youth would talk about the war at all, a war they can barely remember. However, representations of the past are still highly present in Bosnian public culture and politics. To a large extent, the youth of Brcko share the same popular-cultural references, speak very similar languages and most of them are facing an uncertain future as regards employment, regardless of ethnicity. They do however belong to different ethnic groups, and are exposed to different versions of the past at home, in ethnically divided media or in the education system (see chapter seven and eight for further discussions). My point is that what I observed and encountered when spending time with the mixed group was that they were consciously avoiding controversial topics in order not to create negative energy and conflict within the group. Both Neven and Dino were interested in history and in current political developments, but refrained from talking about such topics within the ethnically mixed group.

Stefansson (2010) explores co-existence between Bosniak returnees and the majority Serb population in Banja Luka, the capital of Republika Srpska. He observed that Bosniak returnees in Banja Luka were interacting and living in peaceful co-existence with Serb neighbors, but that this co-existence “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). In interaction between Bosniaks and Serbs certain sensitive topics were avoided, more specifically “questions about cause of the war, responsibility and guilt, war crimes and the legitimacy of the Republika Srpska and the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Stefansson 2010:69). My informants belong to a younger generation, and have few memories of the war, but they still avoid sensitive topics when in an ethnically mixed company. This corresponds with what Palmberger (2016:237-238) in the Herzegovinian city of Mostar describes as a tendency to silence memories and war-related topics within, what she terms, the ‘Post-Yugoslav’ generation.

In contrast, in the mono-ethnic Bosniak group centered on the Friday café visit there was no lack of discussion of history and the recent war. I argue that such topics are avoided in the ethnically mixed group, because the members of the

group have conflicting views. Moreover, to talk about history and war in this group would create heterodoxy (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:169), a state where conflicting discourses are confronted. When the topics are as sensible as the recent war, such confrontation can possibly be destabilizing for an ethnically mixed group. In the Bosniak group the members had the same ethnicity and views on history were not conflicting. This meant that within this group there was no intent or strategy not to talk about the same topics.

I spent much time with these Bosniaks in June and July 2015, and July was a month deeply connected to the war in Bosnia, as several important incidents occurred during this month. July 11 2015 marked the 20-year commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre. The UN Security Council held a vote July 8 on whether to term the massacre in Srebrenica genocide, something Russia (traditionally a Serbian allied) vetoed against.<sup>17</sup> On July 10, trucks transporting 136 newly identified Bosniak victims from the Srebrenica massacre from Sarajevo to the memorial center in Srebrenica were thrown stones at in the RS village Han Pijesak by local Serbs.<sup>18</sup> On the commemoration July 11, which took place in the Potocari Memorial Centre in Srebrenica, the Serbian Prime minister Aleksandar Vucic had thrown stones at him.<sup>19</sup> This occurrence disrupted the commemoration ceremony as the Prime Minister had to flee the ceremony to ensure his safety. As the stones that were thrown at the Prime Minister were most likely thrown by people of Bosniak ethnicity, it was interesting to see how my informants in the mono-ethnic Bosniak friendship group perceived these events.

In my interaction with the Bosniak group, we spent much time talking about these events. Both the Muslims and the atheist and the agnostic of the group seemed to agree upon certain things. They were disappointed by the fact that Russia vetoed terming the Srebrenica massacre genocide, and they condemned

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33445772> (acc. 15.11.2016).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.avaz.ba/clanak/186190/truck-carrying-the-remains-of-srebrenica-victims-attacked-in-han-pijesak?url=clanak/186190/truck-carrying-the-remains-of-srebrenica-victims-attacked-in-han-pijesak> (acc. 15.11.2016).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3157356/Serbian-Prime-Minister-forced-flee-20th-anniversary-Srebrenica-massacre-STONED-angry-Bosnian-mob.html> (acc. 17.11.2016).

the act of throwing stones at trucks transporting Bosniak civilian bodies. The Serbian Prime Minister, who had stones thrown at him, should in their opinion, never have come to the ceremony. According to them, he should not have come given the fact that he was a former member of the nationalist Serb Radical Party and had in the 1990s made some brutal statements about killing Bosniaks. At the same time they said that the stones were thrown by *budale* (idiots/fools) who wanted to raise ethnic tensions, and they emphasized that mothers of Srebrenica victims had greeted Vucic earlier in the ceremony.

In the Bosniak group it was taken for granted that Srebrenica was a genocide or that Serbs had to take a larger responsibility for the war. These topics were avoided in the mixed group, because they seemed to know that they did not share the same opinions about such topics. However, Dino, who is half Bosniak half Serb and holds overtly a pro-Bosnian view of history, brought up the incident with the Prime Minister when I was alone with him. He laughed at Vucic and asked rhetorically: "What did he expect, coming to Srebrenica?". Being alone with Neven, who is Serb, on another occasion I brought up the topic, but Neven shrugged and did not seem to be willing to talk about it. I had the opportunity to hear Neven's view of Srebrenica and Serb war action on a later occasion, which will be outlined later in this section. In ethnic terms "a dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies (...) a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest" (Barth 1969:15). I did not experience that the friends in the mixed group perceived each other as strangers, but they were clear on the fact that they had different ethnicities and thereby different views of certain topics. Following from this, the war was not an area of "common understanding and mutual interest" (Barth 1969:15) for the mixed friendship group, as it was for the Bosniak group.

### **When the Shared Silences are Broken**

As mentioned, the mixed group of friends generally never talked about the 1990s war in Bosnia and other controversial historical topics. There was however one exception to this, and one evening it became evident why these topics were



usually avoided. One July evening, Neven and Dino visited my apartment to drink beer and the local plum brandy *sljivovica* together, as we had done on many occasions previously. This particular evening was part of Eid, the Muslim holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan. Nihad was therefore not present, since he was spending time with his family during the religious holidays of Islam. Usually when drinking at my apartment we would later go down to the city center to pubs and/or nightclubs, but this particular time we just got to the city park, half way from my apartment to the city center. We bought a couple of two-liter bottles of beer at a close by gas station, and we sat at some benches in the park, drinking and talking about various topics, as we had done many times. Sometime into the first bottle of beer a conversation took place that I had not encountered earlier, nor was I to encounter later in my fieldwork.

I cannot recall exactly what sparked off the heated conversation, but we somehow entered the topic of the WW2 Serb Nationalist Chetnik leader Draza Mihajlovic, and how he was rehabilitated in Serbian official history<sup>20</sup>. Neven said something in defense of Mihajlovic and Dino sparked off at this. The discussion became more and more heated and they started to discuss the war in the 1990s, while I was sitting there perplexed by the situation. Neven was expressing strong pro-Serb attitudes, which for me seemed controversial in light of what I myself have learnt about the war. He claimed that the Srebrenica massacre was not a genocide and that the Serbian general Ratko Mladic was a hero, rather than a war criminal. He defended the more than 3-year Serb siege of Sarajevo by saying that this was self-defense for the Serbs to avoid an Islamic Republic in the heart of Bosnia. Dino with his pro-Bosnian attitudes meant that Serbia had to take responsibility for the war, and was deeply offended, and it became a personal conflict.

They started attacking each other verbally, and Dino threatened to end his and Neven's friendship several times. Dino said: "I do not understand why I am friends with you, when you have attitudes like this". He repeated this two or

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<sup>20</sup> The Belgrade Higher Court in May 2015 annulled a communist era verdict from 1946 sentencing Draza Mihajlovic to death.

three times during the argument. This situation exemplifies the deeply divided views of the past among people of different ethnicities, and resonates with what is termed heterodoxy by Bourdieu (1977[1972]:169). There exists no official and undisputed version of history in Bosnia, and the war in the 1990s is a topic particularly vulnerable to contestation. Neven and Dino's heated discussion, in which they both tried to convince the other that one's own version of history was the legitimate one, shows an evident heterodoxy regarding history on the basis of ethnicity. Furthermore, this situation shows why avoiding controversial topics is a normal strategy in ethnically mixed group of friends, as Neven and Dino's visit to the "universe of argument" (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:168) appeared to influence their friendship negatively.

In the middle of the argument I found myself in an uncomfortable situation. I was sitting there with two of my closest informants, who had also grown to become my best friends in Brcko. I felt highly uncomfortable that they were having a big argument and worried that this event and my part in it might lead to the end of their long-lasting friendship. I felt that I had part of the responsibility, as they had become more reflective on matters of history and reconciliation because of my presence and research. After the argument had lasted for some time they eventually managed, without having achieved any mutual agreement to the topic discussed, to end the argument. We decided to leave for home, and they left together and walked in the opposite direction to me. After walking about 50 meters I turned around and saw that Dino and Neven were walking away with their arms over each other's shoulders, and they looked like they were best friends again. This eased my heart as I walked back home.

The next day we met for coffee and everything was like before, at least it seemed. The way they dealt with the whole incident was through their joking relationship, where differences in ethnicity and opinions are handled through jokes. They would jokingly call each other nationalist, Chetnik and other ideologically loaded words. The mood between Neven and Dino and in the group was good, but when I spoke with them separately in person or on Facebook they would continue to preach their side of the arguments from the park. They sent

me links to online articles “proving” their views, and they both seemed eager to show me that what they had been claiming in the park had its roots in reality.

The whole incident in the park and the aftermath stands out as one of the most important events in my fieldwork. It gave me insight into the dynamics of an ethnically mixed friendship and the problematic relationship between history and memory in post-war Bosnia. Neven and Dino’s different understandings must be seen in light of the way different narratives are produced in Bosnia on a higher political level. Public discourses of history shape peoples’ collective memories and affect inter-ethnic interaction. In theories on reconciliation establishing *truth* is an important condition for lasting reconciliation (Lederach 1997:28; Gloppen 2005:18). Establishing such a truth would mean to reach an official version on what actually happened in a conflict. Palmberger (2016) exemplifies the opposite of a common and official version of the past in her analysis of history classes at the two universities in the city of Mostar. Both in the Bosniak-dominated and the Croat-dominated University, a victimization of one’s own ethnic group plays a central part.

In order to grasp the different understandings and versions of history it is necessary to look at the larger structural mechanisms in society and how they produce different collective memories. Dino and Neven's different versions of what happened in the war in the 1990s must be understood in light of how versions of history are produced in areas such as politics, media, the school system and are influenced by each of their families’ experiences and suffering during the war. The consensus within the Bosniak group regarding topics related to the same war must also be understood in terms of them being influenced by the same version of history as they have the same ethnicity (chapter eight elaborates upon production and reproduction of ethnically divided understandings of the past).

An interesting point is that Dino is not a Bosniak, but rather regards himself as a Bosnian with Serb and Bosniak parents. Though Dino does not identify as belonging to any of the three major ethnic groups, he has been influenced by

ethnically biased versions of history. In the first years after the war he went to school with only Bosniaks in the village of Celic. After returning to Brcko and attending an integrated high school he still had to choose to have Bosnian, rather than Serbian or Croatian language classes. Language classes are not immune to ethnic contestation (see chapter seven for further discussion). The point is that ethnicity influences your view of history even if you do not see yourself as belonging to any of the major ethnic groups.

### **Divided and Mixed Arenas**

Both mixed and mono-ethnic groups of friends have been described, and in the extension of this it is interesting to look at how different arenas can also be more mixed or more mono-ethnic. There exists an informal division between divided and mixed cafés, pubs and nightclubs in Brcko. As mentioned briefly there are pubs and cafés in Brcko that are frequented by the so-called *alternativci* of all ethnicities. However, I experienced that cafés, pubs, nightclubs and restaurants in Brcko were often perceived to be either Serb, Bosniak or, to a lesser extent Croat. These places were frequented first and foremost by people from the respective ethnic groups. On the other hand there were certain places that were perceived as ethnically mixed.

It took me more than a month to become aware of the fact that there existed an informal division of cafés, pubs and nightclubs based on ethnicity. Until the end of my fieldwork it was hard to account for to what extent people separate themselves in "Bosniak", "Serb" or "Croat" public arenas. It still remains a fact that people spoke of this as a phenomenon, and were personally inclined to go to places owned by a person of their own ethnicity. Regardless of to what degree people go to arenas based on ethnicity, the fact that locals seemed to agree that it is a phenomenon makes it a relevant topic for examination in terms of ethnicity and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. Following Barth (1969:15), to categorize people as having another ethnicity than yourself "implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance". If you are a Bosniak, it is easier to find

people in a Bosniak café who are willing to talk about the latest match of the Bosnian national football team, or to find someone who agrees with your opinions on the latest court verdicts related to the war in the 1990s.

Furthermore, it is notable that the creation and maintenance of ethnic boundaries and identities involves the interdependence of ethnic groups, who are defined in relation to each other (Barth 1969:18). If Bosniaks go to certain places with other Bosniaks, it must follow that Serbs do the same with other Serbs in other places.

### **Divided Arenas**

About a month into my fieldwork I was drinking beer with Neven and two of his cousins. His cousins asked me about the theme of my research, and what my impressions were so far. At that point I had mostly met people with a connection to the Youth Center, and had observed much inter-ethnic interaction, and I told that my impression was positive regarding reconciliation. One of Neven's cousins, who is at her last year of high school, told me this was not the case. She told me that Serbs mostly interact with Serbs and Bosniaks with Bosniaks, and that they even go to different cafés, pubs and nightclubs. The next day I confronted Neven with this attitude. He admitted that I might have seen a picture that was not representative of the youth in Brcko, since most people I knew were active at the Youth Center. For the rest of my fieldwork I tried to get a grip on these divisions, and often asked people about it as soon as I felt I knew them well enough to ask such a question.

The cafés situated on Brcko's main square mostly have Bosniak owners and are usually frequented by Bosniaks, while in a street 50 meters east of the main square the cafés have predominantly Serb owners and are usually frequented by Serbs. These places mostly play local pop or *turbofolk* music and often show sports on TV-screens. Close to the Catholic Church in Brcko are located three restaurants within a radius of 20 meters. One is Serb owned, another Bosniak owned, while the last one has a Croat owner. Apart from the one restaurant, I did not hear about Croat cafés or pubs, which relates to the fact that the number of

Croats living in the city of Brčko is low. The biggest nightclub in Brčko is Serb owned, while there is a smaller one on the main square owned by Bosniaks, in addition to a bigger one in the Bosniak majority village of Brka outside Brčko. Bosniak owned cafés, pubs and restaurants typically serve beers from Bosniak majority areas of Bosnia, like *Sarajevsko*, *Tuzlanski* or *Preminger*. In cafés, pubs and restaurants owned by Serbs the beers are mostly from Serb areas of Bosnia or from Serbia, like *Jelen*, *Nektar* or *Zajecarsko*. This is a pattern, but both Serb and Bosniak owned places often serve Croatian beers like *Pan* or *Karlovacko*.

Consumption can be seen as social practices (Warde 2005), and in the case of Brčko, social practices of consumption play a part in constituting and maintaining divided arenas. When Serb cafés and pubs serve mainly Serb beers and Bosniak cafés and pubs serve Bosniak beers, consumption has an ethnic dimension. To consume Serb or Bosniak products becomes a part of the social practice of frequenting a pub owned by a Serb or a Bosniak. This consumption also shows how ethnic divisions permeate spheres of life also in very “banal” ways (Billig 1995). Regarding restaurants, Bosniak owned restaurants differ clearly from Serb and Croat ones as they do not serve any dishes containing pork. Most Bosniaks do not eat pork due to the prohibition on eating pork in Islam, though many Bosniaks who do not eat pork do consume alcohol. Since Serb and Croat restaurants usually serve many dishes containing pork, it is easier for Bosniaks to go to Bosniak restaurants, as they feel sure they will not get pork. This is an example of how religious customs influence social practices of consumption that again results in Bosniaks going to Bosniak restaurants. An interesting point is how most cafés and pubs serve Croat beers in addition to their “own” both in places with Bosniak and Serb owners. A possible explanation to this is that Croats have a smaller presence in Brčko. For a Bosniak it could be more acceptable to serve Croat beers than Serb beers, as their ethnic relations are closer tied to the Serbs, with the same being the case for a Serb café or pub owner regarding Bosniak beers.

Divided cities and arenas are not unknown phenomena in Bosnia, and one of the most apparent examples is Mostar. The part of the city located on the west side

of the Neretva river is predominantly populated by Croats, and the side east of the river by Bosniaks, and many people for the most part frequent “their” sides of the city (Hromadzic 2008). Another example is Srebrenica, where Bosniaks and Serbs in spite of certain incidents:

manage to go about their daily lives without friction (...). And, although there are examples of enduring friendships between Bosniaks and Serbs, their social lives for the most part remain separate (Wagner 2008:64).

In the Croat-Bosniak town Busovaca, accordingly “children go to school in shifts, restaurants and social venues are separate, and even streets are divided” (Haider 2012:14).

Bourdieu’s (1977[1972]) concept of *habitus* provides a useful understanding of how ethnically divided arenas exist and continue to exist. The reason why people go to cafés or pubs where the owner and most of the clientele are of the same ethnicity as themselves cannot fruitfully be interpreted as a fully conscious choices based on a distinct wish not to engage with people of other ethnicities. A desire not to be with the “others” could be part of the explanation, but it is also relevant to think in terms of what could be termed ethnic habitus. Let us imagine a young Serb who has always visited Serb cafés with his parents and friends, where he has consumed Serb beer and interacted with other Serbs. If this is the case, it is likely that he will continue to do so, if so partly unconscious and without an outspoken intent to interact with Serbs rather than Bosniaks. Places with Serb owners will also more likely show the Serbian national sports teams competing or show the matches of Serbian football clubs like Partizan Belgrade or Red Star Belgrade.

### **Mixed Arenas**

There are a handful pubs and cafés and one nightclub perceived by locals to be ethnically mixed. One of the characteristics of these mixed places is that they are to a large extent frequented by the *alternativci* described earlier in the chapter. These places play rock music in English and most of them do not have screens

showing sports. These places also have either Bosniak or Serb owners, but as Sinisa, an *alternativac* and bartender in one of these mixed pubs told me:

The pub next door has a Bosniak owner, while the owner of this pub is Serb, with a Bosniak wife. I am Serb and people of all backgrounds come here and to the pub next door. We all get along very well and we do not care about who is what (which ethnicity), we are tired of that.

Sinisa described the *alternativci* and volunteers as open minded, and less affected by ethnic divisions and ethnic polarization in politics. As touched upon earlier, what seems to unite people in these places is a preference for international music and a style of clothing differing from what could be termed mainstream. That is, these people identify along other lines than ethnic. When asked about the divided cafés and pubs, Sinisa said: “It is not like you are not allowed to go to those places if you are not the “right” ethnicity, but people choose themselves not to.”

It is important not to ascribe all interaction to influence of societal structures, as structures are also influenced and negotiated by the actors (Ortner 1984). The mixed arenas represent a good example in such regard, as people in spite of structures rooted in ethnicity, have created arenas where ethnicity is made less relevant, and other forms of identity are made more relevant. Most cafés, pubs and nightclubs were perceived to be either Serb or Bosniak, but there existed certain places which were perceived to be mixed. This is a good example of how structures in society influence people’s interactions, and how people also can challenge the structures.

### **The Rationale behind Divided Arenas**

The Bosniak Friday café visits always took place in one of the cafés on the main square with Bosniak owners, while when having coffee or drinks with Neven and his relatives and friends of Serb ethnicity we always went to cafés in the street where the cafés have Serb owners. In these situations the ethnic divisions seemed to play a part in the choice of place. On the other hand, when I went out



with the mixed group we normally went to one of the mixed places when we were drinking beer, but when we went for coffee we went to both Serb and Bosniak cafés. Again, it is important to underline that these divisions are not absolute, nor are they official. I also drank coffee with Bosniaks in Serb cafés, and with Serbs in Bosniak cafés during my stay in Brcko, and I often went to the major Serb nightclub in an ethnically mixed company.

Bourdieu (1977[1972]:79) claims that “The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less “sensible” and “reasonable””. This implies that people going to ethnically divided areas are not necessarily doing so out of explicit intent, but rather because it is what they know, and what structures in society facilitate. It is not necessarily a clear intent behind Neven and his relative’s choice of Serb cafés, nor the Bosniaks gathering on Fridays in a Bosniak café. It can make sense for the people themselves to go to the places they go to, without it meaning that they specifically aim to interact with and be surrounded by people of their own ethnicity.

A Serb girl from a small village just outside Brcko spoke about her experience with these divisions in an informal interview. One night in the city with some Serb friends of hers she suggested they go to one of the clubs known to be frequented by Bosniaks. Unlike her friends, she was not aware of this. When she suggested that, her friends replied: “Are you nuts? Do you want us to get beaten up??” (“*Jesi li normalna? Hoces batine da dobijemo?*”). On another occasion I went to a café with a Bosniak death camp survivor from a Serb-run camp from the war in 1990s. He said: “let us go to a place where “our Bosniaks” (*nasi bosnjaci*) go. These two examples do not show that you *will actually* get beaten up if you go to a place that is not predominantly frequented by a person of your own ethnicity, nor that only Bosniaks go to the café I went to with the death camp survivor. Instead it shows that the idea of divided cafés exist in people’s minds. Such ideas must be understood in terms of the way that ethnicity builds on the idea of a distinction “between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them” (Eriksen 2006:23).

These cases show both a concrete wish to engage in interaction with people of one's own ethnicity, in the case of the death camp survivor, as well as a fear of entering a sphere dominated by "the others", in the case of the Serb girl. The reasons behind frequenting ethnically divided arenas are as mentioned not necessarily fully conscious, but these cases show an outspoken intent. The intent to frequent an arena dominated by your own ethnic group could be varied. Maybe it is just as important, let us say for a Bosniak, to go a place where people will not question whether Srebrenica was a genocide or negate that Radovan Karadzic is a war criminal, as is it to be with people who actively agree with his view. The Bosniaks drinking coffee every Friday after the prayer in the mosque had no problems with me as a Norwegian joining them, but would it be more problematic for them if a Serb wanted to join them? The point is that both the desire to be with people with the same ethnicity and the desire *not* to be with people of an ethnicity in close relation to your own must be taken into account. On top of this one must acknowledge that any of these desires might not be fully conscious, but rather a result of how habitus and societal structures have influenced ethnic identities over longer time.

In an interview with the Brcko District Major Anto Domic, I told him what I had heard and observed about divided arenas in Brcko. The Major confirmed that he was aware of certain ethnic divisions, but said that they were first and foremost limited to nightlife (*izlazak*). He went on to talk about sports clubs, schools and the Youth Center in Brcko as multi-ethnic arenas. The fact that the Major acknowledged the issue does however indicate that divisions of cafés, pubs and nightclubs exist, and it is a reminder of the way ethnicity permeates many aspects of life in Bosnia, also in ways that are not visible at first sight.

### **The Brcko Youth Center as a Multiethnic Arena**

The NGOs at the Youth Center are rooted in multi-ethnic principles, offering their workshops for free to all people, regardless of ethnic background. In the context of Lederach's reconciliation theory he emphasizes the need for "a place where parts in a conflict can meet" (1997:30). I see the mixed cafés and pubs as more

informal and spontaneous places for inter-ethnic interaction, where people interact without any outspoken purpose of reconciliation. The Youth Center represents a more planned and institutionalized arena where there is a clear goal of engaging people of different backgrounds in interaction and promoting reconciliation. I asked the Major what the Brcko District government does concretely to promote reconciliation and limit ethnic divisions, to which his answer was that their most concrete effort is that they support local NGO's financially, who work for reconciliation. Lederach (1997:26) stresses the importance of thinking in terms of *relationships* in work on reconciliation, and to engage people from different sides in a conflict as humans in relationships with each other is an important basis for reconciliation. The Youth Center, and also the integrated high schools, are examples of public arenas in Brcko where youth of different ethnicities can meet and interact in contexts less affected by ethnicity.

An important part of promoting inter-ethnic tolerance and interaction is to avoid controversies and possible sources of contestation on the basis of ethnicity. I have mentioned earlier the complexity of languages in Bosnia, where Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats speak similarly, but refer to their languages as Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian. In the Youth center, the volunteers consequently refer to the language(s) as *lokalni jezik* (local language). Especially when working with children this is a way of creating a feeling of sameness, rather than to emphasize differences between the children. At the same time, it is a way to avoid possible conflicts. Neven once explained to me:

It is easier to just call it local language. If I use the word Serbian or Bosnian language some parents might come in the next day and ask why I am telling their child that they speak a language they do not speak

This is an example of how efforts of reconciliation and inter-ethnic tolerance in the context of Bosnia must take into account particularities of the respective ethnic groups' identities. Language is one difference between the ethnic groups in Bosnia, religion is another, and when facilitating inter-ethnic interaction one

must have an arena where differences are accepted but not given too much importance. The Youth Center as an institution thus both shapes and is shaped by Brcko's societal structures. The children and young people who frequent the Youth Center experience that it is normal to interact with people of other ethnicities than one's own, and this might affect young people's habitus and affect future inter-ethnic relations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented two different groupings of Brcko youths, an ethnically mixed and an ethnically homogenous friendship group. On the basis of these groups the analysis focused on how ethnic divisions are maintained and communicated in the context of divided and mixed arenas in the city of Brcko. Moreover, identity and group dynamics are different in the mixed than in the ethnically homogenous friendship group related to topics of discussion. A crucial point is that ethnicity is relevant in the daily lives of young people in Brcko, whether it regards what café or pub you go to for coffee or beer, or how to interact and what to talk about with people of different ethnicities.

The Bosniak group can with more ease than the mixed group talk about potent topics, in particular topics related to the war in Bosnia in the 1990s. Central in understanding these differences are concepts such as heterodoxy and qualities of ethnic relationships, which explain how people of different ethnicities are influenced by different understandings of history and perhaps also different worldviews. This must also be seen in a larger context of collective memory, where the three major ethnic groups in Bosnia create different discourses and understandings of the past. Another point illustrating the role ethnic identity plays in people's lives, is the fact that many cafés, pubs and nightclubs are perceived to be ethnically divided. At the same time there are places which are known to be mixed, and in some of these places people unite and identify along other lines than ethnicity. One example is the *alternativci* uniting over an interest in English and American rock music and an aversion towards local music.

The fact that arenas are ethnically divided must be seen in light of structures in the society, while at the same time mixed arenas must be seen as an example of how people can negotiate and challenge these structures. As Dragan, a man who often frequented the mixed pubs told me about the importance of ethnicity: “We do not bother to be concerned with ethnicity anymore, we are tired of that. Why should it matter what ethnicity people are?” The mixed arenas thus become places where people can meet in a context less influenced by ethnicity.

## **7. Ethnicity in Everyday Interactions**

### **Introduction**

Growing up in Bosnia, and particularly in a multi-ethnic city like Brcko, means regularly being confronted with questions of ethnic identity. One is confronted with ethnicity in many different areas of society, and questions of ethnic identity become an expected part of people's everyday lives, which influence both their perceptions and practices. This chapter will show how ethnicity is regularly contested and made relevant in everyday interaction, and in extent shed light on aspects of the Bosnian society at large. The empirical data in this chapter is mostly based on longer conversations and informal interviews conducted with youth of different ethnic backgrounds.

This chapter will investigate the factors and structures that I view as relevant to how ethnicity forms and influences practices and perceptions in Brcko. I will discuss how these structures work to maintain and subvert ethnic divisions, and how young people experience such divisions. Young people are subjects to ethnic contestation within their families as well as in the school system. While ethnic quotas in employment ensure multiethnic work environments, they also force people to declare their ethnicity when they apply for jobs. Moreover, many young people envision a future outside of Bosnia, and many expect a new war in the country in the future. These are perspectives that relate to questions of inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation.

### **Integrated Schools, yet Continued Ethnic Contestation**

The education system is one of the main pillars of a democratic society, and plays an important role in shaping people's attitudes and arguably also the way people perceive the world they live in. In the context of Brcko, the education system is particularly interesting, as it is one of few examples in Bosnia of statutory ethnically mixed classes.

### **Characteristics of Education in Bosnia**

The education system in Bosnia is generally characterized by ethnically divided curricula and classrooms (Torsti 2009; Hromadzic 2008). The responsibility for the education sector lies on different administrative levels, in the Republika Srpska (RS) the main responsibility lies with the Ministry of Education of RS, while in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina responsibility lies on cantonal level (Russo 2000). In the relatively ethnically homogenous areas of the country the curriculum of the ethnic group in majority in the given area is taught. In ethnically mixed areas of the Federation the infamous system *dvije škole pod jednim krovom* (two schools under one roof) is widespread. This system is applied by roughly 60 schools, and implies that Croat and Bosniak pupils go to the same schools, but attend ethnically divided classes with ethnically divided curricula (Tolomelli 2015; Hromadzic 2008). Ethnically biased curricula constitutes an issue that is particularly visible in history textbooks, where the idea of “us and them” in terms of ethnicity is widespread. In addition, the different textbooks often portray their own ethnic group as victims and the other groups as perpetrators, particularly regarding the 1990s war (Torsti 2007).

### **Integrated Schools in Brcko**

The Brcko District represents an exception in the context of education in Bosnia, because since 2001 the high schools in the Brcko District have been multi-ethnic by law (Clark 2010). Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats have classes together and are taught the same curriculum, with the exception of language classes, where they are divided in classes of the Bosnian, Serbian or Croatian languages (Jones 2012). In all of the classes, the students have here the right to be taught in either one of the three official languages and either one of the two official scripts (Latin and Cyrillic). After the establishment of the Brcko District in 1999, the high schools were integrated in two phases. In the first phase Bosniaks and Serbs attended the same schools, but in different shifts, and in the second phase also the classes became integrated (Jones 2011). The transition between the two phases was characterized by students’ protests in 2000. Bosniak students protested for one day because of an incident where two Bosniak students were beaten up, most

likely by Serb students. This protest was followed by a three-day Serb student protest against integration of the schools, and the schools were closed for three weeks before the integration was implemented (Jones 2011).

I received useful insight into the experience of attending an integrated school in Brcko through a conversation with Ivana, a 17 year-old Croat from a Croat majority village close to Brcko. Ivana is doing the third out of four years at the *gimnazija* (high school) in Brcko, and she is leading the Brcko-team of a national NGO for young Bosnians interested in journalism. Ivana went to elementary school in her village, and started to commute to Brcko when she started high school. She has friends of all ethnicities at school, and she considers ethnic background as unimportant in her choice of friends. Ivana views the integrated schools in Brcko as a positive system. She came from an all Croat elementary school, and after she began at the ethnically mixed high school in Brcko her perspectives about history have been challenged. She has realized, both through classes in school and through interaction with her friends of different ethnic backgrounds, that her ethnic group cannot have been just victims and that the others cannot just have been perpetrators in conflicts.

Ivana's story is one example of how the integrated and ethnically mixed school system can work to challenge ethnically biased versions of history and be an arena for inter-ethnic interaction. In terms of social practices, the integrated schools represent an arena where youth of different ethnicity meet and attend school together on equal premises. These schools represent part of the societal structures that form the basis for young people's habitus (Bourdieu 1977[1972]). Following this thought, the youth who attend these schools should be influenced by a habitus that is more influenced by inter-ethnic interaction than the habitus of the generations who attended divided schools. However, to make people attend school together simply provides the possibility of inter-ethnic interaction, and does not necessarily guarantee a school free from ethnic contestation.



Ivana told me an anecdote that highlights the difficult relationship between history and ethnic identity in Bosnia. The topic was the Yugoslav writer Ivo Andric, who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1961. Ivana said;

When I met my Serb friends, after I had been to Croatian- and they had been to Serbian language class, they asked me what we learnt about Ivo Andric. I said that we learnt that he was a Croat writer, while they said they learnt he was a Serb writer.

This is only a minor example of ethnically biased curricula and politicized history writing, but it shows how the different ethnic groups have conflicting narratives regarding the past. Andric does not have a connection to the war in the 1990s, and is as such not the most contested topic. Moreover, each of the three ethnic groups can in their ways connect his ethnicity with their own. Andric was a Croat born in Bosnia, spent much of his life in Belgrade and declared himself as a Serb late in his life<sup>21</sup>.

It is however highly relevant that he was told to be a Croat in Croatian- and a Serb in Serbian language classes. I asked Ivana if she thought they learnt that he was Bosnian in Bosnian class, to which she laughed and said: "most likely". She presented the story as a humoristic example of the absurdity of historical contestation in Bosnia, and it appeared that she and her Serb friends had laughed it off, and that it had not been a source of dispute among them. Even though this was presented as a humoristic anecdote, it appears that even within the context of Brcko's integrated school system there are examples of contestation on the basis of ethnicity. According to Eriksen (2006:85) history and genealogies can be "used as tools in the *contemporary* creation of identities and in politics". In this case the writer Ivo Andric represents a *multivocal symbol* (Turner 1967) as he is presented as both a Croat and a Serb. He is thus a symbol that is interpreted as having more (and possibly conflicting) meanings.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://global.britannica.com/biography/Ivo-Andric> (acc. 19/11.2016)

History classes are integrated in Brcko's high schools, with Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats learning history together, but according to many young people controversial topics are avoided. Young people told me that they had learnt about the history of Bosnia and the region up until 1990, but nothing about the period after that. It seems that the way of dealing with issues like for instance the war in the 1990s in the ethnically mixed schools in Brcko has been to ignore it. This is yet another example of problems regarding understandings of the past in public contexts in contemporary Bosnia. The fact that the three major ethnic groups advocate three different discourses of the past sets limits on the degree of unity in the integrated schools. As a result, it is not possible to teach one version of history without members of the different ethnic groups feeling that it does not correspond with their version of the past (see chapter eight for discussion on ethnically divided discourses of the past).

To publicly address the past and reach a common version or *truth* of what happened in a conflict is emphasized as important to achieve reconciliation (Lederach 1997:28, Gloppen 2005:18). As this has not happened in Bosnia, the only way students of Serb, Croat and Bosniak ethnicity in Brcko can learn about the 1990s war in ethnically mixed classrooms is *not* to learn about it. The past can be manipulated for different purposes, and history "is not a product of the past but a response to requirements of the present" (Eriksen 2006:85). The different versions of history taught among the three major ethnic groups of Bosnia today answer to requirements of ethnically homogenous classrooms where the majority ethnic group in the given areas are taught a version of the past which portray their group as victims and which legitimate their existence (Torsti 2007). It appears that in the ethnically mixed classrooms of the Brcko high school, the latest war is a topic too contested to be taught in a unified way. This in turn highlights some of the issues the ethnically mixed areas of Bosnia face also in the future, as integrated schools will have to deal with the topic of history in a way acceptable to all three ethnic groups.

An interesting point and another example of the relevance of ethnicity in people's lives is that after high school young people who do not stay in Brcko

often choose higher education in areas where their own ethnic group is the majority. Serbs mostly move to study in cities in Republika Srpska like Banja Luka, or in Serbia like Belgrade or Novi Sad, Bosniaks often go to Bosniak majority cities in the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, like Sarajevo or Tuzla, while Croats tend to choose Croat majority cities in the federation like Mostar, or cities in Croatia like Zagreb or Osijek. The fact that many young people choose to study in a city where their own ethnic group is the majority shows how ethnic identity influences their choices. Young people expressed that parents often encourage and also pressure their children to study in these places where their ethnic group is the majority. However, it is important to remember that such choices are not necessarily based on an outspoken desire to engage only with people of the same ethnic belonging. Rather, these choices must be understood within the existing social structures where ethnicity has a divisive effect. If you are a young Bosniak you are more likely to have a Bosniak relative to live with in a Bosniak majority city than in Zagreb or Belgrade. In short, ethnicity informs social practices, which means that people's actions, choices and attitudes must be seen in light of ethnic group identities and the boundaries between ethnic groups.

### **Reproducing Ethnic Divisions within the Family Unit**

In order to understand how ethnic divisions are reproduced among youth it is relevant to look at family structures. The family constitutes one of the main areas which form young people's lives and perceptions, and it is likely that the attitude the parents have regarding inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation will affect the way their child will think about the same issues. I often asked young people what they saw as the main obstacles to achieving reconciliation in Brcko, and in a majority of the cases the immediate answer was the same; "the parents are the biggest problem". There seemed to be a widespread understanding among youth in Brcko that parents who experienced the war reproduce skepticism and intolerance towards people of other ethnicities. The abovementioned statement would usually follow by: "*my parents never taught me to hate, but I know about others where that was the case*". Most of the young people I talked to thus

seemed to think that many people had parents who reproduced ethnic intolerance, but that they had themselves not been victims of this.

There is an inherent discrepancy in the way many young people contend that other people have parents who reproduce ethnic divisions, but that their own situation is different. In other contexts, the same informants contradict the image of their tolerant parents by admitting that their parents will not accept it if they find a partner of another ethnicity. Not accepting a partner of another ethnicity could be seen as a way of reproducing ethnic divisions, therefore those who claim not to be influenced by their parents are in fact affected by their parents' attitudes and views. In this case there seems to be a discrepancy between social practices and what people say. A person's relation and attitudes towards people of other ethnic backgrounds is a part of a person's *habitus*, and young people could be influenced by their parents' attitudes without being fully aware of it.

A sixty-year old Bosniak restaurant owner also regarded parents as a source of ethnic divisions among youth;

Ethnic divisions come from the parents. Bosnia is a country of strong family traditions with a strong hierarchy within the family, which makes the children want to be a reflection of their parents, and this is why hate and nationalism is passed on through generations.

To say that children aim to be reflections of their parents would be a simplification, but it is useful to think in terms of parents' both conscious and unconscious influences on their children to understand persistence of ethnic divisions. The great majority of my informants are living at home with their parents and many of them are economically dependent on them. In spite of a strong desire to overcome ethnic divisions among many young people, structures of society limits social practices and makes it hard to subvert ethnic divisions. The generation of my informants' parents' *habitus* is strongly influenced by living through the war and the change from Titoist socialism to strongly nationalistic ideologies. Following Bourdieu (1977[1972]) the parents'

influence on their children regarding inter-ethnic relations is not necessarily fully conscious, nor experienced as such by the children. However, “in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday’s man (...) the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result” (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:79). The social practices of the parents, which again influence the social practices of the children, are shaped by the lives they have lived. In this case these are lives involving rapid changes of state ideologies, a revival of nationalism and a war, with all that entails. To understand how ethnic divisions are reproduced among youth, one must take into account both the strong family structures and the way most young people live in close relation to their families, as well as how the past that shapes the parents’, and thus also the children’s, perceptions of the world.

In the time of the former Yugoslavia, ethnically mixed marriages were widespread in Bosnia, especially in urban areas (Bringa 1995). An example of this is that many young people I encountered came from families of mixed marriages. Today the situation is different, and in my conversations with young people, many said that their parents would not approve of them finding a partner of another ethnic background. When it comes to the youth’s perspectives, I did encounter Brcko youths who said that they would preferably find a partner of the same ethnicity, but among most of my informants the ethnicity of a partner did not seem to be as important. The latter attitude appeared to be especially prevalent among young people volunteering and among the people belonging to the alternative community. The general opinion among parents seemed to be that they were fine with their children having friends of other ethnicities, but that relations should not be too deep, and a partner of different ethnicity was for many parents out of the question.

The reasons why parents generally accept that their children have friends, but not partners, of a different ethnicity relate to how ethnic boundaries entail a complex social organization and also imply a “restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest” (Barth 1969:15). The generation of parents who experienced the devastating war in the 1990s

generally acknowledges inter-ethnic friendships as an area of common understanding for their children. Romantic relationships, on the other hand, involve deeper and more complex webs of interaction and contact, and are not considered as an area of common understanding. According to a saying I have heard on many occasions in Bosnia; “you do not marry just your wife, but her whole family” (“*Ne zenis samo zenu, vec cijelu porodicu*”). A marriage between two people of different ethnicity would thus involve two families of different ethnicities getting involved in a deeper relation. Another common reasoning behind this is that mixed ethnic relationships could be problematic if another war breaks out. Families with mixed marriages and children from these marriages would risk being split, and it is thus perceived as safer and easier to keep marriages within the ethnic groups.

Despite the desire among many young people in Brcko to transgress ethnic divisions, the influence of their families often shapes the conditions of their practice. Marko, a Serb in his early twenties, is an example of this. When I was conducting my fieldwork, Marko was in a relationship with a Bosniak girl. They had been together for about two years, but Marko explained that it was hard to be in a mixed relationship. Marko is originally from Southern Serbia, but moved to Brcko when he was 13 years old. He is passionately interested in music, and plays the bass guitar. Through music he has made many friends of different ethnic belongings, and I experienced Marko as genuinely interested in socializing with people based on having shared interests rather than based on one’s ethnicity. Marko often make jokes when he is together with his friends from different ethnic backgrounds. For instance, when he encountered his Bosniak friend on the other side of the street he would yell: “Kako si, *Balijo?*” (How are you, *Balija?*). *Balija* is a derogative term for Bosniaks, in the same way as *Ustasha* for Croats or *Chetnik* for Serbs. The Bosniak would reply: “Dobro je, *Cetnice!*” (I am good, you *Chetnik*). Just like in the ethnically mixed group of friends mentioned in chapter six, humor is a strategy for overcoming ethnic differences and tensions for Marko and his friends.

Nevertheless, Marko's appropriation of humor as a strategy to overcome ethnic tensions experienced in society has limitations. He told me that it was hard to be in a mixed relationship, and he experienced pressure from both family and the society. His girlfriend's family accepted the relationship, and he often visited their house. His family on the other hand, was familiar with their relationship, but did not accept it. Marko's girlfriend had never been to his family's apartment, except from when his family had been away. I did encounter young couples of different ethnicities, whose ethnically mixed relationships were functioning well, but this was rare, and the relationships were functioning precisely because of a mutual support from their families. When I came back to Brcko in the winter of 2016, Marko told me that he had ended the relationship, because it was too hard to be together when his family was against it.

Even though Marko is a person who genuinely advocates inter-ethnic interaction and has many friends of different ethnic backgrounds, he ended the relationship with his girlfriend since his family did not accept her, because she is Bosniak and he Serb. This is an example of how personal preferences and attitudes are just one of the elements shaping social practices, and that such practices are affected by other structures in society, in this case his family and their disapproval of the relationship. Moreover, this shows that an increased degree of inter-ethnic interaction and acceptance among youth is not always enough to establish stable social relations across ethnicity, because they are under considerable influence of their parents and families. The example of Marko corresponds with what Hromadzic (2011) observed at the mixed Croat-Bosniak Old Gymnasium in Mostar. Many young Croats and Bosniaks, attending ethnically divided classes at the same school, expressed a desire to interact with each other, but explained it as problematic due to a lack of acceptance and consent from their parents. As a result of this, the Gymnasium bathrooms became an arena for interaction and "mixing".

## A Practice of Avoidance

The pattern of the generations who experienced the war in the 1990s themselves, namely to avoid intimate relationships with other ethnicities, raises questions of what the underlying motivations are. Throughout my fieldwork I attempted to explore what the rationale behind maintaining ethnic divisions is founded on. I will argue that part of the answer to this relates to trust, or the lack thereof, understood within the context of the 1990s war. An elderly Bosniak man, around 70 years of age, explained that people who survived the war find it especially hard to reestablish trust with people of other ethnicities after the war. He is a practicing Muslim and spends much time opening and closing one of the city's mosques before and after prayers. He explained that he as a Muslim respects everyone, but that some experiences from the war have made it hard for him to trust people of other ethnicities. The man explained that before the war, in the time of *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity)<sup>22</sup>, he had many Serb friends. As the war approached he found out that they were not "true friends", and he explained that these people who he thought were his friends all of a sudden "wanted to eradicate him and his people". As an example, he mentioned a couple where the man was Serb and the woman Croat, who rented an apartment in his and his wife's house for a year. They ate their meals together for a year, but when the war broke out the man went to fight for the Serb army. The Bosniak sees his former tenant from time to time, but turns his head away and does not greet the former tenant.

The old Bosniak man's war experiences and many difficult memories have strongly affected his relation to, and interaction with, people of other ethnicities. He has experienced a period in his life when he interacted with people of other ethnicities on a regular basis, while he interacts mainly with fellow Bosniaks today. Turning his head away and refusing to greet a former friend is an explicit action of avoidance of contact. This action is characteristic of interaction between former acquaintances and friends of different ethnicities. I heard a similar story when I asked a man, probably around 50 years of age, how people of different ethnicities are getting along in Brcko. He answered the question by

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<sup>22</sup> 'Brotherhood and unity' was the main parole of Josip Broz Tito's socialist Yugoslavia.



telling me that he had gone to school with, and been friends with a man we passed at the zebra crossing a minute earlier, but that the man does not even greet him anymore when they see each other. This man never stated explicitly that he and the other man were of different ethnicities, but given the context of our conversation I interpreted it as inherent in the way he answered to the question that this was the case. Schatzki (1996:172) claims that a practice “opens a field of sociality”, but in this case the practice seem rather to close a possible field of sociality through avoiding further contact. Like all social practices, this particular practice of avoidance must be understood in terms of the individual and collective life experiences. Peoples’ life experiences constitute their *habitus*, and are “history turned into nature” (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:78). In this case, the war has made people who were once friends not greet each other, which is an obvious example of how the past informs social practices of the present.

To understand the persistence of ethnic divisions, like the practice of avoidance, it is relevant to look at one of the main qualities of ethnic relations, namely the production and reproduction of ‘us and them’. When talking about his former friend, the old Bosniak man used phrases such as “eradicate me and my people” and “went to fight for the Serb army”. This discourse is built on the idea of “systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them” (Eriksen 2006:23). The fact that his friend joined the local unit of the Army of Republika Srpska expressed to the old Bosniak man that the man who was once regarded as a friend wanted to eradicate him and the whole of his (Bosniak) people.

An important notion is that there are different pasts which can connect people with their present and future. The past of the 1990s war being one in which ethnicity played a vital role, while other periods had a lesser emphasis on ethnicity. In socialist Yugoslavia people were aware of their own and other’s ethnicities, but it was given less importance in social interaction, at least in urban areas (Macek 2009). On the other end of the scale is the 1990s war, where to be one of *us* or one of *them* could be a question of life or death. Especially the latter

of the two periods mentioned is important to keep in mind when analyzing inter-ethnic interaction in contemporary Bosnia. Boundaries between people of different ethnicities today is often seen as imagined, but in the war these structures dividing people of different ethnicity were physical and concrete. This has left traces in the people who experienced this period of time. These examples show how ethnic relations are not constant, and how the relevance of ethnicity can vary in different contexts as well as over time. The people of Bosnia experienced an “ethnic revitalization” (Eriksen 2006:103) in the 1990s, and this strongly shapes social practices today.

### **“He is not a Perfect Guy, but He is Still a Serb”**

Most young people I encountered in Brcko did not explicitly state that they were keeping a distance to people of other ethnicities. However, on one occasion a twenty-five year old Serb girl working as a bookmaker revealed how particular circumstances related to the war have shaped her perceptions of interaction with people of other ethnicities. Her father was killed in the war, and she prefers to engage in relations with Serbs rather than Bosniaks and Croats, as she feels a close alliance with Serbs. She said: “No matter how much of a bad person a Serb is, he is still a Serb and therefore closer to me than any Bosniak. Take [Milorad] Dodik<sup>23</sup> for example. He is not a perfect guy, but he is still a Serb, you know.” This statement seems to imply an alliance and trust in fellow Serbs over other people, and that a person’s ethnicity seems to be more important than a person’s qualities. In contrast, Marko gives ethnic belonging little relevance when choosing whom to interact with, and rather looks for common interest and uses humor to handle ethnic differences. This shows how the youth of Brcko apply different strategies of navigating within an ethnically mixed society where ethnicity plays a central role.

The bookmaker further said that youth in Brcko are still divided along ethnic lines. I told her that I had heard that youth, especially in the integrated high schools, interact and form friendships. To that she said:

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<sup>23</sup> Milorad Dodik is the president of Republika Srpska, known to have a Serb nationalist agenda, connecting most issues to ethnicity and advocating independence for RS.

Those friendships are based on a lie (*lazna prijateljstva*), and they only last while you are in school. As you finish school you will lose those friends who are not yours [of your ethnicity], while those who are yours will stay your friends. Friendships with people of your own ethnicity go deep, while those with others are shallow.

The narratives of Marko, the old Bosniak man and the young Serb bookmaker show that ethnicity does influence interaction and social practices, even if strategies of inter-ethnic interactions and relations are diverse and multifaceted. The old Bosniak man turns his head away when he meets a former friends of another ethnicity, whereas the bookmaker never stated that she does not interact with people of other ethnicities, but rather that she has deeper relations with Serbs than with others. Marko aspires to engage in social relations regardless of ethnicity, but he did break up with his girlfriend because his family did not accept her because of her Bosniak ethnicity. Social practices and the formation of relations among youth in Brcko may take different forms, but in essence they are all influenced by ethnicity. The ethnic relations and boundaries are in turn influenced by the past, both times of warfare and times of more peaceful ethnic coexistence.

Regarding the potential for reconciliation, the old Bosniak man's attitudes imply limited contact with people of other ethnicities. The young female bookmaker's reflections represent a view where relations with people of your own ethnicity are deeper than with others, while Marko's view is the one most in line with an idea of reconciliation. For the people of Brcko to reconcile does not imply a dissolvment of ethnic identities, since the existence of ethnicity does not in itself equal conflict. Moreover, inter-ethnic relationships do not consist only of *contrasting* (Us and Them) but also of *matching* (We and You) (Eriksen 2006:34). Nor does reconciliation necessarily imply a wave of ethnically mixed marriages like in socialist Yugoslavia. What it does imply however is that people would be able to choose whom to engage with in social relations without societal

structures casting ethnic differences as negative, and as an obstacle to interaction.

### **Transgressing Ethnic Divisions**

As opposed to the Serb bookmaker and the old Bosniak man, who explicitly preferred to engage in relations with people of their own ethnicity, I encountered other people like Marko, who are actively trying to escape or oppose ethnic divisions and categorizations. Transgressing ethnic divisions and categorizations and promoting reconciliation, however, is challenging in a society and a system built around the idea of people belonging to three major ethnic groups.

As the following example will show, the youth of Bosnia can draw on other factors than ethnicity in their personal identities. On more occasions I had conversations with a young man named Edvin over a cup of coffee. Edvin, or *Isus* (Jesus) as he is called because of his long hair, is a twenty-year old self-identified Bosniak, atheist and *metalac* ('metal head')<sup>24</sup> from Brcko who studies philosophy in the Bosniak majority city Tuzla. Edvin represents an interesting example of how personal identity can be influenced by many other factors than just ethnic ones. The fact that he sees himself as a Bosniak and atheist transgresses the correlation between ethnicity and religion in the Bosnian context. At the same time he carries the nickname 'Jesus', the Son of God in Christianity. Another interesting thing about Edvin is his view on reconciliation and inter-ethnic relations. As a self-identified 'metal head' he spends time in the cafés and pubs described as mixed and frequented by the *alternativci*, mentioned in chapter six. He is part of a group of friends of both Serb and Bosniak ethnicity, and they unite over their interest in music. Regarding inter-ethnic interaction and the importance of ethnicity when establishing personal relations, Edvin says: "I hang out with all kinds of people, as long as they are not nationalists. For me it does not matter what your ethnicity is, as long as you are not a nationalist." My

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<sup>24</sup> In Bosnia, a person referred to as *Metalac* is a person with a big interest in metal music genres, and often has long hair and style of clothing characterized by black clothes and rock band t-shirts.

interpretation is that by nationalists, Edvin means people from all ethnic groups with a negative view of people of other ethnicities solely because of their ethnic belonging.

Edvin would rather interact with a Serb with similar attitudes as himself, than with a Bosniak (the same ethnicity as himself) with nationalistic attitudes. This corresponds with Marko and his friends, who he met through music, and challenges the view of the Serb bookmaker, who said that even a bad Serb is better than a person who is not a Serb. These are examples of two different strategies of navigating within a social system highly influenced by ethnicity. Both strategies are defined in relation to the social realities, by accentuating or downplaying the significance of ethnicity dependent on whom one interacts with. The strategies must also be seen in light of people's life-stories and their habitus. The bookmaker grew up without a father, who was most likely killed by Bosniaks or Croats, and this has influenced her relation to people of other ethnicities. Edvin on the other hand lived as a Bosniak in a Croat-majority village after the war, and basically grew up with more friends of other ethnicities than of his own. Strategies are not necessarily fully conscious or intentional, but are rooted in the social realities people are influenced by.

### **"Why Would I Support Serbia? I Live in Bosnia!"**

Srdjan, a nineteen-year old Serb, is another of my informants who deviates from the dominant patterns of ethnic boundary making. Srdjan works as a volunteer in the same organization as I did, and he is a bartender in an electronic music nightclub known to be ethnically mixed and frequented by volunteers and *alternativci*. On one occasion I asked Srdjan if he supports the Serbian national team in sports, like most of my Serb informants do, upon which he looked almost offended and answered: "No, I do not. Why would I support Serbia? I live in Bosnia!" Srdjan does not see any reason to support Serbia, as he is a Serb from Bosnia. This attitude is uncommon among Serbs also in the volunteer and alternative community. In fact, many of the Serb volunteers, like my main

informant Neven, support Serbian national teams and pay minimal attention to the Bosnian national teams.

On another occasion, Srdjan asked me and another foreigner about our views of the war in Bosnia the 1990s, and what we had learnt about it in our home countries. I felt slightly uncomfortable telling him that I had learnt that the Serbs were the main aggressors in the war, as I know this is a view many Serbs disagree with. Srdjan said I had no need to feel uncomfortable or excuse myself and said that he was asking out of pure curiosity, because he had not learnt much about the war himself. He has a Serb girlfriend, but says that he has no preferences as to which ethnicity his partner should have, even though his parents will not be satisfied if he finds someone who is not a Serb.

In many ways, Srdjan and Edvin challenge the boundaries of their ethnic identities, even if they regard themselves Serb and Bosniak. Srdjan does not share some of the features common among Brcko Serbs, like identifying with Serb sports national teams or to hold a pro-Serb attitude towards what has happened in the region in the past. Edvin deviates from the common Bosniak, as he is an atheist and bears a Christian nickname. Moreover, they both prefer to engage in relations with people based on common interests rather than ethnic belonging. Ethnicity is both self-ascriptive and ascriptive by others (Barth 1969:13), and Srdjan and Edvin both see themselves and are defined by others as Serb and Bosniak. If most young people had the same attitudes as them, it would eventually change the meaning of being a Serb and a Bosniak. Through their attitudes and actions they deviate in some ways from the structures of society, but as long as they are the exceptions rather than the rule, it has a small impact on the societal structures, which influence peoples' patterns of actions and interactions (Bourdieu 1977[1972]).

### **Informal Sanctioning for Fostering Inter-ethnic Interaction**

A 40-year old Bosniak man named Kenan told me an anecdote exemplifying pressure from people of one's own ethnicity to behave in a certain way. He runs a pizza restaurant in Brcko with his wife, who is also Bosniak. They have hired a

couple of Serbs in the kitchen, and this is functioning without any problems among the ethnically mixed staff of the restaurant. Kenan has however received negative feedback from other Bosniaks, who have reacted to the fact that in a situation with high unemployment he has hired Serbs and not Bosniaks, as he is a Bosniak himself. From this anecdote it seems that one is expected to hire people of one's own ethnicity, even if there are more qualified candidates of other ethnicities.

In a similar manner, Hromadzic (2008) describes how Croats in Mostar risk sanctions from fellow Croats if they cross over to the other side of the city, which is populated by Bosniaks. This example and Kenan's experience point to some central elements of ethnic group identity. Such sanctions from people of one's own ethnicity can be seen as a notification that one has challenged the content inherent in one's ethnic identity. According to Barth (1969:16) "stable inter-ethnic relations presuppose a structuring of interaction: a set of prescriptions governing situations of contact, and allowing for articulation in some sectors or domains of activity." To spend time in the Bosniak part of Mostar or to hire Serbs in a Bosniak pizza restaurant is seen by other members of the same ethnic groups as transgressing the boundaries of interaction with people of other ethnicities.

### **The Effects of Ethnic Quotas in Employment**

Public institutions in the Brcko District are ethnically mixed, and the police force of Brcko was the first multiethnic police force in the country (Clark 2010). In the public sector of the Brcko District there are ethnic quotas in employment, even if they are not fully official. Talking to people about particularities of the Brcko District, people would often mention a system of employment they referred to as 4-4-2. These numbers refer to the proportion of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats in the public sector. People said the system was designed to secure an equal representation of the three major ethnic groups inhabiting the Brcko District based on the demographic structure. After I returned home from my fieldwork I was unsure about the officiality of this system, and I asked a couple of contacts in

the NGO where I volunteered, and they confirmed that as far as they know the quotas are unofficial, but are being practiced. When applying for public jobs there is a blank field in the application form, where one is expected to declare one's ethnicity. I also heard that people belonging to any of the 17 recognized national minorities of Bosnia (e.g. Albanian, Montenegrin, Roma, Jew) also have a chance of getting jobs, and that there are some places in the system for people belonging to the minorities.

The ethnic quotas ensuring that people of all ethnicities are given the opportunity to get public jobs serve an important function regarding ethnic co-existence and tolerance. It makes public workplaces ethnically mixed, it facilitates people of different ethnicities to interact, and creates what Lederach (1997:26) calls a place for *encounter* between people of different ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, the quotas presume that people declare belonging to one of the three major ethnic groups, or the national minorities. As mentioned earlier, all inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina are per definition Bosnians, in addition to their ethnic identity as Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks or any of the national minorities. There is thus no opportunity to be "just" Bosnian, as it is not a recognized ethnic category. In population censuses in socialist Yugoslavia people had the opportunity to identify themselves as 'Yugoslavs' (*Jugosloveni*) in addition to the other ethnic categories. In the 1981 Yugoslav census in the Bosnian republic almost 8% declared themselves as Yugoslavs, while the number in the whole of Yugoslavia was 5,4% (Mønnesland 2006:394-395). Today there is no such category, neither to define as Yugoslav nor Bosnian. I have heard people say that they would like to define themselves as Bosnians, and not as Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats. Since Bosnian is not a recognized category, the only other possibility beside the recognized ethnic groups is to declare oneself as 'other' (*ostali*), but this did not seem to be widespread. Many people of mixed ethnicity also explained that they first and foremost see themselves as Bosnians, but they usually define in accordance with their father's ethnicity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that the father's ethnicity is "dominant" is another interesting point relating to the patriarchal structures of the Bosnian society, but not a point I have the space to elaborate further upon.



I talked to a man and a woman from Bosniak families who both expressed a wish to reject the ethnic categorizations and not be Bosniaks, but only one of them has taken the step. Edin is an unemployed newly graduated teacher from a Bosniak family, who currently does part-time jobs at different fitness studios in the Brcko area. He said he wishes to declare himself as other instead of Bosniak, because he does not feel like a Bosniak, but rather a Bosnian. He has still not declared himself as anything but Bosniak, because he is afraid that declaring as other would exclude him from the possibility of getting a public job. Not to be eligible for a public job will mean that he will not be able to get a job as an elementary school teacher in Brcko, as elementary schools are public and the positions are filled in compliance with the ethnic quotas. He explained: "I do not feel like a Bosniak, I would like to be just Bosnian, but I am a graduated teacher and in the 4-4-2 system of employment I would not be worth anything if I am not Bosniak."

Whereas Edin has not yet formally defined himself as anything but Bosniak, a social scientist named Mia decided to define outside of the main ethnic categories some years ago. Mia is around 40 years old, and has held different jobs, many of them in the NGO-sector. She experiences a deep concern and frustration with living in a society where your ethnic belonging sets many conditions for your life. She explained how she currently feels the consequences of not defining as a Bosniak:

At the moment I am working at a call center, which has no relevance to my education, just to make ends meet. It is a result of me defining as a Bosnian [other], but I will rather live like this than to be a part of the ethnic categorizations.

Since Mia does not declare herself as Bosniak when applying for jobs, according to her she has no chance of getting a job within her profession. The Bosnian society is built up around the idea of people being Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats, and there are elements of what Foucault (2010) termed *governmentality*. In this case the Bosnian state system is reproducing people to become Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. People of mixed ethnicity or other people who for whatever reason

do not want to identify as Serb, Croat or Bosniak do not fit the ethnic quotas in politics or in the public sector employment, and are as such citizens who do not fit the system as a whole. These people could be called *ethnic anomalies*, and tend to create challenges within systems of ethnic classifications (Eriksen 2006:74). For Mia and Edin, ethnic identity is not just a question of personal identity, but a question of making a living, since the authorities (in this case the Brcko District) forces one to belong to the major ethnic categories to be eligible for public jobs.

Many Bosniaks and Serbs argue that the 4-4-2 quotas are disproportional according to the population structure of the Brcko District, and that it is much easier for Croats to get public jobs. My main informant Neven told me that he had waited more than a year to get an offer for *pripravnicki*, a one-year paid internship within your field of study after graduation, while his Croat friend from University had received an offer immediately upon graduating. Others claim that there is a lack of Croats to fill the 20% of Croat positions and that Croats from outside the Brcko District come and get those jobs, while Bosniaks and Serbs from Brcko are unemployed. This is another example of how ethnic quotas on the one hand encourage multiethnic work environments, while on the other hand make ethnic belonging an important criterion in people's contact with the public, and in effect a criterion for being a 'first-class citizen'.

### **Future Perspectives**

In order to understand inter-ethnic relations and processes of reconciliation, one cannot focus only on how the past influences the present, but also give attention to people's perspectives for the future.

#### **A Desired Future outside Bosnia**

One interesting point is that many young people in Brcko envision a future outside of Bosnia, with a majority wanting to go to Germany or Austria for work. The tough economic situation and high unemployment rates have made people look for opportunities to make a living outside of Bosnia, and in 2015 more than

80 000 people left Bosnia, most of them between 25 and 40 years of age<sup>26</sup>. I attended an English language workshop at the Youth Center with a group of locals of both Serb and Bosniak ethnicities, and the English volunteer leading the workshop asked where we envision ourselves in five years. One after the other the locals answered that they envisioned themselves living in Australia, USA, Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Uruguay. Throughout my fieldwork I frequently encountered people with similar perspectives. Many young people would say that there are not any perspectives (*nema perspektive*) for them in Bosnia, and that the only possibility of having a decent life is to go abroad.

According to Lederach (1997), one central condition to achieve reconciliation is that the people who stood on different sides in a conflict must envision a shared future with each other. People leave Bosnia mainly for economic reasons, but this could also relate to ethnicity. As shown in this chapter, to advocate inter-ethnic interaction and reconciliation in many ways means to work against the structures in society. If young people imagine leaving Bosnia as soon as they have the opportunity, why should they spend their energy on challenging the structures of society to change it? People also express a wish to live in a country where you are valued based on your skills and knowledge, and not your ethnicity and your personal connections, as many people feel is the case in Bosnia.

### **"There Will be Another War"**

Another example of how perspectives of the future among youth in Brcko form the present, and conditions the possibilities of achieving reconciliations, is that many people anticipate a new war sometime in the future. Talking to people about reconciliation and ethnic divisions, many people told me that they are sure that there will be another war. A common statement is: "The question is not *if* there will be another war, but *when*". Others say, often with a jokingly tone: "We have a war approximately every 50 years here in the Balkans, so now it is around 30 years until the next one". People in Brcko have either experienced war

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/BiH-u-2015-napustilo-vise-od-80000-mladih/374965> (acc. 21.11.2016)

themselves, or they have been steadily reminded of war from their families, in the media or at school.

People expect and fear a new war coming, and this exemplifies the lack of reconciliation in the Bosnian society. In public contexts, politicians play on ethnicity and fear of domination by the other ethnic groups, they discuss who did what in the war, and some advocate independence for ethnically homogenous areas of the country. Furthermore, war is a concept close to the people in Bosnia. Young people's parents experienced the war in the 1990s, while their grandparents might also have experienced World War II. To imagine another war along ethnic lines is the absolute opposite of imagining a shared future, and few possibilities are given "for people to look forward and envision their shared future" (Lederach 1997:27).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how ethnicity sets many conditions and informs the choices and the practices in the lives of Brcko's youth. Ethnicity influences people's choices of friends and partners, and it is relevant in school as well as in employment. The ethnically diverse Brcko youth share habitus to a large extent. However, regarding ethnicity there are differences as their habitus is affected and shaped by ethnicity. Different structures in society, like family, school and public administration continuously emphasize the importance of their ethnicities and contribute to ethnic variations in habitus. These structures are affected by the past, and the link to the war in the 1990s, which divided the population of Bosnia and Brcko along ethnic lines, is especially evident. The social practices of Brcko's youth are influenced by these structures, and ethnic divisions are to a certain extent reproduced, even if there is a higher degree of contact between youth of different ethnicity than there is among their parents. At the same time, many young people do challenge the structures and the importance of ethnicity in social relations, with the possibility of influencing the structures of the future.

To tackle ethnic differences and divisions, many of the youths described in this chapter apply strategies where they consciously give less importance to ethnicity and choose whom to interact with based on other criteria than ethnicity. However, even if they give less importance to ethnicity themselves, they are living in a society where your ethnic identity defines certain criteria and guidelines as regards whom to interact with, where to go, whom to identify with, and what version of history to support. As a result of this, even if youth have an outspoken intent to identify along other lines than ethnic, their social practices at times show something else, as these practices are shaped by many societal factors highlighting ethnic belonging. The most obvious example of this is Marko, who ended his relationship with his Bosniak girlfriend because his family did not accept the relationship. For Marko it did not matter that his girlfriend was of Bosniak ethnicity, but for his family it did, and this lack of acceptance became too much to bear for Marko in the end.

The great importance of ethnicity, combined with other related social issues like corruption and unemployment, have made many young people leave or fostered a desire to leave Bosnia and Brcko. Peoples' wish to leave the country influences inter-ethnic tolerance and reconciliation negatively, as people give less effort to better the inter-ethnic relations and challenge societal structures when they do not see a future in the country.

## 8. A Contested Past



**Figure 4: Brcko Serbs commemorating the 23 year anniversary for the establishment of the local Serb army unit in the Brcko area. (Photo by author)**

### Introduction

The past is everywhere. All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Each particular trace of the past ultimately perishes, but collectively they are immortal.

(Lowenthal 1995, xv)

So far, this thesis has shown the many ways in which the past is still alive in the present, particularly in people's actions, interactions and perceptions. This chapter will address the contestation of the past in contemporary public contexts. In doing so, this chapter will analyze how contestations of the past relates to the production of ethnically divided collective memory discourses. These memory discourses are legitimating and maintaining the ethnic groups' existence and presence in Brcko and Bosnia as well as their roles in the war in

the 1990s. In effect, these ethnically divided memory discourses work as obstacles to reconciliation and improved inter-ethnic relations.

The first part of the chapter will show how the public space in Brcko is contested and how it is constructed into ethnically loaded social spaces by the practices of remembering and forgetting. Monuments and flags in Brcko act as elements of remembrance, as does the 1990s Brcko war detention camp, which interestingly is remembered by some, while forgotten by many. Furthermore, I will describe two different ceremonies I attended in Brcko, a commemoration of the establishment of the local Serb army unit in the area in the 1990s, and a collective funeral for nine civilian Bosniak victims from the same war. The content of these two ceremonies will be analyzed, since they reveal how Serb and Bosniak versions of the past are publicly conflicting. The final part of the chapter consists of an analysis of the media coverage of the collective funeral. I compare a Bosniak oriented- and a Serb oriented online newspaper's coverage of the event, and through the discourses apparent there, I point to differences in interpretation of the history.

### **Contested Spaces**

Travelling around Bosnia often feels like a constant wandering in ethno-national landscapes, and the center of a town or city usually quickly reveals which ethnic group is in a majority in the given area. The most obvious symbols are war memorial monuments and flags, but also religious objects, use of the Cyrillic or Latin script, or as we saw in chapter six, even the beer brands served at the local cafés. Public spaces in Brcko reflect the idea of the Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats being equal citizens and participants in the Brcko District. At the same time, there are examples of public spaces being contested by the different ethnic groups.

## Monuments and Flags as Ethnic Symbols

The city center of Brcko is reconstructed as an area which is not 'ethnically charged'<sup>27</sup>. The three major ethnic groups each have their own 1990s war monument within a radius of 100 meters, and only the Bosnian flag is allowed in use. The urban space in the city center thus reflects the idea of the Brcko District as an area of equality between the Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The city center commemorates the armies of all the three major ethnic groups, but the different neighborhoods usually have monuments dedicated to the ethnic group in majority in the given neighborhood. The villages of the Brcko District, which are largely ethnically homogenous, also have monuments dedicated to the ethnic group living in the given village.

Brcko's main square was, for the first years after the war, named *Trg Boska Perica* after the young Serb soldier Bosko Peric from the region who was killed while fighting for the Army of Republika Srpska<sup>28</sup>. When the Brcko District was established, and many Bosniaks returned to the city, the square was renamed *Trg Mladih* (Square of the Youth). Likewise, one of the main streets in Brcko was renamed *Bulevar Mira* (Boulevard of Peace) replacing the previous name after the Serb Cetnik WW2 leader Draza Mihajlovic. In a similar manner, the streets of Brcko today have names that are not connected to the latest war and ethnic nationalism, and all house number plates have the name of the street in both the Latin and Cyrillic scripts (Jeffrey 2006). Palmberger (2013) discusses the process of renaming of streets in the Croat-dominated western Mostar in the aftermath of the 1990s war in Bosnia. There, street names honoring the Yugoslav socialist era were replaced with street names promoting a Croatian national history. The same happened in Brcko with streets being named after Serb nationalist heroes, but with the establishment of the multi-ethnic Brcko District, these street names were again replaced with names promoting the multi-ethnic project of the Brcko District. These examples show how public spaces are subject to conscious symbolic structuring in Bosnia and Brcko.

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<sup>27</sup> Not 'ethnically charged' in the sense that it does commemorate all three major ethnic groups equally.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.ohr.int/?p=52909> (acc. 10.12.2016)



There are some occasions when national or ethnic symbols like other flags than the Bosnian one are allowed in the public space, and I will argue that there are elements of contestation inherent in the use of these flags in the Brcko urban space. During my fieldwork, the Catholic Church had a Croatian flag hanging from the church both for Catholic Easter (*uskrs*) as well as when the Pope visited Sarajevo in June 2015. On both occasions the flag was still hanging weeks after the events had finished. A Serbian flag was raised at a flagpole next to the Serb monument in the city center when the anniversary of the establishment of a local Serb army unit from the war was marked, and was not taken down for months. At the Bosniak monument in the city center, the *Ljiljani* (lilies) flag used by the Bosnian army<sup>29</sup> during the war, was raised when a collective funeral for 9 newly identified civil Bosniak victims from the war took place. I noticed that also this flag was hanging for a long time afterwards.

The use of monuments and flags and the names of streets, squares etc. in the Brcko District underline the contestation of spaces. According to Low and Lawrence-Zuniga (2003:18), “spaces are contested precisely because they concretize the fundamental and recurring, but otherwise unexamined, ideological, and social frameworks that structure practice.” In the case of Brcko, the city center is designed as a space where the three major ethnic groups each have their monument and where other ethnic symbols are not allowed. This can be seen as an attempt to avoid ethnic tensions and make the city center an area accessible to all people regardless of ethnic belonging. Moreover, street names are cautiously chosen as not to have connection to nationalist ideologies. Many of the streets in the city center are named after late writers from the region of the former Yugoslavia, like Miroslav Krleža, Tin Ujević, Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović. These writers are not necessarily free from controversies and contestation, but are not connected to the latest war. On the other hand, outside the city center it seems as if the majority ethnic group in a neighborhood or village, to a larger extent, displays ideologically loaded symbols. And even in the city center the Serbian, Croatian and *Ljiljani* flags are kept up for weeks after ceremonies where they are used. The contestation of spaces relate to the

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<sup>29</sup> The Bosniak dominated Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH).

different understandings of the past among the ethnic groups of Bosnia, who each aim to reproduce their memory as the dominant one, thereby marginalizing the memories of the others (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003).

### **The Luka Detention Camp**

As part of the Serb occupation of Brcko in the Bosnian war in 1992, Croat and Bosniak men were detained in the detention camp *Luka* (harbor) by Serbs<sup>30</sup>. Detainees were killed, tortured and treated inhumanely. Three Brcko Serbs have been convicted in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague for acts of atrocity committed in the camp (ICTY 2017). In 2013, a memory room (*spomen soba*) opened in one of the buildings at the harbor, dedicated to the Brcko detention camp and other detention camps all over Bosnia. The Association of Detainees of the Brcko District (*Udruzenje Logorasa Brcko Distrikta*) is responsible for the memory room. I visited the association at the end of April 2015 and had a guided tour of the memory room with the president of the association. The president showed me where his “place” had been when he was detained at the camp in 1992, and told me about tough memories of how fellow detainees were tortured and killed. I asked him if school classes come to the camp to learn about this part of the history, to which he said that it happens, but that it is no mandatory activity for schools in Brcko.

In the evening on the day of the visit I encountered my Serb friend and informant Srdjan, whom I told that I had been to the detention camp museum at the harbor. He said he had heard of the museum, but that he had never been there. I met my main informant, the Serb Neven, later in the evening, and I also mentioned to him that I had visited the camp. He told me that he did not know of such a camp, and that he had only heard rumors of a camp in the Bosniak majority village Maoca on the outskirts of the Brcko District in the war. The fact that Neven and Srdjan had limited or no knowledge of the Luka camp surprised me. At the same time it was a reminder of the selective knowledge among youth about the past and the

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/memorial-room-opened-in-brcko/1460/te-burgosurit-boshnjake-te-luftes-hapin-memorialin-ne-kampin-e-brckos> (acc. 09.12.2016)

latest war in particular. The harbor is only a couple of hundred meters away from the cafés, pubs and nightclubs which Neven and Srdjan visit regularly.

Neven is a Serb who has been living in Brcko for 20 years, and yet he had never heard of the camp that was located close to the city center where Bosniaks and Croats were kept by Serbs. He had, however, heard rumors of a camp in Maoca, which would, due to the demographics of Maoca and its position in the war, mean that this was a camp where Serbs were held detained by Bosniaks. An important part of the production of collective memories is the process of forgetting, and the detention camp in Brcko is largely and intentionally forgotten among the Serbs. The camp is also forgotten in the ethnically mixed schools of Brcko, as they do not visit it. Forgetting is “considered not as a defect or deficit practice, but a valued activity that is as strategic and central a practice as remembering itself” (Zelizer 1995:220). The reasons for forgetting such an element of the past may be varied, but the result is that in the collective memories of particularly the younger generations either there never existed a detention camp in Brcko, or it did exist, but is not seen as important.

### **Ethnically Interpreted Public Ceremonies**

The two ceremonies I attended exemplified how different ethnic discourses and understandings of the past are alive in the present. The commemoration of the 23rd anniversary of the establishment of the local Serb army unit in the Brcko area displayed a pro-Serb discourse. Serb actions of war were portrayed as actions of self-defense to the perceived threat that questioned the existence of the Serb people. The collective funeral for the nine newly identified civilian Bosniak victims from the 1990s war, on the other hand, showed a pro-Bosniak discourse where the war was presented as a Serb attack on Bosnia in which the Bosniaks only defended their country. In this narrative, trials and convictions of Bosniaks for war crimes is perceived as unjust.

### **Commemorating the Establishment of The First Brigade of Posavina**

On May 20 2015 I attended a commemoration of the formation of “The first

brigade of Posavina' (*Prva Posavska brigada*) which was established in 1992 as the local Serb army unit in Brcko and the Posavina region during the war. The ceremony I attended was held on a small square in front of the monument dedicated to the Serb soldiers of the 1990s war, close to the main square of Brcko. On the otherwise empty flagpole next to the monument, a Serbian flag<sup>31</sup> blew in the wind. Approximately 100-150 people attended the commemoration, most of them middle-aged and older men. Several speeches and greetings from different people and organizations were given and wreaths were laid down in front of the monument. Two Orthodox priests performed a religious ritual and candles were lit for the fallen Serb soldiers.

One particular speech at the commemoration displayed a clear pro-Serb discourse. The main theme throughout the speech was the Republika Srpska (RS), and it was presented as if Brcko was still a part of RS with no reference to the Brcko District<sup>32</sup>. The establishment of the brigade was romanticized and legitimized as necessary to "keep the Muslims from taking our freedom" (*da nam Muslimani ne oduzimaju slobodu*), so that they could "wave their three fingers again"<sup>33</sup>. The speech continued to present RS as a proud and important *country* (and not an entity), and how it is still important to strengthen it. The discourse in this speech presents the RS and its establishment as an important and proud process, without any reference to for instance ethnic cleansing and other war crimes. Moreover, it portrays the Serb army's actions in the war as necessary and legitimate and relates them to a threat of being dominated by the Muslims (Bosniaks).

### **Collective Funeral for Nine Civilian Bosniak War Victims**

On June 13 2015 a collective funeral took place on the graveyard next to a mosque in the Ivici neighborhood in Brcko, where nine newly identified Bosniak

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<sup>31</sup> A serbian flag with the RS crest in the middle.

<sup>32</sup> As mentioned in chapter 4, The Brcko District belongs to both the RS and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>33</sup> Showing three fingers raised, the thumb, index finger and middle finger, is a typical Serb salute with nationalist connotations.

civilian victims from the war were buried<sup>34</sup>. This was the fifth collective funeral held in Brcko with victims who were killed in Brcko during the war, and found in different mass graves both in Bosnia and Serbia. The funeral was an important event for many Bosniaks in the city, and several hundred people attended. Like many others, I arrived just before the *dzenaza-namaz*, the collective prayer for the buried ones, which seemed to be the central part of the funeral. The atmosphere was quite relaxed, people continued showing up just before and at the beginning of the prayer. During the prayer most people were praying, and even the security personnel attended the prayer, and it was visible that this was a commemoration that first and foremost Bosniaks attended. I recognized many Bosniaks I had met or seen during my fieldwork, and both genders and all generations appeared to be well represented. Before the prayer, there were a couple of speeches, and after the prayer the coffins were carried to the cemetery next to the mosque. During these prayers, people close to the small podium where the speeches were held were quiet, while people in the periphery were smoking and talking.

A speech prior to the prayer displayed elements of a pro-Bosniak discourse. The speech started by honoring the dead, before the speaker continued to talk about how “the Serbs still know where the rest of the mass graves are, but do not want to tell us, even when we ask them”. The speaker then said that: “The ones guilty will get their punishment, if not from the legal system, then from Allah.” Further, he talked about how Brcko in the war was part of Radovan Karadzic’s strategic plan to connect Serbia with the Krajina region and western Bosnia, and how these victims were dead as a result of this.

The imprisonment of Naser Oric, a Bosniak war commandant from the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH), was also mentioned in the speech. Oric was arrested and brought to the ICTY in Hague June 10 2015, where he was charged with war crimes against Serb civilians in the Srebrenica area in 1992<sup>35</sup>. He has been in the ICTY before, and received a sentence of two years for not preventing

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.otisak.ba/brcko/28663-ukopano-devet-bosnjaka-koji-su-> (acc. 04.12.2016)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/srebrenica-commander-oric-charged-with-war-crimes-08-27-2015> (acc. 06.12.2016)

the death of Serb civilians in Eastern Bosnia, a sentence that was later acquitted<sup>36</sup>. Many Bosniaks experience it as deeply unfair that Oric was taken to Hague again, since many Serb war criminals have still not received sentences. Oric was not mentioned by name in the speech, but it was apparent in the discourse that the speakers were talking about him when they said: “The Serbs know where the mass graves are, but they will not tell us, but they still get Bosniak commandants arrested, when they themselves have a lot of war criminals still on the loose”.

### **Collective Memories Produced and Reproduced**

The two ceremonies contribute to the production of collective memories, memories that take different forms and manifest in various ways. This was the case in the way the ceremonies used elements of embodied collective memory (Connerton 1989). At the Serb ceremony, the participants lit candles for the fallen soldiers and crossed themselves with three fingers while the Orthodox priests were performing a religious ritual. At the collective funeral, the participants prayed by holding their open hands up in front of their chests and by closing their eyes, while the Imam was saying prayers. These are embodied practices that mark differences in ethnicity and religion. Moreover, commemorative ceremonies are according to Connerton (1989:44) ritual actions, and the verbal content in combination with the bodily practices of ceremonies constitute collective social memories. The two ceremonies I observed contribute to the production of separate understandings of the past based on ethnic divisions.

Collective memories are also present in discourses, and the speeches at the ceremonies concerned the 1990s war in Bosnia and in Brcko. The content shows how a historical period like the war can be understood and remembered in different ways and be deployed as a ‘political language’ shaping people’s perceptions of the war for political purposes (Radstone and Schwarz 2010:3). In the main speech at the collective funeral, the main focus was how the Serbs

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/hague-acquits-srebrenica-bosnian-army-chief> (acc. 06.12.2016)

should be punished for their war crimes in Brcko. The fact that the Bosniaks were also an active part of the war was not mentioned<sup>37</sup>. The speeches at the Serb army commemoration presented Serb participation in the war as a heroic story of defense, freedom and the establishment of Republika Srpska as a country for the Serbs. Detention camps, mass graves and the fact that three Brcko Serbs have been convicted for war crimes in Hague were not mentioned. A central notion is that “every narrative depends on the suppression and repression of contrary, disruptive memories – other people’s memories of the same events, as well as the unacceptable ghosts of our own past” (Hall 1998:440). In these two ceremonies, two different narratives and discourses of the war were displayed, and they were both based on one-sided understandings of the war and involved a suppression of the other ethnic groups’ sufferings and their own ethnic group’s war crimes. Such ethnically loaded and divided discourse is contributing to strengthening the idea of ‘us and them’, one of the key features of ethnic relationships which maintains ethnic divisions (Eriksen 2006:23).

In the larger context, these ceremonies were attended by a limited number of people. The point, however, is that the same subjective and selective readings of history with the basis in ethnicity are also present in schoolbooks, in the discourse of the main political leaders of the country, in newspapers, as well as around the dinner table in many homes. To understand how the war in the 1990s still plays a large role in the lives of the people of Brcko today, one must acknowledge that “individual remembrance, collective memory and narrative history interact in highly complicated ways, shaping each other as different versions of the past are constructed and reconstructed, modified and invented” (Linke 2015:181). People’s understandings of the past must be seen in light of personal memories of war as well as how the war is projected in three separate ways among the three major ethnic groups on a systemic level.

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<sup>37</sup> Except for the plea to release the Bosniak commandant Naser Oric.

## **Representations of the Collective Funeral in Media Discourse**

Different understandings of the past are visible not only in public speeches and public spaces, but are continuously reproduced in the media. Two local online newspaper sites covered the collective funeral from different ethnic perspectives, and the implicit discourses of the articles must be seen in light of the ethnically divided political ideologies on a national level. Following Foucault (1972:216), aspects of power and politics are inherent in discourses, and the production of discourses serves certain, and often political, interests.

The Bosniak oriented Otisak ([www.otisak.ba](http://www.otisak.ba)) and the Serb oriented Ebrcko ([www.ebrcko.net](http://www.ebrcko.net)) display differences related to ethnicity already in the headlines of their articles on the funeral. Otisak's headline, for instance, reads: "Nine Bosniaks which were killed during the aggression on Brcko buried",<sup>38</sup>. Ebrcko, on the other hand, writes: "Posthumous remains of nine civilian victims of the civil war Buried"<sup>39</sup>. One difference is the acknowledgement of ethnicity in the Bosniak oriented newspaper, and the lack of any mention of ethnicity in the Serb oriented one. By describing the ethnicity of the buried, Otisak recognizes the victims as both Bosniaks and human beings. Ebrcko reduces the victims to the bones and remains of victims of the war, without mentioning the ethnicity of the victims.

The two newspapers also term the war in Brcko differently. Otisak calls it the "aggression on Brcko", a view often held by Bosniaks and Croats<sup>40</sup>. The Serb Ebrcko calls it the "civil war", which is the usual way to describe the war among Serbs. Furthermore, the article in Ebrcko has one picture, while the article in Otisak has five. The article in Otisak is longer than the article in Ebrcko and, among other things, mentions that the victims were found in mass graves in Bosnia and Serbia, while no reference to this is made in Ebrcko. Moreover, the Otisak article quotes one of the speeches from the funeral saying that the victims "were killed and taken from our lives in a criminal and barbarous way, just

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.otisak.ba/brcko/28663-ukopano-devet-bosnjaka-koji-su-> (acc. 04.12.2016)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.ebrcko.net/vijesti/vijesti-brcko/30317-sahranjeni-posmrtni->(acc. 04.12.2016)

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/why-there-s-no-truth-about-the-bosnian-war>(acc. 08.12.2016)



because they had another religion and another national identity, just because they did not fit the criminal conception of the Hague-detained Karadzic". In line with Fairclough (1992:64), "discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief". In this case, the newspapers contribute to the production and reproduction of different ethnically divided traditions of knowledge on the war in the 1990s. The reproduction of such discourses must again be seen in relation to the ethno political *hegemony* (Fairclough 1992) that has been ruling in Bosnia since the fall of Titoist socialism.

Another example of the differences between the two articles, is that the Bosniak oriented Otisak writes that 289 civilian victims of the war in Brcko have been buried and that 200 are still missing, while the Serb oriented Ebrcko writes that 187 civilian victims have been buried at the memorial center in Brcko and that 100 are still missing. This is an example of how the two newspapers perceive the past in different ways and are parts of a tradition of ethnically divided discourses. The civilians buried and missing from the war in Brcko are mostly Bosniaks, and it is visible how the Bosniak oriented newspaper operate with higher numbers than the Serb oriented newspaper. It is in the interest of the Bosniaks that the numbers are high and for the Serbs that they are low, and this is another example of how political aspects and ideology are inherent in discourse. Van Dijk (1989:203), in a discussion on media discourse and the reproduction of racism, states that: "The news media do not passively describe or record news events (...) but actively (re-) construct them". The practice of different media coverages of the same events is a basic, but central, point in Bosnian news discourses regarding topics related to ethnicity. Such (re-) construction, and, in this case, different numbers of victims in the Bosniak and Serb newspapers, are not necessarily part of conscious and planned strategies within the different newspapers. Rather, they must be seen in light of the larger traditions of ethnically divided media in Bosnia since the war, as discourse and societal structures exist in a dialectic relationship, where structures influence discourses and discourses influence structures (Fairclough 1992).

The ethnically situated discourses displayed both in the speeches at the ceremonies as well as in the media coverage of the collective funeral, serve to maintain ethnic divisions between Serbs and Bosniaks (and Croats). This, in turn, serves the interest of the political elites of the country which have their basis in political parties centered on ideologies of nationalism and ethnic divisions. Fairclough (1992:87) emphasizes that “the ideologies embedded in discursive practices are most effective when they become naturalized, and achieve the status of ‘common sense’”. When the past is understood in very different ways, as it is in the newspapers and ceremony speeches, the prevailing understandings of the past within one’s own ethnic group become ‘common sense’. This, in turn, affects inter-ethnic interaction among the people in everyday life. Moreover, the pattern of ethnically divided media applies also on a national and regional level. Consequently, the inhabitants of Brcko are exposed to ethnically divided discourses in local, national and regional media.

## **Conclusion**

The war in Bosnia in the 1990s is a story of suffering and trauma for most people, regardless of their ethnicity, and there is no contradiction in commemorating and remembering losses and sufferings on all sides. What makes the discourses regarding the war in the Bosnian public contexts problematic is how each ethnic group portrays itself as the biggest victim of the war and presents their own war crimes as legitimate acts of self-defense and their armies as heroes. Hence, there exist three major ethnically divided understandings of the war, which are continuously produced and reproduced in public contexts. These divided discourses and the three ways of remembering the past are quickly identifiable in the discourses of the speeches and newspaper articles discussed in this chapter, as well as in the constructed symbolic landscape of Brcko and Bosnia in general.

The fact that the detention camp in Brcko is not commemorated among everyone there, exemplifies the selective nature of how the past is understood, remembered and sometimes intentionally forgotten. If the past was addressed in

a common way, the detention camp could have been an example of the horrors of war and a place to take younger generations to learn about the negative sides of war, and possibly prevent something similar from happening in the future. Instead, the camp is known by some, and forgotten by others, just like many other elements of the 1990s warfare in Bosnia.

## Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the youth in the ethnically mixed city of Brcko in northwestern Bosnia. More precisely, it has explored the ways in which ethnic belonging and the troubled past of the country influence the lives of young people. The aim of the thesis has been to discuss themes ranging from everyday interactions between people of different ethnicities, to societal structures that influence and shape the lives of youth. The Brcko District (*Brcko Distrikt Bosne i Hercegovine*) represents an interesting institutional and demographic unit in the Bosnian context. Bosnia is a country where many regions, - due to displacement, forced and voluntary migration and an ethnically divided political climate -, have become largely ethnically homogenous since the 1990s war. The Brcko District, however, is inhabited and governed jointly by Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats. In the public sector employment, all three ethnic groups are secured participation through ethnic quotas. Furthermore, the ethnically integrated high schools in Brcko represent a rare example in the country. The institutional design has established certain structures favorable for a move towards ethnic reconciliation. However, my ethnographic study of inter-ethnic relations and ethnic reconciliation highlights ethnic divisions and different collective understandings and representations of the past by the three main ethnic groups. Ethnic divisions and collective understandings of the past continue to affect the inhabitants' interactions with other ethnic groups and become impediments in achieving reconciliation.

The youth of Brcko live in a society which is strongly shaped by ethnicity and politically structured along ethnic lines. The ethnic groups' different interpretations of the past, and in particular the war in Bosnia (1992–1995), play important parts in shaping and structuring social relationships. The past is contested in politics, the educational system, public display of symbols and ceremonies, as well as in the media. Furthermore, the family acts as an institution in which deeper inter-ethnic interaction is often discouraged, and a strong ethnic identity is encouraged. For instance, inter-ethnic marriages are discouraged by many ordinary people, something that represents a change from the times of socialist Yugoslavia where inter-ethnic marriages were widespread.

The societal structures shaped by ethnicity are manifest in different ways in the lives of Brcko's youth. Public arenas like cafés, pubs and nightclubs are to a large extent informally ethnically divided. The youth are expected to find a partner of the same ethnic belonging as themselves. Moreover, they are expected to support the ethnically motivated discourses of their own group. Some examples of these types of ethnically motivated discourses are a view of history which is favorable to their own ethnic group, support of Serbia's national teams in sport for Serbs, or the Bosnian national teams for Bosniaks. When applying for a public job within the Brcko District, ethnicity is relevant and must be stated, because people are hired in public positions in lines with ethnic quotas.

The social realities that young people live in, tend to influence their practices, and many seem to unquestionably accept of the ethnically defined social structures. As the structures become embedded in peoples' practices and social interactions, they become naturalized over time. Others appear, consciously or unconsciously, to be less affected by ethnic divisions. Some of the young people I encountered in Brcko, attempt to challenge the ethnically divided societal structures and identify and interact along other lines of identification. However, this alternative interaction and identification requires certain strategies.

One important strategy in handling ethnic differences is humor. Some of my informants take part in 'joking relationships' with their friends of other ethnicities, where differences regarding ethnicity and religion are mutually joked about. Another strategy which seems to be central in maintaining good inter-ethnic relations and friendships is to silence topics which could be sources of ethnic contestation. In the ethnically mixed groups of friends with whom I spent a lot of time, it was evident that the war is rarely or never spoken of. Corruption and unemployment, on the other hand, is vividly spoken about, as these are topics which affect people regardless of ethnicity. These topics are much less contentious sources of conflict than ethnicity.

There are certain places which are frequented by people of all ethnic backgrounds. These arenas provide an alternative to the many formally or

informally ethnically divided arenas in the city. The people frequenting these places tend to identify with an 'alternative' taste of music and style of clothing (see chapter six for a discussion on the term 'alternative'). Ethnicity does not play any major role in their interactions in these places. These places are to a certain extent experienced as 'free spaces' in a society characterized by ethnic divisions. To identify along other lines than ethnic ones, and to interact in arenas frequented predominantly by people who share the same means of identification as yourself, can also be seen as a strategy to handle living in a society largely structured by ethnicity. There are also public and formalized arenas which allow the Brcko youth to engage in inter-ethnic encounters. The ethnically mixed schools and the Brcko Youth Center (*Omladinski Centar*) are two examples of such. In these arenas, social relationships are built between people of different ethnic backgrounds, and they are examples of institutional measures to strengthen inter-ethnic relations.

Even though youth develop strategies in order to overcome the ethnically divided societal structures, and wish to encourage interactions with people of other ethnicities, the societal structures are still determining their lives. Strong family structures played its part when my Serb informant Marko broke up with his Bosniak girlfriend of 2 years, because his family never accepted the relationship. The newly graduated teacher Edin publicly defines as a Bosniak, though he sees himself only as a Bosnian. The reason is found in the institutional structures of the Brcko District, where public positions are filled according to ethnic quotas of 40% Serbs, 40% Bosniaks and 20% Croats. In public institutions like the schools, there is no place in the quotas for a person who wants to define as a Bosnian, and not as a Bosniak (or Serb or Croat). The point is that the youth can develop strategies in order to navigate within a society structured along ethnic lines, but that the structures still, to a certain extent, determine their personal identity and social organization.

Most of my informants either did not experience the war in the 1990s, or were too young to remember it. Still, they are affected by living in a post-war society. Events, memories and responsibilities regarding the war are however subjects to

ethnically divided discourses, and the three major ethnic groups all still tend to see themselves as the biggest victims of the 1990s war. The diverse and conflicting views of the past continue to complicate interaction between people of different ethnicities. Brcko can in my opinion not be described as a *reconciled* city. Rather, it is a city which has restored a basic inter-ethnic *tolerance*, and the inhabitants appear to accept that Brcko is home to Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats.

The leading politicians of Bosnia have since the end of the war in 1995 been more concerned with maintaining ethnic divisions (and thus their basis for political power), than to find solutions to other societal issues like unemployment or lack of foreign investments. Furthermore, the country is not immune to global developments. Economic crisis, political radicalization, terrorism and ethnically conflicting choices of foreign allies are all relevant issues in Bosnia. The vital question remains whether the youth of contemporary Bosnia will pave the road towards better inter-ethnic relations and stability in the future, or if the increasing political polarization we see in the world today might have an influence, and destabilize the fragile country in the heart of the Balkans.

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