

Perpetrators' Confessions during Ongoing Conflict Situations

Dr. Ruthie Ginsburg

'Breaking the Silence' (BS) is an established Israeli organization whose aim, according to their official website, is to bring events occurring in the State's 'backyard' to the attention of the Israeli community. Since the year 2000, the organization has interviewed more than 750 soldiers who have served in the Occupied Territories. These testimonies, upon first appearance, would seem to reveal that international laws are being violated by the Israeli forces. These testimonies, as emphasized by the organization, have come from combat soldiers who confess to acts that they have either perpetrated or witnessed. The special status afforded to combatants assists to provide the organization with the authority to criticize the ethical deterioration of the Israeli military.¹

The practice of publishing confessions of perpetrators, such as soldiers, is not unique to BS. By way of example, the confessions of American veterans who confessed to war crimes committed in Iraq have been published and ex-soldiers of Pinochet's military forces declared that they are willing to confess to crimes committed during their service.² On different occasions, perpetrators have been encouraged to confess their actions or to report other crimes, in the process of truth-telling in 'post-conflict' as a healing method towards reconciliation. At times these confessions were initiated by organizations (or NGOs), such as Helsinki Watch in former Yugoslavia; and at times by truth and reconciliation committees, such as in South Africa, and Argentina.³ In order to disclose 'truth' and to settle with the past in 'post-conflict' democratic societies, perpetrators are asked to confess to their deeds in public.

Most of Israeli non-governmental organizations that focus on the violations of Palestinians' human rights are 'managing' the local conflict as it is happening, by monitoring and documenting the violation of rights and attempting to provide relief by persecuting the offenders. In comparison, the practice of BS can be characterized as 'post-conflict' practice. That is, documenting and publishing confession of perpetrators. The proposed paper explores, through examination of the non-governmental Israeli organization BS, the phenomenon of the 'post-conflict' practice of confession in the context of an 'ongoing conflict' situation. It will compare the confessions that are collected by BS to confessions from reconciliation hearings, and bring to light the differences between the performance of perpetrators challenged by an audience of victims and survivors and those who are not. I intend through this comparison to examine if the work of BS is an example of 'post conflict' civilian action or if it is an 'in-between' organization, i.e. an organization that not only deals with 'managing' the conflict but also deals with 'post conflict' situations.

¹ <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>

² See: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ys5bC0esMKU&feature_dyn/content/article/2009/11/01/AR2009110100656.html) , <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/01/AR2009110100656.html>

³ Regarding these procedures see Payne 2005; Payne 2008.

Phantoms of the past realized in present images and the effect of this realization on an actual conflict.

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The Fiddler at Bet Iba Checkpoint
Photo: Horit Herman Peled, Machsom Watch
November 2004



Prisoners at a concentration Serbian camp Photo:
INT
June 1992

In her book, *Regarding the pain of others*, Susan Sontag describes two roles of photographs in an archive. The first one refers to an image of Bosnians photographed at a Serbian prison (1992). Sontag argues that the picture's resemblance to the atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust rendered it a status of more than a mere illustration. The image of emaciated prisoners behind a barbed wire fence cleared away misconceptions. Light was shed upon the conflict in question through representational repetition of horrific images from the Holocaust (p. 84).

The second role of a photograph in an archive, adds Sontag, is in helping to build a collective memory. In the context of an archive, photographs function as representative images that serve to verify certain ideologies. Consequently, the photographs operate as stirrers of already-known emotions and thoughts (p. 86).

However, in her sequence of associations whilst looking at photographs, Sontag does not linger to reflect upon her own observations. Whereas the first role of the photograph is to remove prejudice, the second reinforces already known and established opinions.

In my presentation I intend to compare these two roles and ask how they engage with an actual conflict.

I will look at a photograph taken by a human rights activist (2004) of a young Palestinian playing a violin at an Israeli military checkpoint. Similar to the Serbian-Bosnian photo mentioned above, the image of the Palestinian violinist has evoked in the Israeli and international public memories of Holocaust victims. As a second generation survivor of the Holocaust, the Israeli photographer was enraged by the demand of Israeli soldiers for the

Palestinian to play before them. The mentioning of the Holocaust reinforced an image of the fiddler - a known image - of Jew as a victim.

Whereas the image of the Bosnian prisoners served to encourage the international community to intervene in the conflict, the public debate in the Israeli newspapers shows that the image of the Palestinian violinist did not. In the paper I will aim to consider this complexity. I will consider this state of affairs in which the recognition of 'phantoms of the past' in present images of actual conflict has such a mixed impact, wondering what may be inferred from these different reactions about the nature of the conflict.

Ruthie Ginsburg has written her dissertation at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, under the supervision of Dr. Ariella Azoulay and Prof. Ronen Shamir. She continued her research in the U.K at the Durham Centre for Advanced Photography Studies, working with Prof. David Campbell. Her research focuses on the discourse of local Israeli Human Rights organizations through critical reading of their visual documentation, She has published several papers in English and Hebrew on this topic. Ginsburg is currently teaching at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, Hamidrasha, The School of Art, Beit Berl College, and Seminar Hakibbutzim College, Tel Aviv.