



Telling Histories

images, memories, narrations

The Burden of Silence: Coping with the Trauma of War Rape

On 27 January 2016 a Dutch tribunal recognized for the first time the responsibility of the Dutch state for the rape of an Indonesian woman in 1949 by Dutch colonial soldiers. This historic decision was partly made possible by the important work accomplished by the UN International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR), recognizing mass rapes for the first time as war crimes, acts of torture, crimes against humanity or acts of genocide.



Image credit: Midhat Poturović

Until the early 1990s war rapes were generally considered as an inevitable “collateral damage” of war. The mass rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda have made the gendered aspects of violence in war more visible and have also contributed to the development of support structures for the victims, as well as new scholarly work on this issue. First person testimonies of the victims are of crucial importance both for establishing the facts and for understanding the long-term consequences of rape on the victims’ lives.

“The pain will never go away”, “I will never be able to be the woman I was”, these statements by witnesses at the ICTY illustrate this point.

In her presentation Riki van Boeschoten will look at these long-term consequences of war rape by analyzing the narrated life story of a Slavophone woman raped by a Greek soldier during the Greek Civil War. The interview, conducted in 1998, revealed the importance of “recognition” and “retribution” for the victims of rape, and how the sharing of multi-layered traumas can turn individual memory into part of a collective story.

Riki Van Boeschoten is Emeritus Professor of the Department of History, Archeology and Social Anthropology of the University of Thessaly, where she taught Oral History and Social Anthropology from 2000-2015. Recently she co-authored with fellow anthropologist Loring Danforth a book entitled “Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory” (Chicago University Press, 2011), which in 2013 was awarded the Edmund Keeley Book Prize by the Modern Greek Studies Association. In 2012 Riki took the initiative to set up a Greek Oral History Association and was elected its first President (www.epi.uth.gr). Since 2013 she is a member of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the journal “Oral History”.