

Old wounds—new challenges: Women’s war experiences in the ex-Yugoslav and Bosnian armed conflict (1991-1995)

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ABSTRACT: Women suffered greatly during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They lost everything they owned, they were widowed, had to flee, were victims of sexual violence or even lost their lives. Most have never gotten over their trauma from the war. Many of their tormentors have still never been brought to justice. At the same time, there were also women who supported the military conflict and ethnic hate as spreaders of propaganda, nationalists and war criminals. This article will explore the different fates and range of agency open to women, who were to be sure primarily victims in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, but not just. It will also be shown how even after suffering brutal wartime experiences, women are now fighting for their rights and breaking open the patriarchal social structure existing up to today.

KEYWORDS: war, Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, women, war victims, perpetrators, violence

INTRODUCTION: THE WAR IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing political and social transformations in the “Eastern Bloc”, in Yugoslavia there were also new borders being drawn and declarations of independence. Four republics in Yugoslavia declared their independence after 1990: Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991), Macedonia (1991) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992) (Nielsen 2021). Montenegro and Serbia continued to form the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until 2003. Serbia tried to prevent the Slovenia’s and Croatia’s aspirations towards independence with military intervention. The Yugoslav People’s Army (Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija, JNA) was instrumentalized by Belgrade (Report of *The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*, no date). They first entered Slovenia in June of 1991 where a ten-day war broke out. After that,

a much larger conflict shifted to Croatia. The battle of the eastern Croatian town of Vukovar, lasting from September 14th – November 20th and ultimately captured by the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian guerillas, became a part of the collective memory due to the Ovčara massacre committed by the Serbs. The Croatian war ultimately cost over 20,000 lives (Bužinkić/Jakovčić 2012: 11).

The civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke out in April 1992, shortly after the Bosniak and Croatian population voted in favor of breaking away from the rest of Yugoslavia in a referendum. As there were numerous ethnic warring factions, this war developed into a much more complex and brutal conflict. Before the war, around 43% (Calic 2012: 79) of the population Bosnia and Herzegovina were Bosnian Muslims, called Bosniaks (bošnjaci). Bosnia Serbs made up 31% of the population and Croats 17% (Calic 2012: 79). While the majority of Bosnian Muslims wanted an independent Bosnian and Herzegovinian state, the Bosnian Serb troops were fighting for Serbia to annex the country and Bosnian Croats wanted *Herceg-Bosna* to become part of Croatia. In contrast to the Croats and Serbs, the Bosniaks could not count on the support of a “home country” and were dependent on the support of several predominately Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia (Steindorff 2001: 221; Burg/Shoup: 327, 359, 399).

After the Bosnian Serb militias merged with the Yugoslav People's Army, the Serbian offensive captured around 70% (Steindorff 2001: 219) of the country, including the territory of the entity known today as the *Republika Srpska*. Particularly tragic was the situation that developed in the capital of Sarajevo, which was under siege by the Bosnian Serbs for 44 months (Morrison/Lowe 2021). There were around 1,600 children among the 11,541 casualties (Morrison/Lowe 2021: 1). The Massacre of Srebrenica cost at least 8,372 Bosniak boys and men and their lives as victims of “ethnic cleansing” (Hanson-Green 2021: 15). It was carried out by Serbian-Bosnian troops under the command of General Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, president of the *Republika Srpska* at the time and commander-in-chief of the army of the same name, as well as Biljana Plavšić, his second-in-command and successor. *The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)* and the *International Court of Justice* ruled that the crimes of Srebrenica, the most serious war crimes in Europe since the end of World War II, constituted genocide (Burg/Shoup 2009; Nettlefield/Wagner 2014; Bitunjac 2017). They were committed with the goal of wiping out an entire ethnic and religious group. In the end, the price of the Bosnian war was extremely high: in 2007 the *Research and Documentation Center* in Sarajevo determined that 97,207 were killed in the conflict and that of those, 40% were civilians (Tokača 2012: 13).

How could such a war happen in the middle of Europe? The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began to take its course already in the 1980s, especially after the death of Josip Broz, commonly known as Tito, who had been appointed president for life. The permanent financial crisis, movements for national autonomy as well as nationalistic anti-Yugoslav movements were among the important factors driving the dissolution of the multi-ethnic state. Although latent nationalism and ethnic stereotypes already existed in Yugoslavia, the different peoples, mainly Christian Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim, peacefully co-existed. Marshall Tito's politics were ultimately based on uniting the peoples of Yugoslavia under the motto of “Fraternity

and Unity” (bratstvo i jedinstvo).

The increasingly politicized treatment of the past after Tito’s death and the increasing nationalism in almost all of the republics allowed for historical arguments to be used in justifying fighting a particular opponent in the wars which disintegrated Yugoslavia. The mobilization of combatants was partially initiated by charismatic politicians from all the warring factions exploiting diffuse fears and activating deeply rooted stereotypes and codes from many people’s subconscious (Calic 2012: 51 – 60).

The war propaganda was not, however, limited to the spread of ethnic stereotypes, but also cemented a traditional, nationalistic distinction in gender (Sieber 2011: 121) which hadn’t existed in socialist Yugoslavia to that extent. Compared to other European countries, Yugoslavia showed emancipatory progress after the Second World War (Calic 2012: 138). This has changed since the war began, when women were increasingly assigned the traditional role of family protector. The use of sexual violence through the different warring factions tore exactly these social and familial structures apart.

WOMEN AS VICTIMS IN THE BOSNIAN WAR

In the last wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, women were historically known mainly as victims of sexual violence and assault by the male-dominated armies and paramilitary forces. For the first time *The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia* had to establish that systematic rape in war was a crime against humanity. According to estimates by the United Nations and the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, between 20,000 and 50,000 women and girls were systematically raped and sexually abused during the war.

In the war zones, women of every nationality and religion were in danger of becoming victims of sexual violence and exploitation. The perpetrators included men from all three ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks. The fact should also not be ignored that the UN blue helmets responsible for preserving peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina were often involved in the trafficking of women. The largest number of victims, however, were Bosniak, Muslim women and girls, who were being held in their occupied villages or camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina run by mostly Bosnian Serbs and raped and sexually abused for days or even months (Amnesty International report, January 1993).

Rape is considered to be an especially effective and cruel weapon of war. It serves to destroy the enemy’s social and cultural structures. In addition, the rape of a woman sends the message to the male enemy that he is not able to guarantee the safety of his family and, therefore, also not of his country. As women have taken on a key role in the biological as well as socio-cultural reproduction in traditional national identity, this value structure threatened to shatter as a consequence of sexual violence. A rape represents “the symbolic rape of the body of this community” (Seifert 1993: 101). The social structure was even more destroyed when family members were forced to rape their own female relatives.

According to the Mazowiecki Commission, named after Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the

former Polish prime minister and the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia, these crimes took place on orders of the commanders of the Bosnian Serb army. In his "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia" Mazowiecki further describes their motivation:

Rape is an abuse of power and control in which the rapist seeks to humiliate, shame, degrade and terrify the victim. In all his reports, the Special Rapporteur has emphasized the variety of methods which are used to achieve ethnic cleansing. Rape is one of these methods, as has been stated from the outset. In this context, rape has been used not only as an attack on the individual victim, but is intended to humiliate, shame, degrade and terrify the entire ethnic group. There are reliable reports of public rapes, for example, in front of a whole village, designed to terrorize the population and force ethnic groups to flee. (Mazowiecki 1993: 19)

Within the nationalist context of establishing a "Greater Serbia" (the idea of territorial expansion), the Yugoslav People's Army, wanted not only to torture the body and soul of those women they had stigmatized as their enemy, but to impregnate them. Irma Oosterman testified against Karadžić and Mladić: "The soldiers told often that they were forced to do it. They did not say who forced them to do it, but they were ordered to it. And: "They wanted to make Serb or Chetnik babies" (Trial Transcript at 412, 1996; Weitsmann 2008: 570).

The goal of impregnating women in the context of "ethnic cleansing" was to enable Serbian children to be born. A woman's Muslim background did not matter from the rapist's point of view (Weitsmann 2008: 571; Seifert 1995). By giving birth to a child conceived by rape, the women were meant to be even more psychologically damaged. The rapists were establishing future problems; their violence did not only affect the generation directly involved in the war, but also their descendants. Today the children of the raped women—in case they even know where they came from—are often seen as "bastards" or "invisible children" in the still patriarchal society. The number of children born as a result of the systematic rape in Bosnia and Hercegovina is between 2,000 and 4,000 (Weitsmann 2008: 565 ff; Daniel-Wrabetz 2007).

The traumatic experiences in war, including internment, abuse and rape, continue to determine the victims' lives. They suffer from the serious long-term effects of their violent experiences in the war, such as depression, panic attacks, physical complaints and anxiety. The results of the study "Research on the long-term consequences of war rape and coping strategies of survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina" by the women's aid organization Medica Zenica included the following conclusions:

70% of the participants state that the rape experience completely affects their life today. [...] Despite the unique status of civilian victim of war, which 79% of the women in our sample have obtained, the participants overwhelmingly agree that governmental, cantonal and entity institutions do nothing for survivors. Essential support is perceived as only being provided by NGOs. The presence of ongoing stigmatization in communities, the lack of protection for witnesses and

insensitivity towards survivors of war rape in institutions, and shortcomings in the implementation of the law regarding the status clearly outweigh any positive role that this political mechanism of granting war rape survivors a special status could play. (Husić et al. 2014: 13–14)

Thanks to the support of the NGO Medica Zenica the “Law on basics of social protection, protection of civilian victims of war and families with children” (Zakon o osnovama socijalne zaštite, zaštite civilnih žrtava rata i zaštite porodice sa djecom) was passed in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The law offers women who were raped or sexually abused in the war the possibility to apply for financial restitution, though the bureaucratically complex approval procedure does not always do justice to the particular severity of the trauma suffered. The numbers bear this out, as well: up to today, only around 800 people have been recognized as having the status of a civilian victim of wartime rape, which shows that the situation of these women is not being taken seriously enough by the government and authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Amnesty International report, September 2017). A change in attitude in the women’s favor will likely be extremely difficult to achieve in today’s heavily nationalistic Bosnia and Herzegovina.

WOMEN AS COMBATANTS AND WAR CRIMINALS

It was not a new phenomenon in the Balkans for women to take up arms in various conflicts over the course of the long 20th century. Though female combatants were always severely underrepresented, they still gained their place in military history. In Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo, for example, some women, called *burnessh* (sworn virgin), *virgin*, *tobelija* or woman-heroine, decided to become men (Vince-Pallua 2001). They declared in front of the village’s elders to want to remain celibate and could then take on a male name. Also, they gained all the rights that belonged only to men and assumed all the social responsibilities which meant that they also had to go to war (Vince-Pallua 2001).

There were also frequently individual women in Serbia who had to overcome various hurdles in the masculine world of the military before they achieved military recognition, such as the war heroine Sofija Jovanović, who took part in the First Balkan War and later the First World War as the first woman in the Serbian army (Potholm 2021). She was later decorated with 13 medals. The Serbian woman Milunka Savić even dressed as a man to fight in the war against the Ottomans. Even when her gender was revealed due to a hospital stay, it did not prevent her from participating the First World War.

In the Second World War, when the first Yugoslavia was divided and occupied by the Axis powers, the People’s Liberation Army led by the communist leader Josip Broz Tito mobilized around 10,000 female Yugoslav combatants who, together with their male comrades, liberated the country from the local fascists and occupiers in 1945 (Jan-car-Webster 1990). After the war, it wasn’t until 1983 when women were once again allowed to serve in the Yugoslav People’s Army.

While the socialist propaganda of the 1940s recruited women for military service

with emancipatory slogans and set equal rights for Yugoslav women as an important political goal, in a complete contrast, all sides in the Balkan War in the 1990s propagated masculinity and machismo (Hughson Blagojevic 2012). This phenomenon was accompanied by flaming nationalism, which strongly pushed for traditional gender roles and instrumentalized women as only being passive victims. This stigmatization did not, however, result in the women who actually had been victimized remaining in this role forever. The mothers of Srebrenica, for example, the surviving relatives of the victims of the genocide of Bosniak men and boys, fought tirelessly for the legal recognition of the crime after the war (see their activities on the official website <http://www.enklave-srebrenica-zepa.org/english.index.php>). In doing so as members of a strongly patriarchal Muslim society, they were leaving the private sphere and continue to appear in public to campaign for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Besides advocating for peace, which is stereotypically considered women's work, women also took an active part in the war. The need to protect one's own life and assert one's national interests led also women to become combatants themselves within the former Yugoslavia and support their local army. There has been less focus on research of women as soldiers in regular and paramilitary units or as offenders, who remained in the minority as opposed to the men (Prusina 2019). It is known, however, that around 5,360 women served in the Bosniak dominated Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine) in various roles such as doctors, nurses, office workers, but also as soldiers (Omanić et al. 2010: 136). The female soldiers were considered to be "Amazons", seen as a kind of mythical being who were characterized by their courage, but were also extremely conspicuous in the male dominated military domain (Spahić/Aganović/Delić 2014: 119 ff.) Thirteen Bosnian women were honored for their courage with the prestigious honor of the Golden Lily (Zlatni ljiljan). There was also a women's only unit in the Bosnia and Herzegovinian army called "The Bluebirds" under the command of Sabaheta Ćutuk (Spahić/Aganović/Delić 2014: 121).

Between 14,443 and 23,080 women served in the armed forces in the Republic of Croatia (Oružane Snage Republike Hrvatske) in various functions (Stanić/Mravak 2012: 12; Bradarić 2011). Circa 766 female soldiers died and 1,973 are living today as invalids. In the Croatian War of Independence or Homeland War (Domovinski rat), as it is called in Croatia, women made up around 5 percent of all combatants (Šućur/Babić/Ogresta 2017: 11; 27; Stanić/Mravak 2012: 12). Many of them had to face discrimination because of their gender. One female Croatian soldier who fought in Croatia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina described the situation for women on the front in the following way: "Here in Croatia it was okay, but when they saw me, they [the male soldiers] would still say 'oh, a woman', but in Bosnia a woman on the front was in the lowest category" (Ebrod.net 2016).

The fact that women in the military had to face gender stereotypes and discrimination from their male comrades not only demonstrates the intolerance of these men towards their female comrades-in-arms, but also reinforces the view that does not understand women to exercise autonomous agency. Their traditional sphere is the invisible and domestic, even when the conditions of war force them to emerge from these

private and familiar surroundings. Again and again we can see a certain continuity in the behavior structure of male soldiers in wars in which female combatants had taken part in the past. As Yugoslav women had already taken up arms in the Second World War, they must have already then experienced discrimination from their own comrades (Sklevicky 1996: 25–61; Bitunjac 2016: 131 f). It was by no means uncommon for female soldiers as well as politically active women in the heavily male-dominated wars to be degraded as less valuable, incompetent—and yes, even for being “easy targets”. Nothing much has changed in this way of thinking in some countries up to today (Asimović Akyol 2019; Lazarević/Tadić 2018).

In times of war, this discriminatory attitude meant that female soldiers and nurses on the front were also in danger of becoming victims of sexual assault and not only by members of the respective enemy armies. Female Croatian former soldiers (Croat. *braniteljice*/Engl. defenders) report that they were raped by high-ranking officers in their own army. Some of the women became pregnant and kept the baby; others had abortions. The victims have remained silent about who the rapists were until today. Because the women had to quit the Croatian armed forces due to their pregnancies, they did not receive a war pension later on and are today often living on public assistance (Ebrod.net 2016).

However, not only men were perpetrators of crimes in the war, but also female combatants. Some of them were found guilty of being war criminals for their acts of violence, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Drakulić 2004). Azra Bašić, for example, who fought in the Croatian Defence Council (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane, HVO), the Croatian army in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was sentenced to 14 years in jail for the crimes she committed on the Serbian civilian population in Derventa in 1992. Marina Grubišić-Fejzić, who fought in both the Croatian Defence Council as well as the Bosnia and Herzegovinian army, abused Serbian prisoners in the camp in Dretelj. She was put on trial in Tuzla and did not see herself as a war criminal, but assured: “I am someone who is proud of myself and I stood in places where men didn’t dare stand. I am proud of fighting for this country so that someone would not take my country away” (Prusina 2018). Although she could be connected to specific crimes, she denied her involvement and refused to take the blame.

There is still no data available on how many women fought as combatants in the Yugoslav People’s Army and the Bosnian Serb paramilitary units. Here, though, as well, women were also involved in crimes against humanity. The Bosnian Serb Ranka Tomić was sentenced to five years in prison by the Higher Court in Belgrade for her role in the abuse and killing of Karmen Kamenčić, an 18 year old orderly, in July 1992 during the Bosnian war (Prusina 2018). The Serb Maja Bjelos was sentenced to nine years in prison by the Higher Court in Belgrade for war crimes. After the fall of the Croatian city of Vukovar, she was an accomplice in the killing of 200 hospital patients in the nearby town of Ovčara (Prusina 2018).

Biljana Plavšić, the former president of the Serb-dominated entity of the *Republika Srpska*, was the only woman convicted of being a war criminal by the *International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia*. A trained biochemist, she, along with the Serbian leader Radovan Karadžić, whose deputy she was until 1996, were among

the founding members of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) (Bachmann 2003). In this role in the war she supported the crimes against humanity and called the “ethnic cleansing” of the Bosniak civilian population a “natural phenomenon” (Bachmann 2003). For her, the Bosniaks were originally ethnic Serbs, but had lost their “Slavic blood” during the conversion in the Ottoman Empire. She therefore referred to them as “genetically deformed Serbs” (Ulrich 2003). She called for violence (Bachmann 2003) and personally went to the soldiers on the front to stir them up with nationalistic hate speeches against Bosniaks and Croats (Ulrich 2003). She was therefore a central enabler of the war crimes.

In no way did she attempt to use her power as a prominent and influential politician to prevent any crime against humanity. On the contrary, she even had Bosniak children taken as hostages to be used to blackmail the release of some of her relatives. Her fanaticism also long hindered the peace process with the other warring factions (Ulrich 2003). After she was elected president, Plavšić turned against her nationalist former comrade Karadžić and changed course after the war. She admitted her guilt and in February 2003 Biljana Plavšić was sentenced to 11 years in prison by *The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*. Although she had not been involved in planning the war crimes, she approved and supported them. After serving two-thirds of her sentence and also due to her having pled guilty, she was released early by Sweden, where she had been imprisoned (Martens 2009; Gamillscheg 2009). It was not noticed that her remorse was a tactical calculation (Martens 2009). Instead she reported to a journalist that she had avoided eating together with Muslims in prison (Martens 2009). Nothing whatsoever had changed in her hatred of people from other faiths.

The list of female war criminals and their cruel deeds could go on. Women who did not fit the classic, peaceful ideal of femininity were and are a part of every war. Due to the ubiquity of positive female stereotypes, women are only rarely perceived as active participants in war. This is presumably why there are far fewer studies of female “war-mongers” in the Yugoslav wars than of the female rape victims. There are several areas remaining open to research such as the question of how much influence the wives of powerful men could wield. For example, it is known that the wives of both Milošević and Karadžić influenced their politics (Hartmann 2003; Tichomirowa 2006).

OUTLOOK

On November 21, 1995 Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović and the Croatian President Franjo Tuđman signed the Dayton Accords, which brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Calić 2012: 249–267). Its political solution was to separate the country into two parts: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in which mostly Bosniaks and Croats live today, and the *Republika Srpska* with a largely Serb population. However, not a single woman was involved in the peace process, not even as a mediator between the warring parties, for example (Asimović Akyol 2019). At the same time, the inclusion of women in political processes and institutions as well as peace negotiations is critical for a

gender sensitive security policy. Women approach the peace process from a different perspective.

Since then, however, minimal progress has been made in the area of security policy. The study “The status of women in the military in the Western Balkans” (Položaj žena u oružanim snagama država Zapadnog Balkana) points out that women make up at least nine percent of all military personnel in the Western Balkans. Each army has mechanisms in place to sensitize its members about gender equality and specific contacts in charge of cases of women’s discrimination (Balon 2014).

Also, in the Balkans, like in many other European countries, women are greatly underrepresented in politics (Lazarević/Tadić 2018). The difficult economical and social situation also obstructs women’s participation in the political arena: The Western Balkans is shaped by growing instability. Considerations to change the borderlines according to ethnic criteria in Kosovo and Bosnia, widespread corruption, organized crime, political patronage and a weak rule of law are some of the problems confronting the Western Balkans. Relations between the Balkan countries are less on friendly terms, particularly due to the fact that nationalism, including historical revisionism, hate speech, glorification of one’s own war criminals and territorial claims prevent an open dialogue. The trend of nationalism in the Balkans also paralyzes women’s participation in the political process. A greater inclusion of women in institutions and political decision-making processes would mean that civilian victims, especially rape victims, could exercise their rights. A greater percentage of women in politics would also take gender policy into consideration at all levels. After all, gender equality is ultimately a fundamental part of all democratic societies.

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