
A War Written on Her Body: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Hidden Genocide

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Abstract: The following text is an excerpt from my Bachelor's Thesis entitled *The War on Women's Body: a Multidimensional Analysis of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence* (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, June 2025). It focuses on the systematic use of sexual violence during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting how rape was employed as a strategic weapon of ethnic cleansing by Serbian forces. Drawing on legal, political, and personal testimonies, the analysis explores how sexual violence functioned not only as a tool of terror and domination, but also as a mechanism of genocidal intent. Crucially, the text invites reflection on the legacy of such atrocities and whether, decades later, justice has truly been achieved for the women who endured them – making this not only a historical inquiry, but a deeply relevant issue for the present.

Between 1992 and 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the theatre of one of the most violent and tragic wars in Europe since World War II. It has been a conflict whose legacy, especially in terms of sexual violence, continues to raise urgent questions about justice, memory, and accountability today.

The Bosnian War followed the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a multi-ethnic federation destabilized by the collapse of communism, the death of Tito, worsening economic crises, and resurging nationalism across Eastern Europe. As Bosnia proclaimed its independence in early 1992, a full-scale war erupted, driven by ethnonationalist ambitions – most notably Slobodan Milošević's vision of a "Greater Serbia". The war was marked by the siege of Sarajevo, the Srebrenica genocide, and the systematic displacement of populations. Among the many forms of violence that marked the Bosnian War, there was a pattern of abuse that emerged as particularly widespread and devastating: the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

After the conflict, extensive evidence has confirmed the widespread perpetration of sexual violence. Women were victims and survivors of severe abuses, including repeated and systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancies, and other forms of sexual violence. Estimates of the number of women subjected to rape during the war vary between twelve thousand and fifty thousand. Although individuals from all ethnic groups committed acts of rape, the overwhelming majority were carried out by the Bosnian Serb forces, particularly those in the Srpska Republic Army (VRS) and Serbian paramilitary groups, which used rape as a strategic tool

of ethnic cleansing. The term ‘ethnic cleansing’ describes the strategy aimed at “rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area”, and it is used frequently by advocates who support the recognition of rape as a form of genocide. Indeed, many have argued that the widespread and systematic nature of the mass rapes, committed against the Bosnian population, demonstrates that these acts were part of a broader genocidal campaign, and that the Bosnian Serb Army deliberately used rape as a tool of genocide targeting the Bosnian Muslim ethnic group. In this view, “genocidal rape” was employed not only to “encourage the evacuation of all non-Serbs but to destroy parent-child and spousal bonds and render large numbers of the society’s child-bearing women contaminated and thus unmarriageable”.

The United Nations Commission of Experts identified five patterns of rape which reflected the systematic and organized nature of this Serbian policy. The first involved sexual violence occurring alongside looting and intimidation preceding the outbreak of major conflict in the region; another emerged during active combat, where rape was perpetrated during the fighting; a third pattern was observed in detention centers or so-called refugee “collection centers”, where women were held and abused; the fourth took place in “bordello” camps, specifically set up for sexual exploitation. The fifth pattern of rape instead, unfolded in designated “rape camps established in buildings such as hotels, schools, restaurants, hospitals, factories, peacetime brothels, or even animal stalls in barns, fenced pens, and auditoriums”. The rape camps represented one of the main strategies used by Serbian forces during the war, and it is profoundly disturbing even to imagine the great suffering and brutality experienced by women detained there. One of the primary objectives of the rape camps was to forcibly impregnate women. Forced impregnation would have served to “increase the Serbian population because under Islamic and Muslim law, a child’s ethnicity is determined by that of the father”. Therefore, “from an ethnic-cleansing perspective, the child assumes the nationality of the rapist”. Women who became pregnant were required to stay in the camps for seven to eight months. They were examined by gynaecologists, and those found pregnant were separated from the others and provided with food and other so-called “special privileges”. They were only released, and typically sent to Serbia, once it was too late for them to get an abortion. However, a huge number of women were still killed either immediately after being raped, or “after becoming too debilitated to serve their purpose in a rape camp for the production of Serb babies”. Rapes took place in different camps set up by the Serb forces, such as in Keraterm, Vilina Vlas, Manjača, Omarska, Trnopolje, Uzamnica and Vojno. At Omarska camp for instance, between five thousand and seven thousand Bosnians and Croats were detained in early 1992. They were held in inhumane conditions, repeatedly raped, sexually assaulted and tortured. A newspaper described the situation there as “the location of an orgy of killing, mutilation, beating and rape”. But this is only one example. The number of rape camps was countless, and women, including young girls, were subjected to extreme forms of physical and psychological violence. For many, the trauma left lasting scars; for others, the brutality was so severe that it cost them their lives.

The following passage by Lynda E. Boose powerfully captures the horrific violence and atrocities that characterized the Bosnian War:

Against the organized, dispassionate, bureaucratized logic that is the horrific signifier of Nazi-orchestrated genocide, the savagery perpetrated in places like Foca, Manjača, or Camp Omarska reeks of another kind of brutality: uncontrolled, spontaneous, blood-fixed, and so remarkably adolescent as to suggest the existence of some unconscious script being played out alongside the canonical one of genocide as a strategy for territorial acquisition. In an orgy of nationalism bathed in alcohol, athletic contests, and Serbian songs, Serb soldiers threw Muslims off of cliffs and from hotel roofs into rivers, carved Orthodox crosses into their chests, hacked off the arms or legs of their victims, made women clean up the mess from such amputations, and then raped the women on top of the blood-soaked rags.

In response to mounting evidence and international outrage, the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993 through Resolution 827. This was the first time since Nuremberg that an international tribunal prosecuted wartime sexual violence as a crime under international law. While the ICTY stopped short of formally recognizing rape as a form of genocide, its jurisprudence laid essential groundwork. In the landmark *Furundžija case*, rape was recognized as a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions and as a violation of the laws and customs of war. Another milestone was the *Kunarac et al.* case, which marked the second ICTY case focused solely on charges of sexual violence and represents the first conviction of Serb men for the rape of Bosnian Muslim women. The court noted the systematic targeting of Muslim women in the Foca region and established sexual violence as part of a coordinated campaign. Still, no direct link to genocidal intent was proven in court. Critics like Shayna Rogers argue that despite evidence of ethnic-targeted violence, the ICTY deliberately avoided labelling these acts as genocide – a decision that many survivors and advocates viewed as a failure of justice.

But beyond legal definitions and judicial victories lies a reality more difficult to measure: the long-term consequences for survivors. These are not limited to physical effects, such as “sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, gynaecological problems and physical injuries”, but also extend to psychological and social dimensions. On the psychological side, survivors may experience “non-pathological distress, anxiety disorders, depression, medically unexplained somatic complaints, and alcohol and other substance use disorders, as well as suicidal ideation and self-harm”. Additionally, the social consequences, often underestimated, can be equally devastating. Survivors frequently face ostracism and rejection by their communities following the violence, which heightens their suffering and may result in profound feelings of shame and humiliation, further traumatising them. In the context of the Bosnian War, sexual violence, and in particular rape, was deliberately used as a means to demoralize an entire society. This form of demoralization involved a brutal invasion of the victim’s body, “which thereby constituted an attack upon the intimate self and dignity of the individual human being”. In this way, such violence functioned as a weapon of war.

Psychiatrist Muradis Kulenovic observed that the language employed in psychology to conceptualize the term ‘rape’ become deeply inadequate, if not entirely irrelevant, when applied to the experiences of many Bosniak women. For these

women, rape was not isolated, but part of a chain of traumatic events. Kulenovic says that:

The victim, prior to the rape, had experienced the massacre of children and parents, then had to watch the murder of her husband, who had been forced to watch the rape of his wife. Finally, ... terrified and probably naked, she had to flee under a rain of bullets from her burning village, stumbling on the mangled and charred bodies of her relatives, neighbors and friends.

Inger Skjelsbæk's narrative analysis captures how survivors' understanding of themselves shifts through these experiences. Some prefer to be called "victims," while others insist on "survivors" – a distinction that, far from being semantic, reflects personal journeys through pain, memory, and identity reconstruction. The words of women themselves, drawn from the interviews, convey the true magnitude of the violence they suffered: violence that courts and statistics cannot encapsulate.

Danira: It must have happened over 100 times that I was raped. They raped me everywhere, in burnt-out houses and in different rooms in the concentration camp. Once I asked them to kill me, because I could not go back to my kids after this, but they did not do this. Every day there were different men, and usually they came in groups and they would take out some women and rape them and bring them back, and after that a new group came.

Azra: These boys they were my neighbours. I remember them as young boys when I got married. One day he [the rapist] came to my house during the war and asked me to show him all the rooms in the house, and my son was playing in the garden when all of a sudden he took a knife and put it under my neck and asked me if I wanted to do it there by my own will or not, and at that point I knew exactly what would happen. He beat me so I could not breathe, and he kicked me in my stomach. I lost consciousness, and when I regained consciousness he raped me and there was blood all over. When he saw what happened, he just left me alone. He went out and asked the two soldiers that were in front of the house if they wanted to come up and rape me too.

Emilia: They raped me. Sometimes they were old and sometimes they were young, and it happened more than 50 times. I was only 16 years old, and every day I asked them to kill me, because I did not know anything about my family and all this was happening.

These women spoke about how the experience of wartime rape damaged their bodies, souls, and sense of human dignity, causing such profound suffering that some even asked their perpetrators to be killed. In the aftermath, several of them began experiencing insomnia, taking tranquilizers, developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and struggled with relationships with men in general.

The question that now arises is: have these women truly received justice? Some argue that they have. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) handled numerous cases involving sexual violence and rape, playing a crucial role in documenting and acknowledging the severe abuses endured by women. It gave voice to victims and survivors while prosecuting those responsible for these crimes. However, many survivors of wartime and post-conflict atrocities have expressed dissatisfaction with some of the Tribunal's more recent rulings. In decisions issued as late as November 2012, for instance, Serbia – the state responsible of perpetrating many of these crimes – was effectively granted impunity. This sense of injustice was further deepened by the controversial acquittal of Vojislav

Šešelj in March 2016, despite multiple charges against him, including sexual violence.

The testimonies outlined above uncover the cruelty of a violence that goes beyond physical violation. It is a violence that tears apart identity, community, and humanity itself. International justice mechanisms have made significant step forward in acknowledging sexual violence as a weapon of war, not only through ad hoc international tribunals, but also thanks to the emergence of ‘People’s Tribunals’ and the United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV). Yet, the unanswered question remains: can justice ever be truly served, when the scars left behind are so deep and the recognition of suffering so often incomplete?

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