Gendercide and the Bosnian War

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Ethnocentrism is the fuel of ethnic conflict, as it can lead to wars where military strategies quickly become extremist. People become divided by nationality, causing them to believe that ethnicity is linked to social privilege; class privilege is mistaken as the state’s intentional social and economic oppression of poor ethnic groups. Such misrecognition sparked explosions of gendered extremism during the Bosnian war genocide. The territorial unit of the former Yugoslavia, embedded with cultural acrimony and patriarchalism. It became a politicized male space where women’s bodies represented territory to conquered by means of rape. The genocidal rape of non-Serb women and the mass murders of non-Serb men constituted a “gendercide” committed against non-Serbs within Bosnia and Herzegovina; men and women suffered differently at the hands of the Serbs intending to emasculate, terrorize, and weaken states of whom they sought to control. The gendering of this conflict arose from Slobodan Milosevic’s political opportunism, which he predicated on mythic ancient ethnic hatreds, and the patriarchal masculinity embedded within Balkan culture.¹

Slobodan Milosevic and Ethnic Cleansing

The late Slobodan Milosevic, ex-president of Serbia, is the personification of Balkan patriarchy. His war crimes reflect a patriarchal masculinity that equates male power with domination and devaluation of the feminine and feminized “others.” Rising to power on an ultranationalist platform, Milosevic cited Serbian supremacy over all other Balkan ethnic groups. He paired his extreme right ideologies with the skilled demagoguery of a charismatic leader. By speaking of a Greater Serbia that would emerge through the seizure and cleansing of territory, he garnered
the approval necessary to commence an “ethnic cleanse” within the Balkans. Before Milosevic’s rekindling of the “ancient hatred” between Bosniak Muslims and Serbs, those residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been content in a relatively peaceful multicultural state for many years. Milosevic’s nationalist campaign, however, inspired hostility towards non-Serbs by constructing a distinctive Serbian identity to encapsulating the nation through what Satzewich puts forth as the foundations of ethnic identity. Urging Serbs to rise up and claim class privilege, the ultranationalist campaign rests on employing race as a category for designing difference. Describing the Balkans as the historical territory of Serbs, Milosevic ordained that Serbia ought to reclaim them. On the anniversary of Serbia’s 1389 defeat by the Ottoman Empire, he symbolically invoked Serbian history in a speech directed at Serbs all across Europe proclaiming: "Six centuries later, again we are in battles and quarrels. They are not armed battles, though such things should not be excluded yet." Recreating the Serbian ethnicity through his charismatic leadership, extreme right ideology, and a claim to territory, Milosevic’s invocation of history, nationalism, and racial privilege served a powerfully effective justification for war.

He shares traits similar to those of past charismatic leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin; however, he is perhaps more admirable (or despicable) depending on the value one places on honesty. To gain the territory of other Balkan states, Milosevic wrote ethnic cleansing into official policy allowing him to effectively propagate genocide; Hitler was more secretive in his genocidal campaign. The gendered genocide of the Bosnian war can be seen as a battle between a patriarchal, nationalist leadership and a threatened body of women. Milosevic’s mandate provided Serb citizens, military, and paramilitary forces with the rationale to justify the raping of women, the pillaging of their nation, and the murder of their men as a means to secure economic redistribution that would favor those of Serbian ethnic background. Allen describes the Serb policy of genocidal rape as follows:
1. The policy is aimed at the destruction of a people.
2. The best way to achieve this goal is to attack the women and children.
3. Rape is the ideal means to this destruction.
4. Rape is used as a torture preceding death and is used on males as well as females regardless of age.
5. Enforced pregnancy and eventual child birth.
6. Enforced pregnancy negating all cultural identifications of victims, reducing victims to sexual containers.
7. Three forms of genocidal rape
   a. Publicly
   b. Within concentration camps
   c. Within rape/death camps

Rape Warfare and Gendercide

In order to engage in a proper discourse of genocidal rape during the Bosnian war it is essential that we clarify the difference between rape warfare and peacetime rape. Lene Hansen distinguishes the former as a collective threat to a nation and the later as an individual risk. Raping of an individual is predisposed by the victim’s sexual features rather than their ethnicity. Moreover, wartime rape lacks the sexual connotations that surround the rape of an individual since it is perpetrated in the name of a nation, religion, or an ethnicity. In the Bosnian War, bodies became gendered and sexed, as non-Serb men were perceived to pose a military and sexual threat to Serb dominance; women were recognized as national territory and sexual container to be conquered and colonized.

Mary Hawkesworth explains that the genocidal rape that transpired during the Serbian incursion in Bosnia was strategically employed to achieve psychological and military objectives; raping Muslim women functioned to demoralize Bosnian men and to dehumanize the women. Women’s bodies were regarded as an arena for political contestation and thus dehumanized, politicized,
and perceived as male space.\textsuperscript{8} The patriarchal construction of women as political male space suggests that women are objects and their bodies a battlefield in a contest between rival males. Warfare becomes a contest of masculinity where the penis is weaponized and males fight to emasculate opponents by invading the bodies of their nation’s women. The ethnic gene pool is thus contaminated by the appropriation and colonizing the nation’s female bodies. This is because, in patriarchy, the inability to protect one’s woman and to control her sexual and procreative powers is recognized as weakness in men.\textsuperscript{9}

Michael Kimmel’s four rules of manhood state that femininity in any way, shape, or form invalidates masculinity.\textsuperscript{10} By this logic, raping a mass of ethnic women emasculates the men and feminizes the entire ethnicity, effectively weakening it beyond reconciliation. Milosevic used such societal norms and values to weaken enemy nations in his conquest of the Balkans. Non-Serb men were humiliated and weakened because they failed to be reliable protectors when confronted by Serbs. They were unable to maintain the dominance and control of women that patriarchy commands. It becomes clear that patriarchy is inherently homosocial as it concerns men and what goes on amongst them, pitting them one against one an “other” in a struggle for power, control, and domination. Misogyny and the oppression of women may be an important part of patriarchy but it is not the purpose.\textsuperscript{11} The goal of patriarchy is to maintain (male) privilege and control of “others.” Balkan patriarchy adopts genocidal rape as a tool to eradicate or at least subordinate the “other.” Eradication in the Bosnian war lies at the nexus of ethnicity and gender where a man’s failure to fulfill his gender role is a reflection on his ethnic group.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{The Three Forms of Genocidal Rape}

Allen describes the three forms of genocidal rape that Milosevic incorporated in his attempts to ethnically cleanse
Gendercide and the Bosnian War

They were part of a three-pronged approach to remove the Muslims and Croatians residing in Bosnia. First, militias (such as the Chetniks or other irregular Serb forces) would enter a village belonging to Bosnian-Herzegovina or Croatia and violently rape the non-Serb women in public. Soon, the whole village would hear news of the rape, which effectively humiliates Muslim and Croatian men who were powerless to protect “their” women. The women become scared, worrying that they may be raped too, and then official Serbian soldiers enter the village offering safe passage out of the village if villagers promise never to return. The largely unarmed villagers usually accept their coerced emigration that renders them stateless refugees. The second part of the Serbs rape campaign is to capture enemy women and confine them to concentration camps where they are raped at random. This is a method of torture preceding death. The last, and perhaps the most paradoxical, form of “ethnic cleansing” involves Serb forces arresting and imprisoning non-Serb women only to continually rape them until impregnation. Prisoners are held and subjected to physical and psychological torture until their forced pregnancy has progressed past any stage of safe abortion. The women who survive this brutal torture are later set free to have Serbian babies, their bodies having been successfully colonized in the eyes of Serbs. 13

The first of the two forms of genocidal rape Allen describes can be understood as war tactics of humiliation. Target populations are intimidated or exterminated, but the third form (enforced pregnancy) is perplexing, as the policy misunderstands eugenics. Improving the genetic composition of Bosnia’s population is sought through the extermination of what Milosevic saw as “undesired” ethnic groups. The murders were as strategically sound as they were evil because less non-Serbs would strengthen the numbers of the Serbs for political purposes, but forced impregnation fails to serve the same purpose. Forced impregnation is premised on the misconception that the victims lack any identification other than sex. Females are recognized only as empty
vessels or sexual containers. In reality, the resulting child will only be half Serbian. More importantly, if the mother decides to raise the, she will certainly not socialize it to a Serbian nationality, preventing the child from learning any allegiance to Serbia in the primary institution of socialization, family. Serbian policies of forced impregnation can only function if their torture methods effectively brainwash victims, robbing them of their national and religious attachments. Thus, the logical explanation behind forced impregnation is that the victims, who survive the rape as well as the resulting children, serve only as a lasting symbol of the nation’s defeat and feminization and nothing else.  

Rape is equated with the immediate conquest of the women through penetration, conquest of the men, insofar as the women are regarded as objects owned by the men, and the entire nation because women’s bodies (in patriarchy) correspond to the ethnic group’s national territory. In a speech to the UN Security Council on 24 August 1993, Bosnian Ambassador Muhamed Sacirbey graphically illustrated the Bosnian crisis through symbolism arguing that:

Bosnia and Herzegovina is being gang raped. . . . I do not lightly apply the analogy of a gang rape to the plight of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As we know, systematic rape has been one of the weapons of this aggression against the Bosnian women in particular.

In the past rape was thought of as “normal” behavior in warfare because testosterone and male sex drives were perceived as primal needs that required satisfaction. It was commonly accepted that men had to rape enemy women after a battle to satisfy sexual “needs.” Today, it seems obvious that this “need” is not of a sexual nature, but of violence and power. Gang raping the enemy nation is a strategy through which to gain power and control through sexual conquest.
NATO officials within the international community claim that rape used as weaponry is a traditional element of Balkan warfare. They argue that since wartime rape is a part of Balkan warfare, it may not be used as grounds for foreign humanitarian intervention.\textsuperscript{17} Considering the fact that all of the nationalities residing within the Balkans have raped their enemies during war, this may be true. Unfortunately, the U.N. Peacekeepers furthered the atrocities committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. One Bosnian Serb commander of a concentration camp testified that U.N. soldiers often visited his camp for food and drinks, to watch television, and for the girls too.\textsuperscript{18} U.N. soldiers of Canadian, French, New Zealanders, Ukrainian, and African nationalities have been identified as having occupied the camps for likely the same reasons. When one U.N. commander was questioned about his visits to the camp he struggled to maintain a plausible answer. Beginning with a complete denial of having ever attended any such place, his story began to deteriorate until, after being met with evidence, the commander spontaneously recollected being there for what he said were “official U.N. reasons” that certainly had nothing to do with rape.\textsuperscript{19} The participation of soldiers not originating or trained within the Balkans falsifies NATO’s insinuation that the rape of prisoners by soldiers is exclusive to Balkan culture.

What makes the Bosnian war different is that the Serbs are the only people to have written a mandate of genocidal rape into state policy. By writing rape into policy, Milosevic provided the ethnic cleanse with an air of legitimacy on which reluctant NATO officials capitalized. Officials defended their disregard for the victims by claiming that could not intervene in the Bosnian war because to do so would be culturally insensitive. According to them, rape warfare is part of Balkan culture\textsuperscript{20} and thus protected under the cultural difference defense; they claim that Balkan wars are wars of rape, while Western wars are not. These racist assertions of NATO officials have since fallen in light of evidence the exposes scandals of Peacekeepers raping Bosnian women.\textsuperscript{21}
This indicates that U.N. personnel aim to demonstrate masculinity and dominance through sexual conquest and that patriarchy remains a prevalent issue within western institutions; women’s bodies remain recognized primarily as male-space by a diverse group of men, not Balkan soldiers exclusively.

However, using rape as weaponry may not be as easy as once thought when the aggressing soldiers know they are violating basic human rights. Survivors of the Serb rape camps report that some Serb soldiers were unable to achieve an erection when commanded to rape by their superiors. Soldiers who were unable or unwilling to perform were ordered to rape the prisoners or be subject to punishment. Survivors divulge that soldiers were forced to “short-circuit” of any ethical or moral barriers they might hold through viagra usage in combination with illicit drugs and pornographic materials. In other instances soldiers used objects to rape and sodomize their prisoners. Threatened with their own death, Serb soldiers may have themselves experienced a gendered abuse of human rights. A policy that calls for the rape of enemy women as a means of national conquest creates the perception that raping women part of being a soldier and a man. When particular men are reluctant to violate their neighbours, their manhood is brought into question and with it the manhood of their nation. As such, the forced rape and impregnation of women illustrates how men and women suffered differently due to hegemonic conceptions of gender that construct men are to be aggressive, violent, and unemotional dominant protectors of a nation, one of which women are the body in their duties as primary caregivers.

Despite the atrocious human rights violations committed during the Bosnian war, gender-selective mass killing is commonplace in human conflict. While Bosnians were evacuating the cities and towns that surrendered to the Serbs, militia divided men from women and adults from children; they lined up the men and conducted mass executions. The slaughter of the target population’s battle-age men frees the aggressor from the concern
that subsequent generations will claim their revenge in the near future.\textsuperscript{25} The Serbs did not adopt a “root and branch” extermination where the target population gets murdered as a whole in systematic fashion; however, this may have been the ultimate goal with eradication of non-Serb males serving only as a prelude murder of females.\textsuperscript{26} Dating back to antiquity patriarchy is manifest in the domination of men over women as well as men over “other” men whose difference is constructed as feminine, whose lack ethnic ties to the aggression group as a threat to hegemony.\textsuperscript{27} Historically, men who defended their land were killed; those who were spared were forced into slavery along with the women and children. In many cases, the men were also castrated leading to a further marginalization of their ethnic group.\textsuperscript{28} No longer a sexual threat, the inapt mates serve only as a symbol of their people’s feminization.

\textbf{Reluctant Humanitarians}

The Western world (with exception to the U.N.) remained completely oblivious to the genocide befalling Bosnia and Herzegovina until journalist Roy Gutman brought the story to the forefront of media in 1992.\textsuperscript{29} Croatian media subsequently provided video footage of Serb militia shelling villages and towns which shocked and appalled Westerners and the plight of Bosniak Muslim women became the center of media focus. What was left in the background, out of focus, was the male suffering. Feminist scholars write the bulk of academia surrounding rape warfare and gender and this may inadvertently lead to the absence of men and male on male rape.\textsuperscript{30} The media, too, is guilty of overlooking the situation of men. Men are supposed to be tough, consequently, their suffering is considered less valid in the eyes of the public, whereas the raping of women inspires outrage because women are perceived as weak and vulnerable. Women are thought to require protection whereas men are not, thus, the genocide committed against Bosniak Muslims was not a “femicide” but rather a “gendercide;”\textsuperscript{31} as Non-Serb men and women received distinct
abuses at the hands of Serbs by virtue of their gender specific social roles. Non-Serb men were raped with foreign objects to humiliate them and their nation before they, the emasculated soldiers, were killed and the women raped and impregnated to figuratively claim the nation’s body. Serb forces executed this gendercidal murdering of masses of battle-age men in addition to raping thousands of women. Such represents the patriarchal dominance of Serb men over all “others.”

The gendercide befalling Bosnia-Herzegovina went on for months before the crisis was given any attention from the United Nations. Allen shames the U.N. in her analysis of the Bosnian war where she gets “the impression that Europe is testing the limits of suffering” (12). Only when Western media released video footage taken by the Croatian media did the U.N. Security Council begin to feel sufficient pressure to make a humanitarian intervention. Up until the expressed outrage, the international organizations embraced a realist stance towards state security and reasoned that they were unable to contribute support to the Bosniak Muslims, as it did not serve the interests of the powerful member countries. They avoided involvement by deeming the Bosnian crisis a civil war in which humanitarian intervention would not equal sound foreign policy. In reality, the U.N. had the authority and the moral duty to intervene because genocide falls contrary to Article II of the 1948 U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and because rape is against international humanitarian law. Bosnians were being persecuted on the basis of gender and ethnicity while the decision makers on the Security Council paid little regard. Human rights intervention, for them, is not sound policy when there is no potential for monetary gain.

When press coverage of the atrocity had sparked enough public outrage for the U.N. to get involved it was too late. Milosevic’s campaign of genocidal rape had already crossed many borders of territories and inhumanity. Thousands upon thousands of Croatian and Bosniak Muslim women had been raped,
impregnated, or killed and the men had been sodomized preceding their extermination. One Serb militiaman put it well when he told his female prisoner: “You may have got your country but it will be a land full of widows.”

The U.N. proved itself to be an intergovernmental organization with foreign policy reflecting the preferences of an elite group of state leaders during the Bosnian war. The decisions of an international organization should exemplify the preferences of the majority of people it represents, not the powerful few. It took mass media to catalyze global democracy in order to end the suffering of Bosniak Muslims during the Bosnian war. The problem is that it was too late for many men and women. The solution is to establish a check on foreign policy. Political bodies (domestic and international) must work together to establish a democratic dialogue; they must look to the grassroots of which they represent as well as to the non-governmental organizations to determine the best course of action. International relations will only have an outspoken effect on wars once global polities have moved towards intergovernmental organization within a substantive global democracy where the media is not the only source of pressure for action. Media is not reliable as the only check on international governance as it too can be biased towards maintaining the status quo and towards other corporate profit-seeking interests.

The Aftermath

The Dayton Agreements marked the official end of the Bosnian war, but not the end of the Serbian genocidal campaigns. Leaders of the Bosnian Serbs were indicted on international war crimes and genocide charges, but Milosevic managed to continue waging his war on the Balkans in Kosovo. He was eventually stopped by NATO and brought to The Hague face similar charges of grave Geneva Convention violations. Throughout the late 1990s to the mid 2000s, war criminals such as Slobodan Milosevic,
Radislav Krstic, Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac, Zoran Vukovic, and various other Bosnian Serb fighters were indicted, apprehended, and brought to trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). They were charged with an array of crimes such as mass rape, genocide, and forced prostitution. The trials were riddled with witnesses and victims from rape camps giving testimonies recalling rapes, tortures, forced impregnation, enslavement, and forced prostitution. Victims testified behind blinds with their voices altered, but in the courtroom they face and must identify their tormentors. Many rape victims refused to testify and others could not be contacted. They had been conquered and humiliated, causing the numbers willing to relive the atrocity in a public forum to be few and far between.

The strength of the women who survived and forced themselves to testify against their tormentors, despite the inhumane physical and psychological torture they endured, helped bring justice to victims everywhere. Many remain upset, they feel robbed of justice because Milosevic was never officially sentenced for his crimes in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, though he did not die a free man. He died in custody on March 11, 2006 of cardiac arrest before any convictions were reached. Perhaps the primary instigator of the Serb hostilities did escape his earthly punishments, but the same cannot be said of his accomplices. The ICTY announced numerous sentences for war crimes and Judges set new precedents designed to protect women from future injustices.

It has been more than a decade since the Bosnian war reminded people around the world of the human capacity for evil. International organizations have learned from this crisis and have tried many Serb politicians and military leaders, however, the memory still haunts survivors and international institutions maintain a democratic deficit. International law has been rewritten accordingly to add protection for women but we must remain critical of these laws. They may only be new renditions of the “add
women and stir” method of writing women’s policy.\textsuperscript{40} The Fourth Geneva Conventions already had provisions for protection of women against rape in humanitarian law.\textsuperscript{41} Is the ICTY adding the same excerpt into another law book or is this the true defining law of women’s protection? Judges may have the authority to rewrite laws to include gender, but the power to enforce those laws lies in a bureaucracy that is often ruled by elites who operate by their own agendas; the status quo remains secure.

The Bosnian war is a dark chapter in world history. Not only did it see a monster rise to great power, it bore witness to an organization, which by definition claims to serve humanitarian interests, ignore the plight of a plurality of nations. The nationalist Serbians made Slobodan Milosevic powerful and he propagated their “rightful” privilege, rallying them to claim it. Pathologically, he convinced himself and his countrymen that the other Balkan ethnic groups had undercut them throughout history. Milosevic was a patriarchal dictator peddling majoritarianism and colonialism to Serbs throughout the Balkans, claiming that they would in engage in a “cleansing” of the lands and emerge as the Greater Serbia that they ought to be. Serbian incursion into Bosnia-Herzegovina achieved psychological as well as military objectives. These nations were humiliated and thus weakened internationally by the Serbian gendercide, which emasculated men by violating the bodies of their mothers, sisters, and daughters as well as through the extermination of men and seizure of territory.

Humiliation can be extended to the United Nations as well, but not by the hand of Milosevic. The UN embarrassed itself and its member nations in its failure to remedy the Bosnian crisis; Western societies thought the lack of humanitarian intervention outrageous and deplorable. Media capitalized on their discovery of the U.N.’s negligence and transmitted the public opinion to governments who began to move on the issue. Although less than humanitarian interests may have motivated the media, they did effectively catalyze the international organizations’ response the
genocide occurring in Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere. However, the U.N.’s embarrassment does not stop with their lack of stamina in foreign policy; peacekeepers furthered the humiliation when media exposed their illicit visits to the Serb rape camps. Intergovernmental organizations certainly demonstrated their need for reform during the Bosnian war.

Conclusion

Ethnicity and gender were allowed exist as legitimate political reasons for murder and rape during the Bosnian war when international organizations decided to stand idly by as Milosevic legislated gender specific violations of the Geneva Code against Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following through to commit these many atrocious mass murders of men and forced impregnations of women, supporters of Milosevic’s ethnic cleansing agenda were largely successful in the Bosnian gendercide. Enemy non-Serb men within Bosnia and Herzegovina were feminized and the bodies of women were rendered a politicized male space. Political opportunism and patriarchal masculinity are connected as they intertwine to form the roots of the Bosnian war. Patriarchal manhood requires men to associate domination with power and privilege. What Milosevic did was provide a difference-based justification to unite Serbs against non-Serbs so that they might exert control over women and men lacking immediate ties to Serbia. Non-Serbs were feminized by their inability to protect and control their women. The rules of masculinity had been broken and the consequence was eradication. The consequences that follow this tragedy are debatable, but fortunately the U.N. and NATO did react somewhat faster to the subsequent crisis in Kosovo. International humanitarian law is updated and the criminals convicted and sentenced; the Dayton Agreements have brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina for the time being. Resolutions emerging from aftermath of the Bosnian war are now up against the test of time and, hopefully, patriarchy in the Balkans (and elsewhere) continues to dissolve, bringing contemporary society
slowly towards the understanding societies modeled on domination are less stable than multicultural ones based on partnership and mutual recognition.

Notes

1 Adam Jones, *Gender Inclusive* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
3 Jones, *Gender Inclusive*, 120-121.
6 Ibid., 100-101.
8 Mary E. Hawkesworth, “Democratization: Reflections on Gendered Dislocations in the Public Sphere,” in *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization*, ed. Rita Mae Kelly et al. (New York: Littlefield, 2001)
12 Ibid., 167.
14 Ibid., 89.
16 Hansen, “Gender, Nation, Rape: Bosnia and the Construction of Security,” 60.
17 Ibid., 61.
19 Ibid., 29.
22 Allen, *Rape Warfare*, 97.
23 Ibid., 98.
25 Ibid., 166.
26 Ibid., 172.
30 Jones, *Gender Inclusive*, 150-151.
31 Ibid., 166.
34 Jones, *Gender Inclusive*, 166.
37 Simons, “3 Serbs Convicted in Wartime Rapes.”