

The Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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We were rounded up on the playing field. The men were locked up in the school. They burned a few men in trash bins in front of the windows, so that the smoke and stink of the burned flesh would drift into the school. We saw them rape the hadji's* daughter – one after the other, they raped her. The hadji had to watch too. When they were done, they rammed a knife into his throat.¹

The refugees and displaced people from Bosnia-Herzegovina have brought with them stories of the terror they have left behind. In all these tales, rapes play a role, yet at first they seemed to me only one more detail in the horrible scenario that the fleeing people had lived through, one more outrage of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian war. It was months before I took special interest in the suffering of the women. What I then learned in my investigations saddened and amazed me. Women and girls who were systematically raped, rape camps and forced brothels, intentional impregnation of women – the atrocities knew no bounds.

My first contacts were doctors, women's groups, Bosnian government agencies, and a few of the women involved. What they reported seemed plausible and conclusive, for I knew that the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was a war against the civilian population and that when territory was conquered, the non-Serbian population was expelled: Why

*hadji = local Muslim cleric

shouldn't the conquerors set upon women with the most powerful weapon men possess?

And yet it seemed monstrous, almost unbelievable. In order to get to the bottom of the matter, my friend and colleague the American journalist George Rodrigue and I set out for Bosnia-Herzegovina to find other women with similar stories. Psychiatrists had told us that raped women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the danger is more immediate, would be more likely to speak about what they had suffered than women who had escaped to the "safe haven" of Croatia.

In central Bosnia, the region around Zenica, Travnik, Visoko, and Tarcin, which was controlled by Muslim and Croatian troops and had become a receiving ground for refugees and displaced people from the parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina occupied by Serbs, we found rape victims: intimidated women who now lived uncertain lives as refugees, broken women, but also furious women who were planning revenge.

It was not easy to find these women. In the refugee camps we visited, how frequently we were told: "Of course we have cases of rape; I can show you the women, but they don't talk about it. They withdraw, they don't say much, they sit in a corner and cry. If you ask them what happened to them, if they want to return to their homes, they say, 'Oh no, absolutely not.' But they don't say why. They won't talk with us, let alone with you."² At first it was one woman who was prepared to talk with us, and then in the next refugee camp another one, one who understood the rape for what it is: a humiliating act of violence, but no mark of dishonor to be kept secret. And so, little by little, we spoke with many women and young girls.

The conversations were difficult. Even for these women, who wanted to tell the foreign journalists what had happened to them, rape is that terrible, humiliating, almost unutterable "it." They had to be approached carefully, with questions about their current situation as refugees, about events when the Serbian troops invaded. Only then could we speak about what had been inflicted on these women personally.

When they faltered and began to cry, I myself often had a lump in my throat, the feeling that I was hurting them by forcing them to live through the rape one more time. And throughout everything the sober questions, repeated at various points during the interview, to test the truth of their stories: "Who raped you, when exactly did it happen, how

many women were there, what were their names and where are they now, do you know the names of the rapists, what did the men say, how did they look, how do you know that your neighbor was raped too?" These and many subsequent conversations confirmed the first results of my investigation: in Bosnia-Herzegovina a war is being waged against women. Not because they are women, but because they are Muslim, Croatian, or Serbian women. Yet because they are women, men are using against them their most effective weapon: rape.

Women have always been raped in wartime, of course. There were mass rapes even in wars that were not wars of expulsion. Rapes seem to be part and parcel of a soldier's life, a "normal" accompaniment to war. Some people, especially men, say that soldiers simply need women because they have had to be "chaste" for such a long time; they say that male sexuality includes the predisposition to "take" a woman. Yet those are only the usual excuses for wartime rapes.

A rape is an aggressive and humiliating act, as even a soldier knows, or at least suspects. He rapes because he wants to engage in violence. He rapes because he wants to demonstrate his power. He rapes because he is the victor. He rapes because the woman is the enemy's woman, and he wants to humiliate and annihilate the enemy. He rapes because the woman is herself the enemy whom he wishes to humiliate and annihilate. He rapes because he despises women. He rapes to prove his virility. He rapes because the acquisition of the female body means a piece of territory conquered. He rapes to take out on someone else the humiliation he has suffered in the war. He rapes to work off his fears. He rapes because it's really only some "fun" with the guys. He rapes because war, a man's business, has awakened his aggressiveness, and he directs it at those who play a subordinate role in the world of war.³

In war, men rape for various motives, and we can identify nearly all of them in every war. Yet not all wars are the same, and each war provides its own specific motivations for rape. For the Russians who raped German women by turns during the invasion of Berlin in 1945, the key motives might have been revenge, a desire to break the pride of the German master race, and the feeling of having earned "thanks."⁴ For the Americans in Vietnam the motive was more likely the frustration of being in a foreign country and having to fight a war that was not "their" war.⁵ In neither case was the goal to drive away the women and their community; both the German and the Vietnamese women were to remain where they were.

But dispersion is precisely the goal of the Serbian forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their purpose is to drive Muslims and Croats away from the conquered territories. Besides brutal terror, deliberate murders, mass executions, internment camps, deportations, and torture, one of the means they are employing is rape. Rapes spread fear and induce the flight of refugees; rapes humiliate, demoralize, and destroy not only the victim but also her family and community; and rapes stifle any wish to return. A rape is a "surefire weapon that doesn't need any fuel or ammunition," as the Zagreb feminist Asija Armanda once said. The military leaders and politicians in positions of responsibility have obviously accepted this. Until now there has been no known case of a local authority's saving a woman of "enemy nationality" from rape or even helping her afterward.

"In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, rape has been an instrument for 'ethnic cleansing.'" The UN commission of experts that investigated the rapes in the former Yugoslavia has concluded.⁶ "Rape cannot be seen as incidental to the main purpose of the aggression but as serving a strategic purpose in itself," reports the European Community mission concerned especially with the situation of Muslim women.⁷ The report of the humanitarian organization Amnesty International states: "Instances that have included sexual infringements against women are apparently part of an inclusive pattern of war conduct characterized by massive intimidation and infringements against Muslims and Croats."⁸

The American human rights organization Helsinki Watch believes that rape is being used as a "weapon of war" in Bosnia-Herzegovina: "Whether a woman is raped by soldiers in her home or is held in a house with other women and raped over and over again, she is raped with a political purpose – to intimidate, humiliate, and degrade her and others affected by her suffering. The effect of rape is often to ensure that women and their families will flee and never return."⁹

Against this background, it is obvious that rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina are taking place "on a large scale" (UN and EC), that they are acquiring a systematic character, and that "in by far the most instances Muslim women are the victims of the Serbian forces" (Amnesty International). Estimates of the number of rape victims – including Croatian and Serbian women – range from 20,000 (EC) to 50,000 (Bosnian Ministry of the Interior).

But we must not forget that Bosnia-Herzegovina is not an exceptional case. Soldiers do not rape only when they want to drive out the popula-

tion of the “wrong nationality.” “Ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia is only an additional factor, explaining why the rapes there are so extensive and so particularly humiliating.

The names of the women mentioned in this chapter have been changed for the women’s own protection. Other name changes have been noted in the text.

The “Ethnic Cleansing” of Prijedor

An example of a successful “ethnic cleansing” using rape as a weapon is the district of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia. Prijedor is a rural area with gentle hills, green meadows, fertile fields, and the thickly wooded Kozara mountain range. Most of its inhabitants lived in seventy villages, some large, some small, and pursued agricultural occupations. Muslims, Serbs, and lesser minorities lived here, and they all got along, say the Muslims from Prijedor.

Today they no longer live there. Prijedor has become “Serbian territory.” Fifty thousand Muslims and 15,000 other non-Serbs were driven off or murdered, twenty-five mosques and eleven Muslim sanctuaries were blown up, more than 10,000 houses and apartments were searched, looted, and destroyed. Only burned ruins are left to indicate that Prijedor once had more inhabitants than it does today. The “ethnic cleansing” of Prijedor was carried out quickly, brutally, and efficiently.

According to the census of 1991, there were 112,500 people living in the district of Prijedor, of whom 44 percent were Muslims, 42 percent Serbs, 6 percent Croats, and 8 percent of other ethnicities. Thus there were approximately 65,000 non-Serbs. Of these 65,000 people (according to reliable calculations of the Prijedor Homeland Club in Zagreb) 20,000 were murdered, 30,000 were driven away, and approximately 3,000 are still living in Prijedor.

The reports of refugees allow us to reconstruct what happened in Prijedor after the Serbian leadership had decided to make it a pure Serbian community.¹⁰ In April 1992 important posts and functions were newly filled; Muslims and Croats lost their jobs, and “reliable” Serbs took over their positions. There was no resistance, because the Muslims and Croats owned virtually no weapons. In May all telephone connections were disrupted, and the Bosnian Serbs set up roadblocks.

M: No, they didn't let me. They didn't let me do anything or say anything. At first I screamed, "Don't do it; what do you want with a kid?" Then one of them said, "Shut your trap or I'll butcher you all." I did say it once, but I wasn't supposed to say anything.

Q: Did these soldiers have weapons?

M: Yes, knives and machine guns.

Q: Was anyone else raped besides you and your daughter?

M: This other young woman that I already told you about.

QUESTION TO VELVIDA: Was it always the same men who came to get you?

V: Different ones.

Q: Did you know any of them?

V: No.

Q: Did you try to resist?

M: She would always scream, but they didn't let us resist.

V: I cried.

Q: Did they always take you to the same apartment?

V: To different ones.

Q: Were the apartments empty?

V: Yes. But once my mother and this other woman were with me.

Q: Why did they rape you? To punish you because you didn't tell them who was hiding money?

V: Yes.

Q: Didn't they tell you that you were pretty or anything like that?

V: No.

Q: Or that they wanted to marry you?

V: No.

Q: How many men came to get you?

V: Sometimes five or six.

Q: And did all of them rape you?

V: Sometimes one, sometimes two. Always different.

Q: Are you afraid even now?

V: At first I was afraid, even of our own soldiers. But not anymore.

M: She survived it. Only if something happens now, if a grenade falls, then we're afraid. [Tarcin is shelled from time to time.]

Q: Did you go to a doctor?

V: Yes.

M: She's okay, he just gave her some pills to take.

Q: Do you want to go back when the war is over?

M: Where should we go? Everything's burned up; there's nothing left.

Q: And you're better now? Can you sleep?

V: Yes.

Q: Did you used to have a boyfriend, or was this the first time you had contact with boys or men?

M: She didn't have anything; she was a virgin.

Q: Do you know any of the men who raped you, their names?

BOTH OF THEM: No.

Rape Camps

"Rape camps" – this outgrowth of the war against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina has called forth worldwide dismay and outrage, repugnance and disgust.

We became familiar with this concept when women reported prisons in which hundreds of them had been held like animals, facing daily humiliation and deliberate impregnation. It is those images that are now invariably suggested by the word. Again and again women have related their experiences in such camps; women's groups and commissions have published lists of locations. They say there were such camps throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. Women's camps are also said to have existed on the Muslim-Croatian side, though on a smaller scale.

All the lists, whether Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian, have one thing in common: they are usually undocumented and very vague. Furthermore, the camps cannot be checked out on the spot. All the places in which women are held prisoner, whether large camps or simply cellars, houses, former cafés, are kept secret by the people in charge and are dissolved immediately when they are discovered. They are normally found in areas that are inaccessible, even to the International Red Cross, the only organization in the former Yugoslavia authorized to inspect camps and prisons.

It is easy to keep undesirable visitors at arm's length: the military just refers to the "cunning sharpshooters" who are making the region unsafe or to the land mines in the vicinity; or perhaps the authorities in charge

even grant permission, but the Red Cross delegation is then held up at a checkpoint.

“All of a sudden you’re not allowed to go through,” reports the Red Cross security coordinator Didier Pradervand.²⁹ “And then they have to contact the head office by radio, and they in turn have to contact the higher authorities in charge to find out what’s going on, and all that can take days.” Sometimes after long negotiations the Red Cross does get permission to visit one or another of the suspicious locations – but it’s empty. “You know that can’t be right, that the prisoners are still there the same as before and that they’ve just been moved somewhere else for the length of the visit, but there’s nothing you can do,” says Pradervand.

In order not to jeopardize its workers, the Red Cross never goes anywhere without the consent of the local authorities, and for the same reason it never enters war zones. All in all, it operates only in a very limited area. The above-mentioned district of Foca, for example, is a “taboo zone,” and not until early August 1992, two and a half months after the beginning of the “ethnic cleansing,” was the Red Cross allowed to go to Prijedor.

At the moment it is only the women concerned who can give information about “rape camps,” and the picture remains incomplete. But there is no doubt that they existed and perhaps still exist. In what follows I will present two women’s camps, each of which was described to me by at least two women.

THE RAPE CAMP IN DOBOJ

According to the statements of three women, there was a women’s camp in the northern Bosnian town of Doboj in which approximately 2,000 Muslim and Croatian women as well as a few children were detained in May and June 1992. This number is very high, and I have discussed it at length with the women. They insist it is correct and say that the gymnasium of the Djure Pucar Stari school in which they were housed was very big, that international handball tournaments were held in it previously, that it even had tiers of seats, and that it was “completely overcrowded.” “We couldn’t move without stepping on somebody,” says forty-year-old Kadir.³⁰ “There might even have been 2,500 women.” She goes on:

Up on the ceiling there were glass blocks, like little windows. They really should’ve turned the lights on in the gym, but we were in the

dispute this and claim that they make a point of performing abortions in rape cases unless there are serious medical reasons against it.

In the hospitals of Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the other hand, doctors are frequently not in a position to perform abortions after the first trimester. They lack the necessary drugs for inducing premature births, and hospital beds are occupied by the wounded. In addition, hospitals in a dissolving Bosnia-Herzegovina are not always easy to reach. The story of thirty-year-old Melisa from the eastern Bosnian city of Gorazde serves as an example.⁴⁵

Melisa

Melisa was raped at the end of April when Serbian troops entered the Gorazde neighborhood where she was hiding along with ten other women and a few children.

The Chetniks came into our house; there were about ten of them. We didn't have any electricity, no lights, only a candle. All of them were wearing masks over their faces; all you could see was their eyes, and they had on camouflage uniforms and caps with the Serbian cockade [Chetnik insignia]. As soon as they came in they began to yell and scream; they cursed our "Muslim mothers" and said, "You sent your husbands off to the front, but now we'll show you what's what, and then you'll go to a concentration camp." First they dragged me and Sema U. (who's thirty years old) into the bedroom. I recognized two of the Chetniks in there; they were my neighbors, Dragan K. and Bora J. I recognized them from their voices. They tore all my clothes off of me until I was naked, and then two of them held me down and two of them raped me. They forced me to do it with my mouth. I was awfully scared, and they kicked me around and beat me. They raped Sema at the same time, in the same room. I don't remember exactly how many there were, 'cause I fainted.

As soon as Melisa regained consciousness she sneaked out of the house where the Chetniks were still going wild and fled as fast as she could. She intended to go to her sister in Zagreb. But the journey through war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina lasted months. Melisa accomplished most of it on foot and had to submit to long detours in order to circumvent the war zones; every so often she had to report to the military authorities in order to get travel permits.

Before long she noticed that she was pregnant. At first she tried to abort herself with injections of hot water. She thought she had succeeded, because she was bleeding heavily. Some weeks later she determined that she was still pregnant. She asked for an abortion at the first opportunity, in the Kiseljak hospital, but doctors denied her request. She did not arrive in Zagreb until December 1992, and then it was too late for an abortion.

Melisa also had trouble coping with pregnancy; she referred to her child only as "the thing." According to her psychiatrist, Dr. Jarmila Skrinjaric, she was in a "hypomanic state." She was uncommonly merry and jolly, and then again desperate. "She's compensating for her depression, trying to pretend that everything's okay. But in reality she's completely torn up," Skrinjaric said at the time. Melisa too was under sedation.

In addition to her psychological rejection of the child, she was afraid of a possible rejection by her family. She said, "Where I come from, everybody, my husband, my daughter, the whole town, everybody would think of the kid as filth." Her husband, who had stayed in Gorazde, knew nothing about her rape. "He'd never take me back again if he knew what happened," Melisa asserted. In spring 1993 she gave birth to a dead child in Zagreb. She left the hospital without telling anyone where she was going.

Rapes of Serbian Women

Because of the suffering of Muslim and Croatian rape victims, we frequently forget that Serbian women in Bosnia-Herzegovina are also being raped. Of course they are not affected by rape as frequently as the Muslims. For one thing, the Serbian army is the victorious army and can better protect its civilians; for another, Muslims and Croats only rarely carried out "ethnic cleansing actions" in the territories under their control (where Serbs are still living) – although hostility toward Serbs is constantly growing and there are recurrent instances of misconduct toward Serbs.

To be sure, it is also difficult to find Serbian rape victims, for refugees in Serbia are normally housed with friends and relatives, where they are hard to locate. But the real reason that Serbian women seldom appear in the reports of rapes in Bosnia might be a different one: they are the wives,

sisters, and daughters of the aggressors. There is hardly a journalist who feels motivated to seek them out, to check up on what has happened to them and thus offer propaganda material to the Serbian side – that is, the “bad” side, the side “responsible for the war.”

But on this side too there are victims of the war, and among them are women who were raped. The UN commission investigating the rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina emphasizes that it found “victims among all ethnic groups involved in the conflict,”⁴⁶ and Amnesty International also avers “that all the sides participating in the conflict have been guilty of [sexual] misconduct.”⁴⁷ Perhaps Serbian women have not been systematically raped, perhaps the aim behind these rapes is not to expel civilians but rather to get revenge, show contempt for women, annoy the enemy, celebrate male supremacy. But it is a fact Serbian women have been raped.

Jelena

One of the victims is the twenty-eight-year-old nurse Jelena from Brcko in northern Bosnia. The Belgrade journalist Seska Stanojlovic spoke to her in early December 1992 when Jelena was visiting friends in the Central Belgrade Hospital. At that time, Seska wrote,

The scars on Jelena’s hands (from the knives she was “caressed” with during the rapes) and on her back (from the cigarettes that were put out on her back) are slowly fading. Her friends in the hospital say that something similar is going on in her mind. She isn’t as depressed as she used to be, especially since this former nurse has gotten a new job in a clinic in Belgrade.

In late January 1992 Jelena was traveling home to Brcko after a visit in Germany when her tour bus was stopped near the Croatian town of Sisak by Croatian militiamen. Six Serbs, four young women and two men, were pulled off the bus, and Jelena was taken to a Croatian internment camp in the warehouse of the Slavonski Brod oil refinery. There, like the other female prisoners, she was raped. “They came to ‘relax’ with us after their successful military actions.” Jelena did not tell Seska how many coprisoners she had or who their torturers were. She said that “many women” were being held prisoner in the camp and that the rapists were Croats.

In April the women were transferred to Odzak in northern Bosnia on the other side of the border river Sava. The new detention camp was a

victims continues to be an arbitrary estimate not based on any statistical calculations. Amnesty International quite correctly stresses

emphatically the extreme difficulty of estimating the actual extent of sexual assault to which the women in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been exposed. Because of their shame and fear of being socially stigmatized, many women are not able to speak about what they have suffered. Furthermore, governmental structures in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been nearly completely destroyed and, except in a few centers, systematic investigations are almost impossible. The fact that women were only temporarily held prisoner in places which served this purpose has also made it very difficult for international organizations to scrutinize them. In addition, the subject of the rape of women (and the other atrocities committed in the course of the conflict) has been employed extensively as a propaganda weapon, and all sides have minimized or disputed the assaults by their own forces while exaggerating the assaults by their opponents. For these reasons it is the view of Amnesty International that all estimates regarding the number of raped and sexually abused women must at the present time be treated with caution.⁶¹

WAR PROPAGANDA

At first the Bosnian government registered some surprise at the response to the rapes: for them they represent only one of the countless war crimes. But the rapes quickly became part of the long list of justifications cited by Bosnian politicians when they indict the Serbian side and ask the world for help.

When they recognized the propaganda value of rapes, Serbian politicians also woke up. Television Belgrade immediately began to broadcast stories about raped Serbian women, and all over the world Yugoslavian embassies dispatched reports of raped Serbian women and forcible Muslim-Croatian brothels.

The propaganda war is also being fought by feminist women's groups who claim not to be nationalistic. Bosnian and Croatian feminists contend that the mass rapes of their countrywomen are an attempt at genocide, unique in the history of rapes, and many of them demand military intervention to rescue the women. Serbian feminists, on the other hand, claim that women have been raped in every war up to the present, that it

has nothing to do with nationality, and that every military action is masculine and sexist per se – for after all it is the Serbian side that is victorious, and any intervention might jeopardize their victory.

The war has affected each side of the three warring parties so much that it cannot see or understand the other. In fact, politicians challenge the report that their own soldiers are raping. The Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, his Bosnian colleague Alija Izetbegovic, and the leader of the Bosnian Croats Mate Boban – who represent the Muslim and Croatian side – have until now gallantly passed over this topic.

For a long time, their opponent Radovan Karadzic claimed that Serbian soldiers did not commit rape as a matter of principle (!). Nevertheless, in October 1992 he admitted in an interview for the British BBC that he could not control every Serbian soldier, but that there was sexual abuse on all sides. When the mass rapes of Muslim women by Serbian forces were then reported around the world, he purported not to know anything about it. At a press conference in Belgrade on December 23 he said:

The lies about the organized rapes of Muslim women in prisons and other locations are shameful, lacking all basis in fact and going beyond all bounds of human decency. We challenge the whole world to prove the existence of a single prison for women or a single case of an organized rape or even the presence of a single female civilian in our prisons, which for that matter are all open to inspection by international organizations.⁶²

AID PROJECTS

Along with much else, knowledge of the mass rapes has instigated a wave of aid efforts. In general, I believe, one should remember the following in connection with aid measures:

- The women concerned usually come from a rural milieu. They have strong feelings of shame and disgrace, and one must probably approach the women rather than waiting for them to come forward.
- For most women the rape is only part of a many-layered trauma: many of them have had to watch as members of their families were tortured and murdered, or their nearest relatives have disappeared. They are subject to an additional trauma in that they have been driven off by their former friends and neighbors; they have lost their homes and property, and most of them look back on painful stays in camps.

- The raped women are usually not aware that they need special help related to their rape. After all the murders, tortures, and horrors they have seen and experienced, they do not understand rape as a special attack on the dignity of a human being. When I asked Muslim women what kinds of help they could imagine receiving, they said that they just want to forget the rape(s), and that if something is going to be done, then all the other displaced people should be helped too. Most of them asked that the world intervene militarily or lift the weapons embargo so that the war, and with it the rapes and expulsions, would cease.

- And indeed, all the humanitarian efforts cure only the symptoms; the causes themselves are in no way changed. The international community must finally undertake concrete measures to end the war in the former Yugoslavia.

- Bosnian men and women of the Muslim faith have been forced to wait it out in a crumbling Bosnia-Herzegovina. If they do not possess a visa for a third country, they are turned away at the Croatian border. Yet it is practically impossible to arrange for a visa, since in Bosnia-Herzegovina not even the phones or the mail are working. These are the people who need help, even if travel in Bosnia-Herzegovina is fraught with certain safety risks.

- Whether Serbia, Croatia, or Bosnia-Herzegovina, in all three countries chaos and corruption are the rule. Giving money to local aid organizations does not solve the problem; instead one should help to begin putting the appropriate structures in place.

- Further, the powerful response to the rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina should be exploited to ensure that rapes in war are finally condemned and punished as war crimes.

Notes

1. This was reported by a thirty-two-year-old Muslim refugee from Bratunac in eastern Bosnia, which was captured by Serbian units at the beginning of May 1992. I spoke with her at the Croatian-Slovenian border on July 25, 1992, shortly before her departure for Germany. She wanted to remain anonymous because her husband was in Serbian captivity.

2. This was the view of nurse Melisa Zerín, with whom I spoke in a refugee camp in Zenica on November 3, 1992.