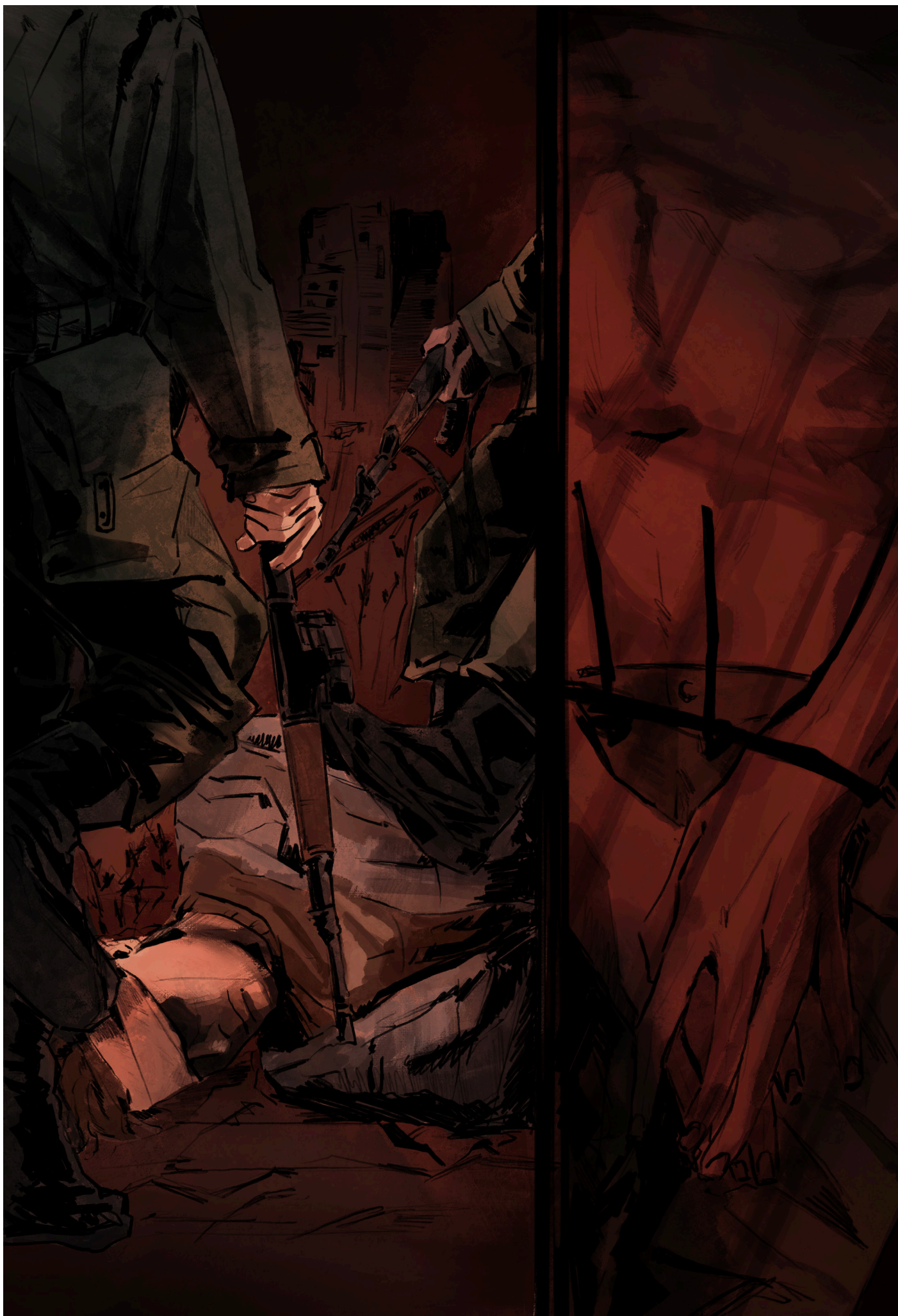




ERASING THE MALE

Sexual Violence & Hegemonic
Masculinity in the Yugoslav Wars

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**Please note that this article contains references to sexual violence, rape, and genital mutilation, which some readers may find distressing.*

During the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the Kosovo War (1998-1999), following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, gender-related sexual violence gained significant attention from the international community. These conflicts each resulted in over 20,000 rape victims (Amnesty International, 2017a; Amnesty International, 2017b), demonstrating the large-scale and systematic nature of these crimes. Despite international intervention and post-war reconstruction efforts mediated by the United Nations and the European Union (Redwood, Morina, and Rexha, 2024, p.246), sexual violence has remained marginalised within international legal accountability and post-conflict political recognition. For many survivors, justice continues to be a long-term endeavour and is often limited by impunity, social stigma, and selective acknowledgement.

While the crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been documented and integrated into international legal processes (Jarvis and Brammertz, 2016), the atrocities committed during the Kosovo conflict have received comparatively less attention in both academic and legal discourse. Male survivors, in particular, remain largely invisible, with their experiences often excluded from post-war narratives and recognition frameworks. Ultimately, this underrepresentation raises broader questions regarding the structural and cultural dynamics that shape wartime violence and post-war silencing. While the primary analysis of conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) during the Kosovo War, the cases of CRSV during the Bosnian War will also be examined as a comparative point of reference. Throughout the Yugoslav Wars, sexual violence against both women and men was shaped by the same patriarchal structures and norms of hegemonic masculinity, aimed at humiliating and dominating the enemy. Nonetheless, while the Bosnian case has been well documented and extensively explored by feminist

scholars such as Hansen (2000) and Snyder and colleagues (2006), sexual violence during the Kosovo War remains significantly underexplored in both academic literature and post-war narratives, particularly regarding the sexual violence directed at men. Building on the Bosnian precedent, examining the Kosovo case is critical to understanding how hegemonic masculinity structured wartime sexual violence and how this gendered logic continues to shape post-war silencing and selective recognition. Kosovo's position within debates on conflict-related sexual violence is particularly significant as it reveals the persistent failure to fully acknowledge survivors and, more specifically, the continued neglect of male victimhood.

Through an analysis of the wartime sexual violence during the Yugoslav Wars, this article argues that sexual violence was not a by-product of war but was used as a deliberate tool of warfare, structured through norms of hegemonic masculinity. This kind of violence was directed at both

women and men—humiliating women as bearers of national identity and emasculating men as a nation's supposed protectors—as a means of dismantling the enemy's collective identity and honour. Furthermore, through a post-war analytical lens, the article highlights how these gendered dynamics persist and continue to shape the selective recognition of survivors. Importantly, foregrounding men's experiences alongside those of women, challenges the assumption that wartime sexual violence is exclusively experienced by women and offers a more comprehensive account of gendered violence in conflict.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF WARFARE

In situating the mass rapes and widespread sexual violence committed during the Yugoslav War, the Bosnian case provides empirical precedent demonstrating that sexual violence was systematically organised and deliberately deployed as a strategy of ethnic cleansing (United Nations Security Council, 1993). These practices reveal that Serb warfare was not merely driven by territorial or political objectives but was a calculated instrument of warfare produced by embedded gendered norms. The recognition of rape as a crime against humanity and as a tool of ethnic cleansing by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) marked a significant legal and international acknowledgment (United Nations, 2008). By holding perpetrators accountable for rape as an instrument of warfare, the tribunal rejected the narrative that reduces sexual violence and rape to an unavoidable by-product of war. Importantly, this legal recognition also marked a turning point in how gender norms and practices came to be understood within conflict analysis and the power structures in which sexual violence occurs (Hansen, 2000, p.69).

It is precisely unequal gender dynamics that shape and normalise ideas of militarised masculinity and legitimise violence as a masculine expression of power (Henry, 2016, p.44). In the Balkans, particularly in Kosovo, patriarchal social structures have historically reinforced rigid gender roles such that ideals of masculinity and femininity remained deeply entrenched throughout the conflict (Munn, 2006, p.289). Importantly, feminist scholars such as Enloe and Cohn (2003, pp.1191, 1198) argue that patriarchal power systems actively construct the expectations of masculinity and femininity that become central to military practices. Within this framework, 'militarised masculinity', defined by Sjöberg (2015, p.445) as the association of dominance, violence, aggression, and war-making with masculine identity, operates as a legitimising force for violence. In the Yugoslav context, the Serb forces relied strongly on this logic through military propaganda's operationalisation of gender, equating masculinity with 'manliness, national honour and militarism' (Bracewell, 2000, pp.578–579). Nationalist discourse celebrated soldiers as heroes

and the embodiment of national duty and patriotic masculinity, while simultaneously casting the enemy as weak and feminised (Bracewell, 2000, p.567).

This gendered logic positioned women as symbolic bearers of national identity and biological producers of an ethnic group (Alison, 2007, p.81). Therefore, violence against women—through rape, enforced impregnation, or killing—symbolised an attack on the Bosniak community as a whole (Bos, 2006, p.995). The use of sexual violence was thus deliberately aimed at ethnically cleansing a nation (Snyder et al., 2006, pp.189–190), transforming women's bodies into sites of political contestation. Violence



Ultimately, the same gendered dynamics that enabled sexual violence during the conflict continue to persist in the post-conflict context, reinforcing male authority and the hierarchies that structure wartime violence in the first place.

against women simultaneously functioned to humiliate the male opponent, whose masculinity and pride were undermined by his perceived failure to protect the women of his community (Seifert, 1994, p.59). Nevertheless, the gendered norms that fuelled these practices extended beyond women. Bosniak men, too, were targets of sexual violence, revealing that rape served multiple strategic purposes (Stiglmeier, 1994). As Brownmiller (1975, p.17) argues, rape is therefore not only a crime against the female victim, but also a crime 'against the male estate', aimed at emasculating and degrading men.

Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that sexual violence during the Yugoslav wars can be understood as an instrument through which ethnic, gendered, and political hierarchies were simultaneously constructed and enforced. These practices illustrate how militarised masculinity operated as a core principle of organising violence, enabling Serb forces to assert a dominant, aggressive masculine identity over the Bosniak community, constructed as subordinated and emasculated. In doing so, sexual violence functioned not merely as a

tactic of intimidation but as a mechanism of social restructuring. Therefore, the violence was embedded within a broader ideological project that combined militarism, patriarchy, and ethnic nationalism. Within this framework, individual bodies became instruments through which collective domination was enacted. Militarised masculinity, in effect, structured the very logic of the violence.

MALE-TARGETED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

During the Kosovo War, men detained in prisons and detention centres such as Lipjan and Dubrave were subjected to rape, genital mutilation, and other forms of sexual violence, explicitly aimed at destabilising and destroying Kosovar Albanian masculine identity (Shala and Halili, 2022). In a patriarchal society where masculinity is closely associated with strength, dominance, and power, sexual violence against men carries a particular symbolic weight. Through the sexual violation of men, perpetrators sought to 'feminise and homosexualise' Kosovar Albanian men, positioning them as weak and emasculated (Zarkov, 2014, p.337). The motive behind these acts of sexual violence stemmed from the desire of Serb forces to assert a superior and hegemonic masculinity grounded in ideals of patriotism and male dominance (Alison, 2007, p.86). Importantly, this masculinity was exclusively a Serbian nationalist one. Serbian nationalist discourse had long feminised and subordinated Kosovar Albanian men as the inferior 'Other', against which Serbian masculine dominance was defined (Salecl, 1994, p.34). Krasniqi (2024) argues that an attack on a man through sexual violence signifies a victory for the perpetrator, as it demonstrates the power to assert his dominance over the victim by stripping him of his masculine and ethnic identity. In Kosovar Albanian society, men were constructed as the defenders of the nation's collective honour. Therefore, their sexual violation, similarly to that of women, symbolically occurred as an attack on the community's capacity for resistance (Luci, 2002, p.75). Ultimately, beyond physical harm, male rape during the Kosovo War functioned as a symbolic attack, in which Serb forces attempted to assert dominance over the collective identity of the Kosovar Albanian community.

SILENCING, STIGMA & HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN POST-WAR KOSOVO

Importantly, the gendered logic that drove sexual violence against men during the Kosovo War did not disappear with the end of the conflict. Twenty-seven years later, the same patriarchal norms shaped by ideas of militarised masculinities continue to shape post-war narratives through the systematic silencing of rape survivors. The patriarchal and traditional gender roles determine whose voices are acknowledged and whose remain silenced and excluded (Krasniqi, 2024). As Henry (2016, p.45) argues, rape survivors are burdened with 'shame and

stigma', dynamics that remain particularly entrenched in Kosovo and further constrain survivors' ability to speak openly about their experiences. The consequences of this silencing are evident in the limited justice the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have received. The Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Traumatized Victims (KRCT) has registered 1,300 cases of CRSV, yet only 4 percent of these cases have been presented to justice institutions (KRCT, 2025), with only one case resulting in the prosecution of the perpetrator (KRCT, 2024, p.14). These statistics highlight the limitations of the post-war justice mechanisms and demonstrate how gender norms impede survivors' access recognition.

This post-war silencing is essentially rooted in the same gendered norms that structured wartime sexual violence. In both cases of male and female rape, sexual violence is framed as a failure of masculine protection (Olujic, 1998, p.39). Within Balkan societies, where sexual violence remains a deeply entrenched taboo, silence is often more honourable than acknowledging the 'shame' associated with rape (Jahjaga et al., 2019, p.180). For women, this shame is deeply rooted and produced through gender norms that frame sexual violation as a transgression against femininity and honour (Amnesty International, 2017b, p.46). The silencing operates as an extension of the wartime logic of hegemonic masculinities in which women's experiences and voices are constrained. Ultimately, the same gendered dynamics that enabled sexual violence during the conflict continue to persist in the post-conflict context, reinforcing male authority and the hierarchies that structure wartime violence in the first place.

For men, however, acknowledging sexual violence directly challenges the dominant constructions of masculinity, which are rooted in strength, heterosexuality, and authority. As a result, resistance to recognising male victimhood becomes a defence of hegemonic identity itself. Munn (2006, p.299) further argues that such resistance reflects the protection of a specific gendered, sexualised conception of identity; namely, an Albanian, male, heterosexual ideal of masculinity laden with social rewards and symbolic power. Consequently, post-war silencing is not merely a social phenomenon, but a continuation of the wartime logic of hegemonic masculinity. The marginalisation of male survivors is thus a broader reflection of an ongoing struggle to preserve dominant constructions of masculinity, which are tied to nationalism, honour, and patriarchal authority. Taken together, the selective recognition of female survivors and the exclusion of male ones reveal that hegemonic masculinity continues to structure social and political recognition, demonstrating the enduring link between wartime strategy and post-war inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Analysing conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and the more understudied case of

Kosovo reveals that rape and sexual violence were used as a weapon of war in the Yugoslav Wars. Drawing on these two case studies, it is evident that sexual violence was systematically deployed by Serb forces to humiliate and emasculate the enemy's collective identity and honour. Crucially, this violence was structured through patriarchal gender norms shaped by militarised masculinity and vulnerable femininity and was employed to humiliate both women and men. The systematic mass rape of Bosniak women and forced impregnation in different rape camps targeted them as symbolic bearers of national identity. Men were also victimised not only physically, but symbolically, as the violence was also aimed at destroying their pride, honour, and masculinity.

Although conflict-related sexual violence in the Balkans is widely discussed in academia, the cases of sexual violence – in particular male cases – in Kosovo remain underexplored and marginalised in legal accountability and post-war narratives. This phenomenon further demonstrates how the gendered norms that shaped sexual violence in the first place continue to persist almost three decades after the war. The marginalisation of male survivors is a product of the hegemonic militarised masculinity norms and further reflects males' continuous struggle to preserve their dominant masculine identity.

Ultimately, the inclusion of both women's and men's experiences challenges the common assumption that conflict-related sexual violence solely affects women and opens the path towards more inclusive post-war reconstruction and legal frameworks. Initiatives should expand the legal recognition around conflict-related sexual violence and extend justice to male survivors, ensuring that no experiences are excluded or silenced. Acknowledging the experiences of both genders is essential to disrupt the conventional gendered patriarchal norms that facilitate such violence in the first place.

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