

**The Forgotten Contribution of Women
in Two Pre-war Social Movements in Kosovo**

Rita Berisha

Supervised by: Valur Ingimundarson

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Abstract

While Kosovar Albanian peaceful resistance in Kosovo has a long history, it has been marginalized in many ways, because of the emphasis on the 1990s armed struggle and wars in the ex-Yugoslavia. After the 1981 protests in Kosovo, the *Ilegalja* movement – an underground protest movement led by Albanian students and intellectuals – continued protest actions. The counter-measures of the authorities led to the imprisonment of many members, which were not freed until the early 1990s. From the *Ilegalja* political prisoners emerged the idea of blood feud reconciliation as a necessity to stop the so-called law an eye for an eye, which had a long tradition in Kosovo.

In this essay, I focus on the crucial role of women members in both movements, which has been largely suppressed because men have taken the credit for their activities. I explore women's motivations to participate in the movements, look at their actions and what they have been through as a result. I explore the topic from the perspective of history and collective memory to show how women have been erased from master narratives. I stress that the predominant mode of remembering in independent Kosovo has to do with the Kosovo War, which mostly brackets out the period preceding it. Through interviews I study women's experiences and their expectations. In addition, to amplify the scholarly works, I use newspapers and photos of statues of men in Prishtina to give an insight into what "should" be remembered and which part of history is neglected.

Key words: Social movements, women's role, Kosovo, memory, history

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

The focus of this paper is on the experience of women, who lived for a cause they believed in. It is about women who went through imprisonment for their political ideas and thoughts and who engaged in political resistance and social movements to achieve historical change. The mass student protests, in March 1981, mark a break in Kosovo's history under Yugoslavia. What started as a protest for improving student conditions at the University of Pristina and the quality of food in the canteen, turned into political resistance and calls for a Kosovo Republic. The demand for wide-ranging reforms and a change in the constitutional status of Kosovo, which was defined as "a province" within Serbia, had been articulated in earlier protests, notably those in 1968. Yet, the way political authorities dealt with the unrest was radically different. After the 1968 events, many of the demands for more autonomy were met. In 1970, the University of Prishtina was opened and shortly, thereafter, the national Albanian flag was allowed, which was followed by the establishment of the Albanological Institute in Prishtina. In 1974, a new Yugoslav Constitution granted Kosovo autonomy and a place within Yugoslavia's highest organ, the Federal Executive Council, like the five Yugoslav republics: Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. Yet, Kosovo did not become a full-fledged republic with a formal right to secede from Yugoslavia.

The protests of 1981 took place one year after the death of Yugoslav leader, Josip Tito, and they were put down with much violence, including killings of some protesters, and resulted in mass arrests. The brutal suppression of the revolt intensified Kosovar Albanian nationalism and re-energized the *Ilegalja* resistance movement, which had been formed after the Second World War. *Ilegalja* was led by students and intellectuals who wrote pamphlets and slogans to raise

awareness of the unfair treatment of ethnic Albanians by the Serbian authorities. They were organized in small cells, usually composed of friends or family relatives who trusted each other and did not share or consult with other cells because it was considered too dangerous. *Ilegalja* did not have a unified programme, and the political goals of its members differed, depending on the cells they belonged to. Some wanted to strive for Kosovo independence, while others, the so-called “Enveristas,” favoured Kosovo’s unification with Albania, which was under the rule of Enver Hoxha, the communist dictator.

Less than a decade later, the situation in Kosovo underwent another political change. Having embarked on an extreme nationalist course, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic deprived Kosovo of its autonomy in 1989. In response, Kosovar Albanian political leaders adopted a peaceful resistance strategy as a way of fighting for independence while avoiding war. However, coinciding with this development, in the early 1990s, there were widespread anti-Serbian protests that were quelled down by the authorities. As a result, many young people lost their lives. When the Serbian regime tried to blame the murders on blood feuds among Albanians, former *Ilegalja* political prisoners, who had been released from prison after completing their sentences in the early 1990s, started the movement of blood feud reconciliation.

Blood feuds had had a long tradition in Kosovo, stemming from the first code of behavior, the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini (Kanun). Kanun was based on honor and traditions, and it helped regulate life. If someone killed a man of one’s family, a family member was obliged to take revenge by killing a man of the other family. The tradition, which was articulated in an “eye for an eye” law, gave the regime an alibi to hide its own crimes, while shifting the blame on the victims. The blood feuds reconciliation effort came at a time when ethnic Albanians could not bear “double killings”: while Albanians were persecuted by the Serbian regime, they were honouring a

custom that led to killings among themselves. Women were instrumental in ending this deadly practice. The traditional ban on the entry of women into an *oda* – or the room which was used for discussion and decision making in the domestic sphere – was lifted. They were not only allowed to take part in deliberations but also to forgive the blood, enabling them to put their own stamp on the reconciliation process.

The purpose here is to account for the vital role played by women in both the *Ilegalja* and the blood reconciliation movements. It is an attempt to rescue their memory from oblivion. Their contribution has until now been silenced, because men have taken the sole credit for the formation, activities, and accomplishments of both movements. It can be seen as a strategy to underpin male political power and legacies, while women are being pushed back to their traditional domestic roles.

Given the preponderant academic focus on the Kosovo War and the subsequent peacebuilding and reconstruction process, scholars have not paid much attention to the two social movements discussed here. However this paper will highlight two works: one by anthropologist Nita Luci, who explores blood feud reconciliation as a movement that helped build the nation (Luci 2014) and the other by historian Ethem Ceku, who has published the court proceedings of criminal cases, involving members of *Ilegalja* cells (Ceku 2004). In addition, it will rely on several other works. Sabile Kecmezi Basha has written extensively on *Ilegalja*, in which she examines, among other things, the role of torture used by the regime against political prisoners (Kecmezi Basha 2003). Elife Krasniqi has looked at women's role in some *Ilegalja* actions (Krasniqi, 2011) and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers explores the roots of *Ilegalja* in Albanian traditions and myths (Schwandner-Sievers, 2013).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Ilegalja and blood feud reconciliation were part of the peaceful resistance movement in Kosovo, which was led by Ibrahim Rugova in the 1990s. This period in Kosovo's history, which coincided with break-up of Yugoslavia, and the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, has not been given much attention, partly because it did not achieve its aim of Kosovo's independence. Hence, this narrative has been marginalized and replaced by a heroic masculine account, where the armed resistance of the Kosovo Liberation Army and NATO's military intervention in 1999 are being valorized as a precursor to Kosovo's statehood. This is an attempt to correct what may be termed a historical bias, which has been kept alive in the present, and where gender plays an instrumental role. The focus here is on how and why the voices of women in the prewar social movements have been silenced. One reason has obviously to do with the suppression of the memory peaceful resistance movement in general. The KLA legacy has been used to rewrite the past and legitimize political power in the present. After all, the current president and prime minister of Kosovo are former KLA members. Yet, what needs to be stressed is that the activities of men in the *Ilegalja* and the Blood Reconciliation movements are remembered and respected. Some of the participants are still active in politics. It is only the role of women, which has been erased from memory and their contribution forgotten.

1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 The Main Research Question

Research question: How and why are women's contribution forgotten?

1.3.2 Sub-questions

- What were the motives of women who decided to join the *Ilegalja* and blood feud reconciliation social movements?
- Why was it important for them to take part in the political struggle?
- What was their contribution to the activities of the movements?
- How were political prisoners treated in the prisons of former Yugoslavia?
- How did the judicial system work? Which laws were used to imprison political activists and to what extent did they violate prisoners' human rights?
- How does present-day Kosovo deal with past, especially with respect to former political prisoners?

1.4 Methodology and Data Collection

I base the paper on interviews with women who were political prisoners and who later went on to be active in the blood feud reconciliation movement. Up until now, only one woman has spoken publicly about her experience, motivation and expectations. The project Oral History Kosovo has, however, conducted interviews with many people on the blood feud reconciliation process. I will rely on informal and semi-structured interviews. According to Dewalt and Dewalt (2002), using semi structured interviews is a way for the researcher to allow the informant to take the lead and control the conversation without imposing a set of standardized questions which would limit their response. Even if some academics prefer non-direct interviewing with the aim of minimalizing as much as possible the influence of the researcher, I argue that, in my case, which deals with sensitive data, women might never talk about important issues. As Hammersley and Atkinson have pointed out, interviewing can generate information that would be very difficult to have otherwise, and some qualitative research relies heavily on interview data, notably life-history work (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 87). To be sure, some feminists have criticized life-history as being too

Western-centric, but I agree with Karin Willemse (2014) who believes that “excluding non-western women from life-history research puts them a priori as essentially different from western women” (Willemse, 2014).

The most important part for me is giving a voice to the women whose stories have never been heard. Oral history “allows one to better understand human agency in the context of social and institutional discourses and that can attend to the influence of history” (Cerwonka, 2007). The interviews can give them a chance to share their personal experience, on the one hand, and historical events, on the other (Portelli, 2006). Or as the folklorist Arbnora Dushi puts it “what strikes me is the personal world of the storyteller before the historical circumstances that we have been through as a nation” (Dushi 2009: 229).

1.4.1 Ethical Concerns

Most of the stories recounted in this paper have never been shared before. Dealing with such sensitive data can pose some difficult ethical questions. Prior to interviewing, I explained to the women that they could withdraw at any moment and handed the recorder to them, so that they could pause or take a break at any given time. It is known that being researched is not easy, “can create anxiety or worsen it”; there can, however, also be potential benefits from talking at length to someone about one’s problems (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 170–178). All the women whom I spoke with have decided to be cited under their name; however they want their stories to be kept inside academia and not for a broader public. Many academics have argued that the participants “own their data” (Walker 1978; Lincoln and Guba 1989, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Therefore, whatever data I share here were approved by the women I interviewed to make sure that nothing would damage their privacy and that they were quoted accurately. Another reason for them to be the first readers of this paper is that sometimes they “feel like they have been robbed

of essential dignity” (Lincoln and Guba 1989: 236), and they are the core of this research and they have trusted me with their stories.

1.5 Contribution of the Research

Kosovo has been researched mostly for the war in 1999 as if it was the starting point of Kosovo’s subjectivity. But the experiences of oppression, gender discrimination or other issues have, of course, been part of its history. Most of the research highlights male experiences and their motivations of men – a trend that is replicated in media accounts. My research puts the spotlight on the role of women and their part in history, specifically on those who have been excluded for almost 40 years. A large part of the social activism we witness today is donor-driven, which restricts its scope and action. The activism of women political prisoners and of the blood feud reconciliation movement had nothing to do with profit. They gave their health and life for a national cause, but have received nothing by the Kosovo state in return. This is a way of trying to bring them back to the collective memory and history by proving that they deserve a place in both. Thus, the research seeks to present a different form of history and a different way of interpreting Kosovo’s past.

Women in the *Ilegalja* and Blood Feud Reconciliation Movements

2.1 Women Joining Social Movements

Motivation and recruitment have been a recurrent topic in the study of social movements, centering on the question of who becomes active and who does not. As Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani put it: “A social movement develops when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond” (Porta and Diani 2006: 14). This is particularly true for a state such as the multiethnic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the way it handled the nationality issue. A case in point is how it confronted the demands of the Albanian majority population for more self-determination. Scholars have used terms such as ideology to characterize the motivation for participation in social movements. *Ilegalja* activists in Kosovo, however, did not have the same understanding or idea about the solution to the problem they were confronting.

As Nita Luci has pointed out, most of the *Ilegalja* groups worked independently of each other and did not have a single coherent ideological platform. Many espoused Marxist-Leninist goals; some fought for a republican status for Kosovo and others saw unification with Albania as the best option (Luci 2014: 107). Some academics have argued that the term “habitus” coined by Pierre Bourdieu allows for a broader perspective on social movements than collective identity by including the term “experience, which is naturalized and internalized” (Formynia 2014; Shoshan 2018). However most *Ilegalja* members were young and had no experience; their life and experience were rather shaped by being active in *Ilegalja*, and then they moved on to the blood feud reconciliation movement. One activist, Hava Shala, puts it this way:

I was 17 years old; I remember Robert was 17 too, Zyrafete and Myrvete as well. I remember that a certain number of us turned 18 during the time in prison. I mean, we were all between the age of 15 and 17, eventually 18. I don't exactly remember other birthdays. But we were arrested at school at that time in December 19; it was Thursday if I am not mistaken; it was the second class (the second hour). It is a day I will never forget because it was a very special day, a day that turned our life in a direction we had never thought about (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

Michelle Petrie also finds that younger people are more likely to be part of protests. She argues that being unmarried and not having children gives people more leisure time and ability to take part in demonstrations (Petrie, 2004). This helps explain why *Ilegalja* and Blood feud reconciliation activists were mostly of young age, often students who did not have a stable job; they were unmarried and interested in politics.

The term “collective identity” has not only helped scholars to explain participation in social movements. It has also been used to explore the changes and motivations of people involved in political formations, which puts them at personal risk. It “is a concept with how the ‘we’ represented by the movement is constructed and how movement members negotiate and articulate a shared understanding of who they are” (Shoshan, 2018). I define collective identity in line with Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper who understand the term as an “individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Collective identity captures well the participation in *Ilegalja* because the main fight of its members was for national rights. As one female participant, Nazire Curraj, observes:

I didn't agree with the Yugoslavia system because it was against our rights; we [Albanians] didn't have any national right. You have money but don't ask for freedom they would say. I worked as well; had 1 million wages, all the conditions,

but it is not fair until we all raise and ask for our rights. To at least be equal with other Republics (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

Collective identity is not only about the way movements frame themselves but also how they distinguish themselves from others (“us” versus “them”). Polletta and Jasper maintain that “[i]dentities need to be integrated with injustice and agency frames so as to clearly distinguish “us” from opponents and bystanders” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Another aspect, which has to be taken into account, is “the interpretation of grievances,” whereby the adoption of the injustice frame, especially under authoritarian regimes, legitimizes disobedience (Snow; Rochford; Worden; Benford, 1986). If there is a shared interpretation of grievances, it provides an incentive for bringing people together.

It has been argued that social ties are the most important part of recruiting people in social movements. Doug McAdams and Ronnelle Paulsen make the point that emotions are not among the first reasons to organize but rather “structural factors” that bring individuals into movements. (McAdams and Paulsen, 1993). Such structural factors refer to “interpersonal ties,” including knowing someone who is already involved in the movement and meeting new people (McAdams and Paulsen, 1993). It is, however, not enough just to know someone or share the same interest with members of a social movement. “[S]haring prior bond” through kinship, friendship is what pulls people into social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In the words of *Ilegalja* female member Shyhrete Malaj Kurteshi:

The ideals were shared by our family. In one group, my brothers and sister were organized; I was a member too. But due to luck and their resistance when they were imprisoned, my name was not mentioned during the investigation; and I was not imprisoned. Then I continued with another group, with other friends. I was the only woman (Shyhrete Malaj Kurteshi, 2017).

Structuralist theories have explained participation in social movements with shared attributes of the population like nationality, gender and class. Yet, communication seems to be more important. The decision to join social movements often depends on risk factors. As Porta and Diani observe: “Evidence suggest that the more costly and dangerous the collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties required for individuals to participate” (Porta and Diani 2006: 128). This shows that joining movements that do not involve high risk makes it easier to make the decision. But since *Ilegalja* members could spend many years in prison, participation required strong interpersonal ties and shared beliefs.

Women usually join social movements later than men, and are usually fewer in number. Research on participation in the 1960s protest movements suggests that the absence of women might be explained by religious socialization and lower college attendance. Michelle Petrie has found that the educational level of women is a less important explanatory factor in the present. “Supporting this hypothesis, the coefficient for gender does not emerge as significant allowing us to conclude that protest participation does not significantly vary by gender as it once did in the 1960s” (Petrie, 2004). This also helps explain the increased female participation in *Ilegalja*, especially after 1981 when women were provided with new educational opportunities. As *Ilegalja* member Shukrije Gashi observes:

Also, women’s involvement in the movement helped; many actions were carried out more easily, because it did not cross the mind of the regime that women would get involved in such issues. Because, as we all know, at the time these actions were reserved for men only. And the distribution of leaflets, of other materials was easier when done by women, because they were not under much surveillance, compared to men who were under much more surveillance, either by undercover spies or

Yugoslav UDB¹ agents. And so, we managed to resume our activities and continue with the demonstrations in the year 1982, as well as to create a network of people, of the movement's members, to stretch it out all over Kosovo and outside (Shukrije Gashi, Oral History Kosovo, 2015).

In other words, by joining *Ilegalja*, women kept the movement going, for they entered the movement when men were unable to carry on with its activities. Another factor that might have opened *Ilegalja* for women was that most of the groups were leftist. Reed M Wood and Jakana L Thomas have shown that ideologies, such as Marxism, which challenge gender roles are usually more positive toward to female participation. They did not, however, find any evidence suggesting that nationalist movements were more prone to welcoming women. To them, female participation in such movements depends on other” ideologies that intersect” – in this case, a left-wing ideology (Wood and Thomas, 2017).

On the other hand, the blood feud reconciliation movement in Kosovo was not one that women joined but created. The idea itself emerged after the Trepça miners' hunger strike and the ongoing protest's all over Kosovo after the Serbian government deprived it of its autonomy in 1989. Thirty-two Albanian soldiers, serving mandatory army duty in the Yugoslav People's Army” during that year were returned in coffins; their deaths were blamed on blood feuds (Luci 2014: 109). Hava Shala recalls that during the protest, she was approached by a man who was scared that his cousins might kill each other and who begged her as a former political prisoner to do something. The idea was also broached by the miners, while Shala was still in prison. She discussed it with Akile Dedinca, a prison friend. But the final push to start the blood feud reconciliation movement was given by the Serbian regime. Shala recounts the story as follows:

¹ UDB is the acronym that stands for Uprava državne bezbednosti meaning State Security Administration.

And the spokesman of Milošević's government appeared in the news at that time; I knew his name back then. And he said that, "They were not killed..." Somebody was killed in Peja, in Deçan and in other places of Kosovo. And he said, "They were not killed by our police and army," theirs. "But primitive Albanians were killed because of feuds." And, it was clear to me in that moment that the first thing I would do the next day, no matter the danger I faced; I would go to the city of Peja. Myrvete was the first person I aimed to meet and wanted to meet" (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

In public accounts about the origins of the blood feud reconciliation movement, the names of women like Shala, Dreshaj and Dedinca's are not mentioned. In one of the public gatherings of blood reconciliations in Drenica, Anton Çetta said that students from Peja had started the movement, but gave no further information about the individuals or their gender identities.

2.2 Women's Contribution to Social Movements

Anthropologist Elife Krasniqi recounts, in an article about *Ilegalja*, her childhood experience and the involvement of women in the movement. She argues that women in Kosovo were doubly oppressed: "apart from being oppressed as women in a patriarchal society, they also faced the same oppression as the rest of population for their national identity" (Krasniqi, 2011). She also recalls that the role of women in the early stages of *Ilegalja* was highly gendered. With respect to one *Ilegalja* action, where many urban spaces were covered with Albanian flags, she points out that it were women who sew cloths into flags. However, women's contribution changed over time – from performing manual functions to intellectual work. In 1968, Hyrije Hana created the following slogans: "We want self-determination for secession"; "We want the unification of Kosovo with other Albanian regions"; "We want the University of Prishtina" (Novosella 2008: 90; Krasniqi, 2011). Women not only participated in *Ilegalja*, but they also led their own cells. As Curraj observes:

By 12 of June 1981 I founded the group “Jehona e Krajës.²” Together with Abdullah Prapashtica, we needed to create connections to get in and out of Albania, but I didn’t use the group only that way. I wrote different leaflets that would be distributed by the six participants of the cell (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

Women’s contribution was, however, challenged by social norms. Women were not only challenging the Yugoslav state with their activism but also patriarchy by being active and participating in history making. Sometimes the reason why women join social movements is that the situation touches them first because of their gender roles. Elizabeth Borland and Barbara Sutton argue that women became part of protest and resistance in Argentina because of the economic crises “dramatically decreasing poor women’s access to resources and making household and care work more labor intensive” (Borland and Sutton, 2007). The challenge faced by Kosovar Albanian women was reflected in in the blood feud reconciliation initiative because it centered on the right to enter the *oda* which was man-only space but also having a say and decision making in forgiving the blood. As Myrvete Dreshaj recounts:

Often in the action for blood feud reconciliation we, as women, had to confront the tradition of the *oda* [men’s chamber]. We were hardly understood sometimes. There were cases when we entered the *oda* and elders would not even extend their hands to us, the meaning of it was that it was not our place, but we had to go to the women’s house. Because our friends, with whom we were there, noticed it immediately, in such cases they would be the ones to open the discussion and we would continue it. It is weird, but there were many cases when the elders sat with their legs crossed in the *oda*, and they always found this position, with their back turned towards us, in order for us to sit behind their backs (Myrvete Dreshaj, Oral History Kosovo, 2005).

At that time, hierarchical control in the family was exercised by men and the elders. On some occasions, a mother or an old women had more decision-making power than a young boy. But

² Jehona e Krajës means Echos of Kraja. Kraja is a region with mostly ethnic Albanians in Montenegro.

when elder men turned their backs to women activists, it was a symbolic way of not only silently requesting them to leave the *oda* and go to the women's room but also an offensive act. These challenges faced by women and young men who joined the movement forced the activists to call for help. Anton Çetta became the face of the movement because as a folklorist, he knew the *oda* and the mentality really well, which helped in the way the reconciliation activists spoke with the families trying to convince them to reconcile. Moreover, he was a professor and held a prestigious position, but, most importantly, he was an old man. Luci argues that for women to be able to continue the work on blood feuds, it needed a shift, a tradition had to re-conceptualized. It not only challenged and opened up the *oda*, but it also re-defined what it meant to be a man (Luci 2014: 120–127). Women involved in blood feuds reconciliation were not just talking and convincing people to forgive blood; rather, for the first time, they were the ones to forgive. In the words of Muradije Muriqi:

Sali Cacaj, he asked me, “Muradije, is there some reason, could we come to your family with some students, professors, to talk; it's the region of Peja”. I said, “You can come, but I am telling you that it will be done here.” He remained speechless and was surprised because I was a sister of six brothers; then it's not that I was of an age when I could take such big decisions. But he was surprised and notified the students who were engaged, you knew the main ones, the professors as well, and they came to our house” (Muradije Muriqi, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

2.3 The Punishment and Imprisonment of Women Activists

Political prisoners were regularly subjected to torture, especially during the investigation phase, in the ex-Yugoslavia. The regime made the most of arrests of Albanian activists in public, with the aim of giving a lesson to anyone who might have been thinking of joining the *Illegalja* movement.

Curraj observes:

In 1981, I was arrested for the first time. I was still working, and when I came home from work, I found five police cars downstairs. My daughters where still very

young. The eldest hadn't turned nine yet; the second was two years old and the third only eight months old. When I went to the door, they waited for me with submachine guns, and they had already searched the house (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

Shala has similar memories of her arrest:

We were arrested in school. I remember they knocked the door open with their feet. It was a very cold winter, and I was wearing a jacket because in the school, we didn't have a heating system. They didn't order to "come" or "follow us", they took us the back by our jackets and dragged us out of the classroom; and I could barely touch the ground until they put me in the police car (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

During the investigation, the torture started, which took on multiple forms. Most of women do not remember the questions that were asked, but have vivid recollections of being beaten:

Maybe the most paradoxical word I encountered, I have ever heard, (puts inside quotations) was the word, "being questioned," because we were not actually being questioned there. You didn't even dare to say a thing there; you were mistreated, and tortured... they were afraid of your courage, of your word, of your thought. (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016)

Torture was used the women as political prisoners had already been labeled as the enemy of the state. It was meant to break the prisoners, to humiliate them. According to Hannah Arendt, this kind of treatment happens because the repressive "state treats the victims of its aggression like rebels, who are to be blamed for treason" (Arendt 2002: 530). Torture methods, however, are often defended by the state on the pretext that "the authorities are obliged to defeat terrorists" (Punamaki 1988). Shala recounts:

There were constantly lists with various names of teachers, or people you could or couldn't know. And you were threatened; you were tortured in order to sign that list. But I can say with pleasure that today I feel pride for my friends because none

of us, all independently from each other, gave such signatures. And then it was easier to deal just with your own punishment (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

The authoritarian or totalitarian state also uses torture to force political prisoners to sign papers which they can later use to arrest others. It does not matter whether the named persons are really involved or not in the movement. This has, for example, been the case with respect to Palestinian political prisoners under the Israeli occupation. Raija-Leena Punamaki argues that torture seeks to “punish the suspect, as well as acquiring information” to give a confession, which will be used in court to punish the suspect and frighten and arrest others who continue to pursue political activities (Punamaki, 1988). Kurteshi describes this experience as an *Ilegalja* political prisoner as follows:

I was covered in blood. I don't even know how I don't have marks on my face; one of them hit me with a wooden ruler and tearing up my lip and mustache. They would hit you in the same spot where you were bleeding. All torture is horrible, but when they used electroshock it was the hardest. It looked like the baton, umbrella and they would put it on your neck or order you to hold it” (Shyhrete Malaj Kurteshi, 2017).

In a similar vein, Shala observes:

And I was very tired because we had gone many hours with no food, no sleep, no water no... we were beaten; I myself experienced electroshock three times in my knee, neck, in the tooth. And electroshock causes a terrible tiredness, then there were various beatings; they were as they called them, tortures with quick methods, which mainly were, beating front-back, throwing, crashing and everything happened really fast. But, there were also slow methods, which means you got beaten exactly in the spot where you were injured, where you had a wound, where there was blood, deliberately once more, twice more in the spot where you were already hurt that was... it was called, “The slow method, soft,” this is how they cynically called it” (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

Curraj tells her story of torture in this way:

Physically and mentally I was destroyed. From prison, they took me to a neurology hospital because I was constantly bleeding from the nose, mouth and ear. But the night I will never forget is 18 January 1989 in the central prison in Belgrade; three guards fought a war on my body until I heard them say “Nema ništa više od nje” - “there is nothing left in her” (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

In many works on political prisoners, sexual violence is mentioned. This topic did not come up in the interviews. The data only reveal instances of men whose sexual organs were violated as part of torture.³

2.3.1 Political Prisoners and Prison Transfers

Most female and male political prisoners were transferred between prisons before finishing their sentences. The regime would usually move them after riots or hunger strikes; it also separated them from other friends or other prisoners with whom they had developed solidarities as a way of added punishment. The only *Ilegalja* prisoner who finished the bulk of her sentence in one prison was Kurteshi. Because her other five siblings were imprisoned as well, they were all kept in different prisons, usually in different parts of Yugoslavia, which made it very difficult for her mother to visit her.

Kadrie Gashi Myrtaj completed her five-year sentence, first in a prison in Mitrovica prison and then in a one located Pozharevc. For her, there was a big difference between the two.

If you have heard of Mauthausen, Mitrovica was Mauthausen. Mitrovica was the worst prison; it can't be explained. It was very harsh. It was a concentration camp not a prison. Pozharevc was different. I used to call it “the misery garden”; it has a lot of beautiful flowers in the garden of the prison. We had to work; I took part in the production of footballs; it was a quite hard job, but we got paid, not a lot, but the smokers could buy their own cigarettes (Kadrie Gashi Myrtaj, 2017).

The idea to make the prisoners work is to give them the ability to think of a normal life outside of the prison and to re-socialize them in the norms and morals of society. There was also an economic

³ See Sabile Keçmezi Basha.

dimension to it: to reap economic gains from cheap labor. “If they don’t live with their work the prisoners have to live from the work of others. Prisoner work turns the thief into an obeying worker” (Foucault 2010, 240). While we may think of prisons as re-socializing institutions, the one in Mitrovica was meant to punish and humiliate the prisoners. In the words of Shala:

Mitrovica I want to make it clear because I heard people say “oh they were “Enverists” [the followers of Albanian Communist Leader Enver Hoxa]; in Mitrovica you couldn’t be an Enverist. There you either had to know what you wanted and why you were there or you went crazy. Mitrovica was for political prisoners... If during parent visits you dared to say something symbolic, every guard on the way back would hit you with a baton until you reached your cell, and if you were under investigations, and investigations happened during the night, you were left with no food, water or sleep. Mitrovica allowed you to bath once in two weeks, and when only political prisoners were showering, they would put only the cold water in the winter for you to freeze (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

Most political prisoners went through the Mitrovica prison. It was investigation prison, and usually after prisoners had received their sentence, they would be transferred elsewhere. Hava finished three years of her sentence in Mitrovica; she was sent back for taking part in a hunger strike that political prisoners started in the Lipjan prison after the harsh treatment and beating of a fellow female prisoner, Ajshe Gjonbalaj. She belonged to the only *Ilegalja* cell that opted for violence in the resistance struggle. The cell believed that the time of slogans and leaflets was over and that more radical actions were necessary. Members threw Molotov cocktails in the “Bozhur” hotel in the center of Pristina, which has now been renamed “Swiss Diamond hotel.” Ajshe received the longest prison sentence of all the women prisoners or 13 years (Keçmezi-Basha, 2003: 214-219).

Curraj also had to go through a humiliating experience in solitary confinement:

After four and a half months, they took me to the central prison in Belgrade. I was in a solitary confinement cell, three levels underground. I wasn’t allowed to shower or to make walks in the garden; all the time alone. The cloths in my body started to get decomposed. I was covered in lice; I’d take lice from hair, armpits, all over my

body. There was only a piece of linoleum floor and worms would come out of it. The human forgets in such situation how to talk. They kept me there for seven months and some days” (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

Nazire was the only female political prisoner who was sent to the Belgrade central prison. Most of the women, however, experienced solitary confinement for some period of time during their imprisonment. When discussing isolation cells, Michel Foucault brings up two important points. The positive aspect of isolation was that “when alone the prisoner thinks” and the isolation is meant to make his/her conscience talk. But if it means isolation for longer periods of time, as was the case with Nazire or Hava, the experience threatened to make them mentally ill (Foucault 2010, 234–237). Shala puts it this way:

During the investigations I experienced the outer limit of physical pain, while in room number three, in cell number three which was solitary confinement, I experienced the outer limit of... thought, of logical thinking. I was afraid that if I didn't say something it was possible that I would suddenly never be able to think logically again, concretely, go crazy (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

Coping mechanisms are important in prison, not only while the investigation is going on or in solitary confinement, but even after being released. One way of coping are friendships built inside the prison. According to research, participants will have “emotional gratifications such as solidarity and agency with others who are in a similar situation” (Benski; Langman; Perugorria; Tejerina 2013). Curraj describes this feeling:

One of the investigators he was a leading criminal, he only spoke with the language of violence, I hear he is paralyzed now. I don't wish bad upon enemy's but that news made me happy. Ohhh, all that he has done, they would bring girls back with black hands from his batons, girls who were still growing up, I never cared about myself (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

Another source of coping with hardship is ideology as an empowering tool. When one is convinced that he/she is on the right side and that a fight for a just cause was the reason for being in prison, it makes it easier to deal with it. Many Palestinian ex-prisoners, who have been interviewed by scholars, mentioned the just cause of the Palestinian struggle as a resource that helped them to withstand hardships; loyalty toward their own people, patriotism and a feeling of pride, and defiance were also singled out (Punamaki, 1988). For Hava, her coping mechanism in a Kosovo prison was singing:

I improvised all the possible ways, be it songs, recitals, drama, as... starting from the first poem to the last, then from the last to the first. The combination of the poetry of Yannis Risto. I had those books for six months and something, they were my best friends. And I sang, I sang, I sang, a lot. The song doesn't sound anywhere better than it does in prison (smiles)" (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

2.3.2 Menstruation in Prison

Menstruation is a taboo and something that is not discussed on a daily basis. Women try to hide it and are socialized in such a way to feel embarrassed or ashamed. Menstruation is a source of stigma; "it conveys information that these women have a defect of body or of character that spoils their appearance or identity" (Goffman 1963; Robledo and Chrisler 2011). As Newton puts it: "The aim of menstrual management is to pass through the menstrual period without mishaps such as leaking, and without unduly drawing attention to oneself by changes in behavior" (Newton 2012). However, this becomes impossible in prison. Female prisoners lose their agency and power to control the way they manage their periods. In order to do so, they have to tell the guards and ask for pads/tampons. This gave the guards the power over female political prisoners, making them more vulnerable when they were having their periods. In Shala's words:

One time when I had my period, and I asked a guard to bring me the things I needed and she went to fetch them. When she came back, another guard came by and he grabbed the things from her hands and said to me “there is no space for such things here” and closed the door. My door remained closed for four or five days” (Hava Shala, Oral History Kosovo, 2016).

There is evidence of political prisoners using their menstrual blood as a way to protest or try to destigmatize periods. Irish women political prisoners did so as part of the “No wash” protest. As Wahidin puts it, “[t]he political prisoners inverted the structures of control and surveillance and created a space that paralyzed the gaze of the prison officers and where menstrual blood became a weapon of political protest which created alternative spaces to resist the power of punishment” (Wahidin, 2018). Menstruating women are, in effect, “in the closet” about their stigmatized menstrual status. “Social relations of somatophobia and misogyny continue to hold over women, in some circumstances, the threat of being ‘outed’ as menstruators, sometimes with serious consequences to their self-esteem or opportunities for benefits” (Young 2005, 113; Robledo and Chrisler, 2013). Kaitlyn de Graaf in her thesis on menstruation in prison shows that women had mostly bad experiences with periods, explaining their experience with words such as “awkward, disturbing, degrading, dirty and as something that made them feel inferior” (de Graaf 2011: 146).

2.4 Communal Stigmatization of Female Political Prisoners

Women paid a high price for joining the *Ilegalja* movement. They defied standardized gender roles, and sometimes they became a source of bad feelings among their families because they had to be “proper women.” Most of them came from families who had a “patriotic” background. But they were stigmatized by the community outside the prison, and because of the intensity of

surveillance “from the society or the fear that everyone you met in your own community might be a UDB spy” or in the service of infamous former Yugoslav security service, the UDBA (Krasniqi, 2011). Being closely watched meant that people were scared to talk to former political prisoners in the streets and sometimes their stigmatization was transposed to their families. Kurteshi observes:

I always felt sorry for my grandfather. He was never used to being isolated. Before the families who served UDB were isolated by the village, then our family became isolated by scaring people that they will get arrested if being close with us. I heard from my family that one time my grandfather went to the mosque and people didn't speak to him. “How come they didn't speak to me when my grandchildren went to prison for such a patriotic reasons.” But that time hurt him a lot. (Shyhrete Malaj Kurteshi, 2017).

Another problem was marriage. Since people tend to have questions relating to prisoners and their hardships in prison, most political prisoners were married with fellow political prisoners. Of course, the connection of sharing the same experience and feelings towards a regime helps to forge relationships, but it is also easier on them because of the life they have been through. Shyhrete even jokes about it that most of the family gatherings feel like going back to prison since all her siblings and their partners have been political prisoners. But this only applies to the girls who were imprisoned before marriage, because getting arrested as a married women usually meant divorce.

Curraj recounts:

I hated Tuesdays. It was the day of visitors and I never had visitors. My husband divorced me the second time I got arrested and my daughters were under 18 so they were not allowed to visit. I never saw them while in prison; I would only write letters. My eldest [daughter] said the thing she misses the most from the house that got burned during the [Kosovo] war were the prison letters from mum” [cries]. (Nazire Curraj, 2017).

The Erasure of Women

3.1 History and Collective Memory

Maurice Halbwachs's seminal work on collective memory, which had been forgotten for decades until it was "rediscovered," is still used in many fields of studies dealing with the past and the memory of social groups (Devine-Wright, 2003). Halbwachs argues that the need to write history comes only when there is no "testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it" (Halbwachs, 2008 [1950]: 139). To him, historians write for a period which is distant to them, far in the past, and they can judge what is interesting as he/she "is not located within the viewpoint of the past" (Halbwachs, 2008 [1950]: 143). Collective memory, on the other hand, is tightly related to the group that "keeps the memory alive and the memory of a society expands as far as the groups composing it" (Halbwachs, 2008 [1950]). Thus, collective memory is partial and "biased" since groups remember whatever has affected them.

Like Halbwachs, Pierre Nora makes a clear distinction between history and memory, seeing them "far from being synonymous but in many respects opposed" (Nora, 1997). He interprets memory as "life that is embodied on the living societies, vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation, it accommodates only the facts that suit it, by nature memory is multiple yet specific, collective and yet individual, while history in the other hand is problematic and incomplete, belongs to everyone and no one and history's true mission is to demolish memory and repress it" (Nora, 1997).

3.2 Sites of Memory in Prishtina

According to Nora, there would be no need for what he terms "sites of memory" if we lived and embodied memory. But since memory is "being swept away from history," we need museums,

artifacts or monuments to remember (Nora, 1997). Such memory locations have become highly visible in Kosovo to underscore what is remembered and what is forgotten. The monuments and statues usually valorise individuals who are closely tied to the main political parties. In central Prishtina, there is a statue of Fehmi Agani, which is located on the university campus. Agani was one of the first Kosovar Albanian sociologists, but he became more famous for joining the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). It was led by Ibrahim Rugova, who symbolized the peaceful resistance against Serbian rule in the 1990s. Walking in the main square in the city center, one is faced with two very different figures: on the one hand, there is a very big statue of Zahir Pajaziti, who was killed during the war.



Pajaziti's name was very unfamiliar to most people until the statue was placed in the square. But he was associated with the two political parties that were founded after the dismantling of the Kosovo Liberation Army after the Kosovo War: The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) led by Hashim Thaçi (who is now the President of Kosovo, having served as Prime Minister for two

terms) and the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK) led by the current Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, who was indicted and acquitted by the International Criminal Court for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (ICTY) on war crimes charges.

Besides Pajaziti's statue, there is a huge billboard photo of Ibrahim Rugova, who spearheaded the push for Kosovo's independence in the 1990s. After his pacifist course was abandoned, Rugova tried to raise international awareness about the Kosovo conflict. Rugova, who served as President for 12 years – both before and after the Kosovo War – has his own statue at one end of the central square. Although the statues of Rugova and Pajaziti are situated close to each other, they represent two completely different ideologies. Rugova was against an armed struggle for independence, while Pajaziti lost his life while transporting guns for the Kosovo Liberation Army. One of the founders of the KLA, who had spent many years in Serbian jails, highlighted this contrast: “The KLA has been founded in 1993 and took its first three casualties on 31 January 1997. But Mr Rugova and his comrades has spent the last couple of years denying that the KLA existed and even claiming that it was the creation of Serbian secret police” (Judah 2000: 103).

Even though the two statues represent opposites, they are also about reconciling the two strands, because they project these political forces as having an “honorable past.” As part of her discussion about history and memory in the 18th century, Aleida Assmann argues that “history was written to preserve the memory of powerful institutions” (Assmann, 2008). In addition, “history narrowed the criteria for the selection of people and events to be memorized; only those of high rank were singled out for a continuation in memory.” Only such events were chosen that buttressed the opinions and interests of the ruling class (Assmann, 2008).

Kosovo's sites of memory have a similar function: they help politicians maintain power by reminding the citizens of their glorious past. This might also be the reason why a statue of

Anton Çetta, even if it has already been made, has not yet been put up in the capital. Çetta was not close to any of the political forces ruling Kosovo. Over the past years, there has been a heated debate over the selection of the urban space where his statue should be located. Since Çetta worked as a folklorist at the Albanological Institute in Prishtina, the municipality concluded that his statue should be placed in front of the Institute. Yet, since 2010, the Institute has opposed this plan on the grounds that the contribution of Çetta exceeds that of the Institute and his profession as a folklorist. Instead, it has proposed the creation of a new square in Prishtina called “The Square of Reconciliation – Anton Çetta.” (“Krasniqi: S’do të lëmë gur pa lëvizur për shtatoren e Anton Çettës,” 2018).

If the purpose was to remember Çetta as a folklorist, the logical place for his statue would be in front of the Institute where he spent his life. But if it was to honour his work for reconciliation, it would be a travesty of history and memory if the statute of him would be not joined by statues of the female initiators of the blood feud reconciliation movement. It is true that the reconciliation initiative would not have been successful without Çetta’s contribution. There would, however, have been no such reconciliation to start with if it was not for Shala, Dreshaj and Dedinca.



Myrvete Dreshaj, Anton Çetta and Hava Shala. The man next to Hava is unknown.

Concluding Remarks: The Written History of Kosovo

As I have argued in this paper, the pivotal role of women members in both the *Ilegalja* and blood reconciliation movements has largely been erased from master narratives because men have taken the credit for their activities. I have shown here what motivated their participation in the movements, examined their actions and the terrible price they had to pay by doing so. The predominant mode of remembering in independent Kosovo has to do with the armed resistance and the Kosovo War from 1997 to 1999, which mostly brackets out the period preceding it. History has, in this sense, been divided into what happened before and after the war. Books written by international scholars and journalists also neglect the role of resistance movements or the role of women in them.

In his book *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*, Howard Clark has a chapter on blood feud reconciliation. But it only proves the point about the gender bias. Centering on the importance of one man, Clark makes the point that Çetta interpreted manhood in a way to convince people to forgive the blood. Over 1000 feuds involving death, 500 wounding and 700 other disputes were reconciled from 1990 to 1992, practically eliminating the tradition (Clark 2000: 63). He also highlights the contribution of Adem Demaçi who served 28 years in prison for being part of *Ilegalja*. But he is the only person singled out for participation in the *Ilegalja* movement, even if Clark makes the point that the the human rights of a vast majority of ethnic Albanians were systematically violated (Clark 2000:43). For Elife Krasniqi, what explains this erasure of women from Kosovo's history is unequal power relationships; referring to the work of Jacque Le Goff, she argues that it is a history by – and for – powerful men who exclude women from it (Krasniqi, 2011). This is an attempt to revive the memories and history of these women, to give them a voice and agency, and highlight their pivotal contribution to an important, if mostly forgotten chapter, in Kosovo's history.

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