

## **WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBERATION OF KOSOVO IN 1998-1999**

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### **Abstract**

The work brings to mind the years 1998 and 1999 in Kosovo, which brought a lot of suffering. Serbian forces carried out massacres, murders, raped women and men and destroyed almost the entire country. Approximately 90% of Kosovo Albanians were forcibly expelled from their homes. The paper brings to attention a contemporary issue, in these times of horror that are being repeated in the same form again in Ukraine and Palestine, groups of women and girls who are raped, massacred and killed, help displaced people with food, support, medical care, housing and education.

Over 20 thousand Albanian women and girls were raped by the Serbs during the years 1998-1999. The harrowing narratives of Kosovar women and girls reveal the barbaric violence that the Serbs have inflicted on women, girls, mothers, children and men, who became victims of rape during the war. The role of women in Kosovo, in this war, was as important as the role of women for the creation of a new life.

This research is based on real statistics of the testimonies of women and girls during the war in Kosovo. According to the records, women and girls got knowledge about weapons and ammunition and became part of the national liberation struggle. The women became the informers of the massacres that the Serbs would do in the towns and villages, preventing them.

The lack of an accurate number of women participating in the war for the liberation of Kosovo means that they do not take their rightful place in this war. They deserve recognition. According to the data, there was a considerable number of women in the guerrilla BIA. Women had a key role in the liberation of the country, they must have been forgotten by the free state of Kosovo.

The contribution and sacrifices of women during the war in Kosovo were unparalleled, they aimed at the war and the liberation of the Albanian lands. In many studies, this role of women in liberation has not been identified, due attention has not been paid to it, and this is related to the existence of patriarchal norms of Kosovar society. The exclusion of women from this active contribution is related to these norms and this study makes an effort to bring this contribution of women to the liberation war of Kosovo. The study brings to attention that the contribution of women during the war should be documented and be part of our oral and written history, whose contribution has been little described.

*Keywords: woman, girl, rape, war, participation, illegal.*

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### **1. Introduction**

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## **2. The beginnings of the organization of women and girls in the struggle for liberation in Kosovo.**

The fight of women with weapons in hand was not a new phenomenon unknown to Albanians. The Albanian woman has been an active participant in the main events of the history of the Albanian people. The millennial history of our country, in different periods, knows many wars for land, freedom and independence that our people have developed, in which women have participated side by side with men and have played an important role. In the history of centuries-old wars for freedom and independence, for preserving one's individuality, for a life free from exploitation and social injustice, the Albanian woman has played an important role. The names of many women such as: Teuta, Mamica Kastrioti, Nora e Kelmendit, Maro Kondi, Sevasti Qiriazhi, Marigo Pozio, Shote Galica, Sado Koshena, etc. <sup>1</sup>, have their name engraved in golden letters in the history of Albania. But while women's participation in the armed struggle was, in most cases, spontaneous and local, in the conditions of the liberation war in Kosovo, it stands out for its massiveness, level of awareness, compactness and organization on a national scale.

Always in times of war, the Albanian woman has come out of the housewife's shell and fought with weapons to protect her family and homeland. In the cities and villages of Kosovo, the forms of resistance by women were different. Albanian girls and women became an example of inspiration for courage and bravery, for honesty and moral and spiritual purity, as well as for strengthening fraternal relations in the ranks of freedom fighters. The participation of women in the armed struggle shook the concepts and prejudices about her role and position in society. This worldview and these concepts had been cultivated for centuries. The fact that the woman was able to successfully cope with all the obstacles and difficulties that the armed struggle brought with it, destroyed the myth, according to which the woman as the "weaker sex" "was supposedly destined only to give birth and raise children". but, "not at all capable of fighting like a man with a gun in his hand, and even more so for partisan war", this concept is deeply rooted in the consciousness of many people, both men and women<sup>2</sup>. Looking at it from this aspect, the appearance of women in the ranks of the KLA was more important for the

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<sup>1</sup> History of the Albanian People Vol.1,2, Toena, 2002

<sup>2</sup> "Kosovarja" newspaper, 2020

woman than for the man. To get there, enough to grab the rifle, women and girls generally had to fight in several directions:

- on the one hand, they had to face the great and continuous pressure of the patriarchalism of the Kosovar family, and on the other hand,
- to overcome the obstacles and difficulties that were brought out in many cases by the social opinion.

Thus, gradually, women begin to be active in the liberation struggle. The successful execution of a series of actions and successive strikes by the KLA forces in different regions of the country caused great damage to the Serbian gangs and resulted in the liberation of many areas. The participation of women in the war was of decisive importance not only for the fate of the liberation, but also for the woman herself, since as an important social force that made up half of the population, the woman participating in the war for liberation was placed on equal terms with the man, in terms of rights and duties to War.

The woman with her presence was playing an important role with dignity and values. Initially, to increase the number of women and girls in this movement, small women's groups were organized. Intellectual women and girls with authority started their work in neighborhoods and villages, forming groups that distributed tracts and various communiques about the war. These treated activists and fighters wounded in the actions of local units and the KLA. Their houses became shelters and became important centers of the liberation movement. Many women in the cities worked with schools, where they created educational groups and cells, in which activities were carried out, discussions were held, communiques were read and patriotic songs were sung. In this movement, which yes grew, women from different professions such as nurses, teachers, housewives, etc. joined. The Albanian woman, being the backbone of the family, began to propagate the war against the police gangs of the Serbian army. They worked and used the situation created to help with supplies, cooking and material aid, etc. for KLA fighters. All these forms were having a great effect on the people and the woman herself was gaining her place in Kosovar society and was changing the wrong concept that Kosovars had about her in general. Women have developed a large illegal activity in the areas occupied by the Serbs. They were especially prominent in cities. In a heavy atmosphere, although illegal work was made very difficult, women played a very important role, carrying a large weight of illegal activity in these areas. As the movement grew, especially when it reached the stage of armed struggle, when men left the city en masse to join the ranks of the KLA, women had to replace them in many actions and functions. They were better suited to carry out illegal activities, they could move more easily from one base to another, they could disguise themselves better. Their illegal work extended throughout the country, in every important center.

### **3. Women participating in the struggle for the liberation of Kosovo**

The violence and rape of women, girls, children and men caused a large number of women to become part of the liberation movement of Kosovo. Many women and girls became part of illegal movements in cities and villages. They participated in assassinations or distribution of press that would connect the people with the vision of the national movement for the liberation of Kosovo. Many women and girls took it upon themselves to mobilize citizens in the distribution of the press to join the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the war front. In Pristina, many schoolgirls and students joined the boys in distributing the newspaper "Liberation" with the aim of preparing the people for war by putting them at the service of liberating the country's freedom.

Women also became an active force of the war in the cities and villages of Kosovo. The wide participation of Kosovar women and girls in the ranks of the KLA was not an easy thing, they

had to overcome and throw away many old concepts that despised the role of women and moreover mentalities that attacked their morals. With their dedication to the war, with their courage and bravery, with their intellectual ability, they showed that they were fully capable of assuming commanding military duties in the ranks of the KLA. There are many acts of bravery and heroism by women and girls during clashes with Serbian soldiers. There is no exact number of women and girls in the service of the war or their deeds. The country was being emptied more and more every day, thousands of Albanians were being killed by Serbian paramilitary forces, others were being driven from their homes. Gender roles began to fade. Women and girls began to create new roles and identities. During the war in Kosovo, some women and girls joined the war fronts as soldiers, some as doctors and nurses and some were responsible for preparing food, while others were leading their families outside the territory of Kosovo. Kosovar women took over the protection of the family, the honor of the motherland. Many women became part of the BIA guerrilla units, of the KLA, operating in the Pristina region. They started their activity as nurses in war-affected areas.

Some became responsible for health and war. The role of women in this war was so important, just as important for the creation of a new life.

In these times of horror, women's groups helped displaced people with food, support, medical care, shelter and education. They acquired knowledge of arms and ammunition and became part of the national liberation struggle. The women became the informers of the massacres that the Serbs would do in the towns and villages, preventing them. The lack of an accurate number of women participating in the war for the liberation of Kosovo means that they do not take their rightful place in this war. They deserve recognition. According to the data, there was a considerable number of women in the guerrilla BIA. Women had a key role in the liberation of the country, they must have been forgotten by the free state of Kosovo. The contribution and sacrifices of women and girls during the war in Kosovo were unparalleled, they aimed at the war and the liberation of the Albanian lands. Fighters regardless of gender took up arms fighting for liberation.

In many studies, this role of women in liberation has not been identified, due attention has not been paid to it, and this is related to the existence of patriarchal norms of Kosovar society. The exclusion of women from this active contribution is related to these norms. This contribution of women during the war should be documented and be part of our oral and written history, whose contribution is little described. The massacre of March 26, 1999 in Kruše Madhe and Vegle, where Serbian paramilitary forces killed more than 200 men and youths from the age of 12-90 years, made Kruše known as villages without men<sup>3</sup>. Women took on the burden of protecting families. The women tell how the Serbian forces ordered them to flee to Albania together with their small children. Most of them retain physical and psychological trauma from the horror they experienced. The KLA is often identified only with certain figures, leaving little room for others, including women. The most famous woman warrior from the war in Kosovo is Xheve Lladrovci who fought together with her husband and who were killed together in battle. But the non-involvement of women in the struggle for the liberation of Kosovo cannot deny women what they have done for Kosovo.

This war brought so much pain but also pride. Men and women, young and old, took up rifles, risked their lives so that generations would never experience the horror of the conqueror. Regardless of the appreciation of women in war, we are proud of their courage, sacrifices and contribution. The past is full of stories of women's sacrifices, which entered the annals of history, thus becoming models of women warriors to protect the rights of the country and the people. Women everywhere became the force of the war in Kosovo in cities and villages. They waited, housed, fed, clothed and protected the KLA soldiers from danger, treated the

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<sup>3</sup> The situation of refugees in the world, Marrin Barleti, 2000, Tirana, p.235

sick and wounded, collected information on the movement of the Serbian military, carried out courier work, collected aid, etc.

With the creation of the KLA, dozens of women and girls joined its ranks. A number of female fighters emerged from the ranks of male and female students. A number of women went to war to replace their murdered husbands or brothers, they fought heroically for the liberation of Kosovo. The wide participation of Kosovar women and girls in the ranks of the KLA was not an easy thing, they had to overcome and throw away many old concepts that despised the role of women and moreover mentalities that attacked their morals. With their dedication to the war, with their courage and bravery, with their intellectual ability, they showed that they were fully capable of assuming commanding military duties in the ranks of the KLA. there are many acts of bravery and heroism of women and girls during clashes with Serbian soldiers. Kosovar women and girls showed their courage, bravery and heroism not only in Serbian prisons and detention camps but also before torture and murder.

Emine Vitija-Brahimi was one of the girls who had undertaken this task of mobilizing citizens - first by distributing this newspaper, then by joining the Kosovo Liberation Army on the war fronts. "The first day in KLA is indescribable in words. I joined the bravest boys and girls of Pristina by distributing the newspaper 'Liberation' in the neighborhoods of Pristina in order to prepare the people for war. That night is deeply embedded in my memory", Eminja remembers for "Grazeta" the first day when, as a 17-year-old, she was put at the service of the country's freedom<sup>4</sup>. "It was a just, obligatory, inevitable war", Ibadetja assesses the war for the liberation of the country. According to her, the role of women in this war was important "as much as the role of women is important for the creation of a new life"<sup>5</sup>. In these times of horror, women's groups helped displaced people with food, support, medical care, shelter and education. "There have been many good days and difficult days while serving the country. Our victories and actions against the Serbian police and army are not forgotten. But we don't forget the difficult moments when we lost our friends", today Eminja describes her days on the war fronts.

The meeting with the weapons of these two women had been done together with their comrades. "Even though I was from the city, I got the basic knowledge about weapons. On the mountain, where we were based, we performed all the necessary exercises according to the programs of our commanders", Eminja tells "Grazeta". "The biggest difficulty was carrying the wounded. Once we were left with wounded in a stream for two days - without food or water. We were only five healthy people from the medical service. The others, all wounded", reveals Ibadetja, one of the greatest memories and difficulties during her time on the war front. Women like Eminja and Ibadetja from all over Kosovo had fulfilled their duty of liberating the country. Thus, Eminja, along with other fighters, had entered Pristina to prevent any further massacres. "I was lucky to be one of the soldiers who liberated Pristina and entered the city before the entry of NATO forces, preventing any massacre of the civilian population by the paramilitaries and the Serbian army<sup>6</sup>. With the entry of the NATO forces, I also gradually started to return to life", she tells "Grazeta"<sup>7</sup>.

The lack of accurate numbers for the women participating in our struggle for liberation means that the girls and women who served do not receive what they deserve - recognition for their key role in Kosovo's freedom. However, the women who played a key role in the liberation of the country seem to have been forgotten by the free state of Kosovo.

In many cities and villages of Kosovo, the statues and memorials of many men who have served the same as women in the liberation of the country stand tall. But you can rarely see the monuments of the latter. Of the ten statues managed by the Agency for the Management of

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<sup>4</sup> Kosovarja, "KLA Women: Untold Stories"

<sup>5</sup> Kosovarja, "KLA Women: Untold Stories"

<sup>6</sup> Bytyçi Enver, "NATO's imposing diplomacy in Kosovo", ISEJ, Tirana 2012

<sup>7</sup> Grazette

Memorial Complexes of Kosovo, only one is of women. "Heroines" depicts an Albanian woman and is made with 20,000 pins, where each pin represents a woman who was raped during the Kosovo War of 1998-1999. "We had one goal: the fight until the liberation of the Albanian lands", says Ibadetja for "Grazeta". Fighters, regardless of gender, when they took the weapon in hand, did not think about whether it would be rewarded later. But when male soldiers are exalted in bronze, women's stories are not even discussed. "We did not fight for recognition and medals, but for the freedom of the country, and the best gratitude for me is when I see my children growing up and breathing freely in our lands." The tendency not to discuss the role of women in the liberation of the country and not to give it proper attention is a product of the patriarchal social norms of Kosovar society. "The exclusion of women from the discourse of war topics, and not only, is related to patriarchal social norms which refuse to recognize the active contribution of women in security and peace processes", while adding that this contribution must be documented. "The contribution of women and girls during the last war must be documented and be part of our oral and written history."

"The KLA is identified with certain figures who have been glorified so much after the end of the war that they have left little space for others, including women. The most famous female fighter in the country from the 90's war in Kosovo remains Xhevë Lladrovci, and this is because she fought together with her husband. The fact that she and her husband died together in the battle has contributed to her war being mentioned after the war equal to that of her husband", said Teuta for "Grazeta".

The non-inclusion of women in the public discourse of liberation is not sufficient to deny women what they have done for Kosovo. However, this approach does not inform the young generations, the young women, what courage they had and what role women have in building the state of Kosovo. Although the contribution of women and men has never been appreciated to this day, we are still proud of the bravery and courage of those women and Eminja and Ibadetja are just two examples of the living heroines of our fight for freedom.

According to the organization Human Rights Watch, the number of KLA members was around 25,000<sup>8</sup>. Data on the exact number of women fighters are still missing, although the war has been over for 24 years now. The lack of accurate numbers for women participating in our struggle for liberation means that the girls and women who served do not get what they deserve - recognition for their key role in Kosovo's freedom.

## Conclusions

- The crimes against the Albanian population in Kosovo do not get old, therefore it is right to cooperate in the work and activity to reveal the truth about the war crimes and the Serbian genocide against the Albanians, not only 23 years ago in 1998-1999, but for the entire genocide. carried out from 1912 to 1999 (87 years in a row), to ask for justice for the fallen, to fight greed, because the experiences have been terrible and it is unforgivable if we don't learn from history.
- The exclusion of women from the discourse of war topics, and not only, is related to patriarchal social norms which refuse to recognize the active contribution of women in security and peace processes. This contribution must be documented.
- The contribution of women and girls during the Kosovo war should be documented and be part of our oral and written history.
- the role of women in this war was important "as much as the role of women is important for the creation of a new life.

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<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, March-June 1999, "Under the power of orders", p.117

- Fighters, regardless of gender, when they took the weapon in hand, did not think about whether it would be rewarded later. But when male soldiers are exalted in bronze, women's stories are not even discussed.
- Rape was used as a weapon of war, leaving serious consequences in these societies, where the victims of this violence continue to be discriminated by the society itself, where many raped were found outside their homes, driven away from their families or divorced from their spouses.
- Not everyone had positive attitudes about women's participation in the liberation movement. Our victories and actions against the Serbian police and army were often accompanied by difficult moments where we lost our comrades. There is no accurate data on the number of women in the liberation war of Kosovo.
- Rape remains a constant reality for thousands of women who have experienced it. Survivors of war sexual violence have been fighting for recognition in Kosovo for more than two decades, but since the verification process opened, many have been reluctant to apply, he feared stigmatization and exclusion.

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