

Rape as a Strategy of War:
The Sexual Assault of Kosovar Albanian Women in 1999

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1. Introduction

How was the rape of Albanian women used as a strategy of war by Serbian soldiers, police, and paramilitary during 1999? Does the pattern of rape in Kosovo during 1999 correlate to the pattern of exodus from Kosovo? This study seeks to synthesize and analyze data collected from *The New York Times*, *Human Rights Watch*, and *Policy or Panic: The Flight of Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, March – May 1999* by Patrick Ball. There is insufficient evidence to tally an exact count of how many Albanian women were raped during 1999. However, by investigating cases documented by *The New York Times* and *Human Rights Watch*, it will be evident that Serbian forces employed rape as a strategy of war. By comparing documented accounts of rape and a survey of Albanian exodus from March through May 1999, it will be evident that rape is a viable threat that causes refugees to flee.

The study will begin by giving a brief overview of the Balkan conflict preceding 1999. Although rape is the focus, the “rape camps” that occurred in the summers of 1993 and 1994 will not be addressed. Instead, the scope will be directed inclusively at Kosovo during 1999. Following the overview, attention will be given to the Muslim Albanian perception of rape by relating interviews with Muslim Albanian men and women. An analysis of patterns of rape in correlation with patterns of exodus will be given in order to decide whether or not the threat of rape is a viable cause for flight. Once the decision to flee has been made, how safe are Albanian refugees? Testimonies of individuals raped while fleeing or while in refugee camps will determine that Albanian women lacked the security promised by “safe-haven” refugee camps. These testimonies will also explain how Serbian forces employed rape as a strategy of war. Finally, an assessment of

changes in International Law will illustrate how rape is being classified as a “crime against humanity.”

2. Overview of Kosovo Conflict Preceding 1999

Human rights abuses in Kosovo are directly related to the revocation of Kosovo’s autonomy within Serbia in 1989. Kosovo Albanians were forced to live in an apartheid-like environment where their rights were denied based on their ethnicity. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Kosovo Albanians accounted for “90 per cent of the population” and between 1989 and 1998 “an estimated 350,000 Kosovo Albanians left the province.”¹ Their decision to leave was based on the threat of assault, murder, and rape by Serbian authorities. They were no longer safe in their own homes.

In order to protect the Kosovo Albanians, peace talks were initiated in Rambouillet, France, in February 1999. However, without the permission of the UN Security Council, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began an air attack against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with targets in Kosovo.² The NATO air campaign agitated ground fighting between Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Serbian authorities blamed Kosovo Albanians for the onslaught of NATO bombs. A blood-bath between Serbs and Albanians ensued, resulting in the flight or expulsion of 800,000 Kosovo Albanians.³ It became imperative for humanitarian organizations to assist the Kosovo Albanians. The International Organization for Migration worked with the UNHCR to launch a ‘humanitarian evacuation programme’.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *The State of the World’s Refugees*, p 233.

² _____. p 233.

Through this program, refugees were placed in host countries such as Germany, the U.S., and Turkey. Refugees were also shuttled out of Kosovo on buses to FYR Macedonia and Albania.

The Kosovo conflict officially ended on June 9, 1999 when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia agreed to:

“the withdrawal of all Serb forces from Kosovo, the safe and free return of all refugees and displaced people, and the establishment of a UN mission which was authorized under UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”⁴

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led a Kosovo force (KFOR) that began providing soldiers as security to encourage the return of Kosovo Albanians. According to the UNHCR, “500,000 people had returned and, by the end of 1999, more than 820,000 Kosovo Albanians had returned.”⁵

3. “Better to kill me than to rape me!”

Rape and the Perception of Rape in Kosovo 1999, 2000

Human Rights Watch produced a map entitled, “Reported Incidents of Rape: February – June 2000,” which indicates the locations of seventy-two rapes. That number of rapes is not particularly alarming for a five-month period considering the New York City Police Department reported 866 rapes during six months of 1999.⁶ Is it possible that human rights activists and guerrillas from the Kosovo Liberation Army exaggerated the

³ _____. p 234.

⁴ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees*, p 239.

⁵ _____. p 241.

conditions in Kosovo? One reason statistics on rape in Kosovo are scarce is that Muslim Albanians view rape as a black mark against their family. Families do not sympathize with the woman who was raped. Instead, the majority of Albanian women who admit being raped are ostracized from their families. Their husbands demand divorces. They are forced to leave their homes and find shelter elsewhere. This may be why women, such as Mrs. Thaqi, are adamant and clear in saying they were not raped.

Mrs. Thaqi is a young, married woman from Zrze, Kosovo who firmly denies being raped. She claims to have been beaten and threatened but specifies repeatedly that she was not raped. Her husband, Behan Thaqi, disagrees. “I am 100 percent certain that they raped her,” he said in an interview with *The New York Times*.⁷ Thaqi continued by explaining how his wife’s possible rape affects him:

“She doesn’t dare tell that kind of story. I would ask for a divorce—even if I had 20 children...I don’t hate her, but the story is before my eyes. I feel very cold toward her...(Kissing her) is like kissing a dead body...I have no will to have children.”

The majority of Muslim Albanian men questioned about the topic of rape in *The New York Times* during 1999 shared Behan Thaqi’s view. According to Parvin Darabi, the rape of a woman brings shame and humiliation to the entire family. “When she gets raped, she has done something to the whole family, to the family honor, to the family dignity,” Darabi said. Darabi continues to emphasize the enormity of a woman’s rape by noting suicide as a way for women to evade dishonor. “If she can commit suicide, then

⁶ New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, www.nycagainstrape.org/stats_nyc.html.

⁷ Elisabeth Bumiller. “Deny Rape or Be Hated: Kosovo Victims’ Choice,” *The New York Times*. June 22, 1999.

she would wash the shame off with her blood, and then the family can restore their dignity,” Darabi said.⁸

Another example of how Muslim Albanian families perceive rape is the case of Ylika Domi, a seventeen-year-old from a once-affluent neighborhood of Djakovica, Kosovo. Afrim Domi accounted the incident of May 17, 1999 when Serbian soldiers who had surrounded the family chased his daughter. According to Afrim Domi, his daughter shouted, “Better to kill me than to rape me!”⁹ When a relative overheard *The New York Times* correspondent speaking to Afrim Domi, the relative assured the journalist, “If rape was going on here, they only rape women from other towns.”¹⁰ These examples illustrate how family members associate negative connotations to the victims of rape rather than the rapists.

With an understanding of the perception of rape by Kosovo Albanians, it is conceivable why many women refuse to speak about what happened to them while in the hands of Serbian authorities. In a survey of *The New York Times* articles addressing “Sex Crimes” in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Serbia during 1999, there were only twenty-three verifiable testimonies of sexual assault. Other articles use general adjectives, such as “several women” and “mass systematic rapes,” to describe the amount of women violated by Serbian soldiers, police, and paramilitary. Although *The New York Times* and *Human Rights Watch* confirmed details of a camp holding three hundred women hostage for three nights in Dragocina, Kosovo, only two rapes from that hostage situation were confirmed by *Human Rights Watch*.¹¹

⁸ Parvin Darabi, Interview with Fox News, June 24, 1999.

⁹ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Deny Rape or Be Hated: Kosovo Victims’ Choice,” June 22, 1999.

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¹¹ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Kosovo Victims’ Choice: Deny Rape or Be Hated,” June 22, 1999.

Zyrafete is a twenty-three year old woman who was one of the three hundred women held in Dragocina by Serb policemen. She witnessed women being pulled out in threes and fours and taken away by Serbs for an hour or two each night. Zyrafete described being pulled out of the building and ordered by Serbs to make coffee. On being told to remove her clothes, Zyrafete said, “Better that you should kill me.” According to Zyrafete, the policeman responded by saying, “Take off your clothes or I will kill you.” Zyrafete claims to have lost consciousness and when asked about the possibility of being raped she said, “The doctor said I hadn’t been raped. I think a lot of women have been raped. But women don’t want to talk about it.”¹²

How else can evidence be gathered to indicate more women are being raped than those who are admitting to being raped? The hospital in Kukes, Kosovo—near a temporary refugee camp of 120,000—reported abortions tripling after the refugees arrived in April, going from around one a day to three a day.¹³ However, there may be other reasons for an increase in abortions. Women may be hesitant to give birth under severe conditions of poverty and distress, conditions that are typical of a refugee camp. The uncertainty of the future could be another variable in a woman's decision to abort. Yet it is possible that rapes of Albanian women by Serb forces have contributed to such a steep increase in the abortion rate at the maternity hospital in Kukes.

Several testimonies from rape victims and bystanders have led to current statistics on the rape of women in Kosovo during 1999. Sherife Alickaj recounts how she, her sister, and four friends were fleeing the town of Pristina after NATO bombing intensified. They were stopped by police at a check point and told to produce their identification

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¹³ _____.

cards. The women were afraid to admit having identification cards because their home was also the birthplace of the Kosovo Liberation Army. The policemen then ordered them back to their homes where they were sexually assaulted. The women were made to undress and five of them were dismissed. Alickaj told reporters that a policeman said, “We are letting the other girls go because you are the most beautiful.” The officer then forced her to perform oral sex.¹⁴

4. Rape and/or Threat of Rape as Reason for Exodus

The testimony of Alickaj corresponds to statistics on the flight of Albanians from Pristina. Alickaj’s rape is estimated to have happened in late March, 1999. During this same time frame, a United States Department Report found that “the provincial capital of Pristina had been left ‘a ghost town’ after Serbian forces expelled between 100,000 and 120,000 Albanians in four days.”¹⁵ This suggests that rape or the threat of rape is probable cause for flight from one’s home. However, a challenge to the argument that rape is a viable cause for flight may be that Kosovo Albanian women were raped while fleeing. One example is the testimony of Sherike Alickaj, as mentioned above. Alickaj was in the process of fleeing Pristina when she was raped. She said her motives for leaving were to escape NATO bombing, not because of any fear about being raped.

Another testimony of rape occurring while Albanian women were in the process of leaving occurred on April 27, 1999. Vase Racaj, a thirty-five year old woman from Klina, Kosovo witnessed Serbian paramilitary forces pulling ten women from out of a refugee convoy en route to the Albanian border. Racaj said ten men then raped the

¹⁴ David Rhode, “An Albanian Tells How Serbs Chose Her, ‘the Most Beautiful,’ for Rape,” May 1, 1999.

¹⁵ Philip Shenon, “A State Department Report Documents Kosovo Abuses,” May 11, 1999.

women in an open field. The Serbian paramilitary men who raped the women, according to Racaj, cut the women's pants around their thighs and returned the women to their convoy. By slashing the women's pants, the paramilitary humiliated the women and weakened the morale of their families who were watching and waiting from within the convoy.¹⁶ This action, the demarcation of their clothing, is an indication that rape was used as a strategy of war. The idea of rape as a tactic for war will be examined later in this study.

The testimonies of Alickaj and Racaj both contradict the theory of rape as a reason for exodus. Is there evidence to highlight a relationship between rape and exodus? The following table illustrates the location and estimated dates of rapes in Kosovo. The information has been compiled from a survey of *The New York Times* articles derived from *The New York Times Index 1999* under entries of "Sex Crimes" with subheadings of "Kosovo," "Bosnia," and "Serbia." The dates are estimates given by *The New York Times* correspondents, eyewitnesses, and personal interviews. For the purpose of this study, the estimated dates will be assumed accurate within a seven-day frame. An extended version of this table is included as an appendix.

TABLE 1. New York Times Index of Sex Crimes in Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia – 1999

EST. DATE	LOCATION	# OF VICTIMS
March 24	Pristina, Kosovo	6
April 18	Dragocina, Kosovo	5
April 27	Prizren, Kosovo	10

¹⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller. "Deny Rape or Be Hated: Kosovo Victims Choice," June 22, 1999.

May 11	Pec, Kosovo	unknown
May 11	Djakovica, Kosovo	unknown
June 22	Zrze, Kosovo	1
June 22	Mitrovica, Kosovo	1
June 22	Dragocina, Kosovo	1
June 22	Dragocina, Kosovo	300*

*Women held hostage in three different buildings, for three days. Does not equate to three hundred counts of sex crimes.

Table one is a representation of sex crimes reported by *The New York Times* correspondents, the Associated Press, and Reuters. It is an incomplete representation of sex crimes occurring in Kosovo during 1999 in that it does not account for interviews taken by non-government organizations. *The New York Times* articles rely solely on U.S. Department Records, Human Rights Watch, and personal interviews.

Table one indicates three phases of sex crimes in Kosovo. The first phase is from March 24 to April 18, 1999. The second phase is April 27 to May 11, 1999. The third phase is June 15 to June 29, 1999. How do these phases relate to Kosovo Albanians arriving in Albania from Kosovo? The phases of sex crimes are directly correlated with exodus to Albania. A study entitled “Policy or Panic? The Flight of Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, March-May 1999,” by Patrick Ball, indicates three distinct phases of exodus. Those phases are: March 24 to April 6, April 7 to April 23, and April 24 to May 11.¹⁷ Ball illustrates the pattern of exodus in Graph 1.1: Number of Kosovars entering Albania at Morina, by two-day period. The graph illustrates peaks of over 60,000 entries on March 29, 30,000 entries on April 18, 15,000 entries on April 15, and 12,000 entries

on May 11. The following table demonstrates the comparison between reported sex crimes and the number of Kosovar Albanians entering Albania.

TABLE 2. Analysis of Sex-Crimes in Comparison to Kosovar Albanian Entries to Albania

Sex-Crimes Phases	# of victims	Entry Phases	Peaks in # refugees
March 24 – April 18 (Phase One)	11	March 24 – April 6 (Phase One)	60,000 March 29 15,000 April 18
April 27 – May 11 (Phase Two)	10 +	April 24 – May 11 (Phase Three)	12,000 May 11
June 15 – June 29	3	No Data	No Data

The comparison of Sex-Crimes Phases with Entry Phases is problematic because there is no data for the exact dates of sex-crimes whereas there is data for the exact dates of entry by Kosovar Albanians into Albania. Also the numerical values attributed to sex crimes compared to the amount of people entering Albania are radically unequivocal. It cannot be asserted that the sexual assault of eleven people caused the exodus of 75,000. In order to rectify this discrepancy, future studies will need to include a broader scope of sources for sexual assault. Also, it may take time for an accurate number of sexual assaults cases to be collected and released.

Another angle of determining whether sexual crimes have a direct relationship with the exodus of Kosovar Albanians is by assessing the location of sexual assault in comparison to the number of individuals fleeing from that location during the same time

¹⁷ Patrick Ball. *Policy or Panic? The Flight of Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, March-May 1999*, p 6.

frame. The two overlapping phases of Sex-Crimes and Entry into Albania are: March 24 to April 6 and April 27 to May 11. During the first phase, the municipality of Pristina incurred six reported sexual assaults and 5,001 to 10,000 Kosovar Albanians fled. However, a challenge to this correlation is that Pristina was also the site of a six-day period of bombing by NATO during phase one. During the second overlapping phase, Prizren incurred ten sexual assaults while the municipalities of Pec and Djakovica were both sites of the “mass systematic rape” of Kosovar Albanian women.¹⁸ According to Ball’s study, 5,001 to 10,000 people left Prizren. NATO bombing occurred in Prizren during a four- day period. Pec and Djakovica both experienced losses of 1,001 to 5,000 people per municipality. In Pec, NATO bombing accounted for six days. Djakovica experienced the most severe bombing which accounted for twelve of the eighteen days from April 24 to May 11.¹⁹

The analysis of sexual-crime data in correlation with the number of entries to Albania is inconclusive. At most, the comparison determines that municipalities where sexual assault was reported experienced a greater population of exodus than areas where sexual assault was not reported. Another discovery is that reports of sexual assault coincide with peaks in exodus. However, this may be attributed to Serbian forces assaulting individuals while they were in the process of fleeing. What prompted Serbian soldiers, police, and paramilitary to sexually assault Kosovar Albanian women?

**5. “We’re Going to Rape Your Women,
and They Will Give Birth to Serbian Children.”**

¹⁸ Philip Shenon, “A State Department Report Documents Kosovo Abuses,” May 11, 1999.

¹⁹ Patrick Ball, “Policy or Panic? The Flight of Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo,” March-May 1999.

Rape as a Strategy of War

If rape was not a primary reason for why Kosovar Albanians chose to flee, then how was it a strategy of war? According to interviews with refugees in *The New York Times*, Serbian soldiers selected the most beautiful women from refugee convoys and sexually assaulted them. The soldiers used this as a tactic to weaken the morale of Kosovar Albanians and the guerrilla fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army. The use of rape as a war strategy was also associated with the ultimate goal of “ethnic cleansing.” Five men from Mitrovica recall graffiti on a city high school wall that reads: “We’re going to rape your women, and they will give birth to Serbian children.” This message is clearly a threat. The message seeks to intimidate and demoralize Kosovar Albanian women and their families.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) attests that rape was an integral part of the ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo. “Rapes of ethnic Albanians were not rare and isolated acts committed by individual Serbian or Yugoslav forces, but rather were instruments to terrorize the civilian population, extort money from families, and push people to flee their homes.”²⁰ HRW documented ninety-six rapes that occurred in Kosovo from February to June 1999. A map illustrating where rapes occurred, taken from the HRW web site, is included as an appendix. The rapes were categorized by location: rapes in women’s homes, rapes during flight, and rapes in detention. HRW contests that the rape of Kosovar Albanian women resulted from a chain of command linking back to the Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch Report, as viewed on the web site www.hrw.org/reports/2001/kosovo.

On May 27, 1999, president Milosevic and four of his top officials were indicted for: “murder, persecution, and deportation in Kosovo” between January 1 and late May 1999.²¹ There is controversy over whether the acts of individual police men and paramilitary can be traced to Milosevic. However, there is evidence that illustrates how Serbian forces produced propaganda that defiled the image of Kosovar Albanian women. The propaganda is reminiscent of Nazi Germany. Official state propaganda in Yugoslavia, in the form of pamphlets and fliers, was a weapon used by Serbs to contrast differences between Serbian women and Albanian women. Serbian women were characterized as “cultured, strong, and worthy of motherhood.” Similarly, Nazi art often portrayed Aryan women by accentuating motherly features such as hips and breasts. Jewish women were considered to be seductresses and adulterers.

The image of Jewish women is particularly similar to Albanian women who were illustrated as “indiscriminately fecund.” and “open-legged, stupid, uneducated women ready to have sex.”²² The propaganda campaigns of both Nazis and Serbs led to the demoralization of entire ethnicities. They were well-organized and planned. In the case of Yugoslavia, soldiers, police men, and paramilitary each participated in the rape of women. There is no documentation to prove that they were ever reprimanded or punished for their actions against Kosovar Albanian women. With the formation of the International Criminal Court in July of 2002, there may eventually be a verdict of whether or not President Milosevic is responsible for tolerating the rape of Albanian women.

²¹ Human Rights Watch Report, as viewed on the web site www.hrw.org/reports/2001/kosovo.

²² _____. Julie Mertus, “Women in Kosovo: Contested Terrains,” in Sabrina Ramet, ed., *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States* (University

6. Conclusion

The research presented in this study has shown that rape is not a viable reason for the exodus of Kosovar Albanians in 1999. The hypothesis posed rape as a threat that causes refugees to flee. However, after surveying data from *The New York Times* in 1999, it has been determined that the data is inconclusive. The numerical values of first-hand accounts of rape are not comparable to the amount of people leaving Kosovo. Statistics of sexual assault are vague, with estimated dates and broad descriptions such as “mass systematic rape.” In order to arrive at a conclusive answer to whether or not there is a correlation between patterns of rape and patterns of exodus, the scope of the study would need to include an enormous survey of all available resources on sexual assault in Kosovo.

The Muslim Albanian perception of rape prevents some women in Kosovo from speaking about the atrocities they endured. They are hesitant to speak because of the stereotype that rape is similar to adultery. The victim is often thought to have provoked the rape. Rather than blame being placed solely on the rapist, the victim incurs blame for bringing shame and misfortune to her family. “Better to kill me than to rape me!” Ylika said, expressing the viewpoint of many Kosovar Albanian women. The negative perception of rape is one reason why Serbian forces were able to use sexual assault as a strategy of war.

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TABLE 1. NEW YORK TIMES INDEX* 1999

* Data collected from the New York Times Reference Index for 1999. This information was derived from a survey of every article on SEX CRIMES in BOSNIA, SERBIA.

EST. DATE	LOCATION	VICTIM(S)/VIOLATION	AGENCY
March 24, 1999 Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe	Kosovo	Rape of “several” Albanians by Serbian police forces.	
March 24, 1999	Prestina, Kosovo	Sherife Alickaj, 18 , forced oral sex by Serbian police forces.	NYTC
March 24, 1999	Prestina, Kosovo	Five women sexually assaulted by Serbian police forces.	NYTC
April 18, 1999	Dragacin, Kosovo	Rape of five women by Serbian soldiers.	Human Rights Watch
April 27, 1999	En route to Prizren, Kosovo	Rape of ten women by Serbian paramilitary forces	NYTC
May 11, 1999	Hotel in Pec, Kosovo	Systematic rape of Albanian women by Serbian soldiers.	U.S. Dept. Report - “Erasing History: Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo”
May 11, 1999	Djakovica, Kosovo	“Mass Rapes” of Albanian women.	U.S. Dept. Report (above)
June 22, 1999	Zrze, Kosovo	Ms. Thaqi, 22, sexual assault by Serbian police forces.	NYTC
June 22, 1999	Mitrovica, Kosovo	Avdullahi , 28, threatened with rape by Serbian soldier.	NYTC
June 22, 1999	Dragocina, Kosovo	Zyrafete , 23 sexual assault by Serbian soldiers	NYTC
June 22, 1999	Dragocina, Kosovo	300 women held hostage for three days by Serbian soldiers.	NYTC – eye witness accts.
June 22, 1999	Djakovica, Kosovo	Ylika , 17 threatened with rape by Serbian soldier	NYTC

