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Nasilje nad ženama: diskursi, perspektive, lekcije iz bh. povijesti. By Fahd Kasumović (Ed.), Sarajevo – Berlin: Univerzitet u Sarajevu - Filozofski fakultet – Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2024. Pp. 474. ISBN 978-9926-491-36-9 (Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta); ISBN 978-9926-547-03-5 (Ured Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V. u Bosni i Hercegovini); ISBN 978-3-86928-271-8 (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V., Berlin)

From Empires to Extremes: Women and Violence in Bosnian-Herzegovinian Historiography

Ambitious in scope and profound in its historiographical and humanistic significance, the monograph *Nasilje nad ženama: diskursi, perspektive, lekcije iz bh. povijesti*, edited by Fahd Kasumović, Associate Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, is the culmination of a meticulously conceptualised and executed research endeavour. Emerging from a multi-phase project, the monograph reflects a coherent editorial vision, and features contributions from scholars whose academic profiles and disciplinary expertise align with the editor's selection. The result is a work of considerable value to Bosnian historiography, particularly in the broader regional context. Thematically, the monograph addresses a complex and historically marginalised subject: violence against women, examined through the lens of more than two millennia of Bosnian-Herzegovinian history. This global and historically persistent phenomenon has long been overlooked in historiographical discourse, but the monograph takes it as its central focus, and rigorously examines it from diverse perspectives. Each chapter interrogates the issue from distinct temporal and disciplinary vantage points, from classical antiquity to the contemporary period. The monograph's interdisciplinary nature, particularly evident in its concluding chapters, reinforces the validity and salience of its research findings.

By placing local historical experiences in broader global frameworks, it provides a rare and intellectually demanding perspective that fulfils scholarly and civic responsibilities by documenting, analysing, and disseminating historical insights to a wider audience.

The introductory chapter is the monograph's conceptual anchor; in it the editor articulates the project's core objectives, methodological approaches, and academic rationale. Its publication is both justified and necessary, and it is sure to secure its rightful place in university libraries, research institutes, and academic centres. More importantly, because it is available in print and digital formats, the work will transcend institutional boundaries and reach its intended readership of students, scholars, activists, and policymakers. Such accessibility is among its greatest strengths, and will likely contribute to its enduring success. This assessment is supported by the breadth of scholarship invoked by the contributing authors, who draw on dozens, if not hundreds, of highly relevant sources. Their intellectual approach transcends routine information consumption to offer a deeply reflective, analytically rich engagement with issues that challenge both society and the individual. Alongside established Bosnian-Herzegovinian scholars, the contributors include emerging researchers whose academic potential promises to shape future decades of inquiry: Almir Marić, Dženan Dautović, Fahd Kasumović, Amila Kasumović, Minela Radušić, Adnan Jahić, Mirza Džananović, Sabina Subašić Galijatović, Sarina Bakić, and Ajla Demiragić. Their work draws extensively on globally significant reports, assessments, and recommendations issued by the United Nations and its affiliated institutions, thereby situating the phenomenon in a broader international framework. Crucially, the authors engage with these documents critically and substantively, refusing to settle for superficial interpretations or token citations.

In the chapters authored by historians, the contributors delve into their disciplinary terrain with rigour and responsibility. They navigate an often inaccessible and largely unexplored corpus of historical sources – including manuscripts, official documents, protocols, reports, and court records – written in diverse languages and scripts, and with varying stylistic conventions. These sources are the empirical foundation upon which insights are reconstructed, analysed, and, in some cases, synthesised into the multifaceted nature of violence against women: how it has been perpetrated, organised, justified, punished, concealed, revealed, and remembered across time. The chapters devoted to classical and medieval Bosnian-Herzegovinian history integrate key works from domestic and international scholarship to present representative examples in a single, coherent framework. This enables readers to examine the manifestations

of violence against women across diverse contexts, regardless of origin, social status, age, or other identity markers.

These chapters illuminate the tragic destinies of so-called ordinary women, whose marginalisation in historiography stems from the limited and fragmentary nature of historical documentation. At the same time, they shed light on the fates of courtly women, such as princesses, queens, and noblewomen, whose privileged birth did not shield them from a violence often exacerbated by political instability, dynastic conflict, or court intrigue. Documenting these experiences – whether contemporaneously or retrospectively – is a form of historical testimony and public acknowledgement. It ensures that these voices, once heard by witnesses, prosecutors, or judges, are preserved in the historical record and integrated into historiographical discourse.

In pursuit of a comprehensive mapping of Bosnia's sociocultural panorama as an Ottoman frontier province, author Fahd Kasumović examined and interpreted dozens of court cases from the early modern period to the mid-19th century. The cases focus on the adjudication, punishment, or contestation of violence against women, and offer an opportunity to explore the interplay of law, society, and gender within the broader civilisational framework of the World of Islam. From the late 14th century onward, Southeastern Europe underwent profound civilisational, socio-political, and military transformations that shaped its historical trajectory. In this context, the documented cases reveal confirmed and contested instances of violence, directed primarily at women but occasionally at men as well.

The scope of the cases is broad, and encompasses marital disputes, divorce, domestic abuse, inheritance conflicts, religious conversions, homicide, various forms of humiliation, verbal and psychological abuse, provocation, and other distressing experiences that disproportionately affect women. In most instances, the perpetrators were individuals in close physical and emotional proximity to the victims – which underscores the deeply personal nature of such violence – but the acts were committed in both private and public domains. While the number of documented cases may appear modest in relation to the historical span, their cumulative significance is in the patterns they reveal: violence was not confined to a particular ethnic, religious, cultural, socioeconomic, or age group, but transcended such boundaries to emerge as a pervasive and universal phenomenon.

When compared with other regions in the World of Islam and beyond, similar modalities and structures of violence are evident. Though intensity may vary across contexts, the underlying mechanisms remain strikingly consistent. Of particular importance are the responses of imperial authorities and judicial-administrative institutions, which represent a concerted effort to confront

and regulate such violence. These responses, often formalised through legal instruments, attempted to construct systems of governance in which acts of violence, much like defamation, were subject to legal sanction.

If the earlier periods of Bosnian-Herzegovinian history can be considered premodern, it would be reasonable to expect that the onset of modernisation and the so-called civilising mission – which followed the industrial, political, and social revolutions of the modern era – would usher in behavioural shifts toward greater human dignity and protection. Paradoxically, however, the late 19th century delivered not a narrative of progress but an age of extremes, which continued for much of the 20th century. Violence against women, in its many and brutal expressions, remained a persistent and defining feature of this historical paradigm. Documented instances of human trafficking, organised prostitution, smuggling, and other forms of gender-based violence – perpetrated by both illicit actors and state-sanctioned institutions – reveal patterns of corruption, complicity, and, at times, intentional suppression, even in contexts where a civilising impulse and coordinated efforts to eradicate such abuses might be expected. Amila Kasumović and Minela Radušić's chapters, which focus on the first half of the 20th century, demonstrate that while rapid socio-political transformations and structural upheavals were often framed as progress, they had adverse effects on society as a whole. Crucially, these changes did not herald a decline in entrenched institutional and extra-institutional violence, and women bore a disproportionate share of the harm.

Through the examples presented – from the late 19th century and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian experience under the first Yugoslav state, to the period before the Second World War – a clear picture emerges of institutional mechanisms that sustained and, in some cases, intensified violence against women. These mechanisms, superimposed upon longstanding patterns of domestic and familial abuse inflicted by spouses and close relatives, are a distinct and deeply troubling dimension of gendered violence. Often legitimised through legal and bureaucratic frameworks, this second layer of harm demands renewed scholarly scrutiny. It poses a fundamental challenge to the concept of modernity and its institutional expression within state-legal systems, and reveals the extent to which violence can be embedded, normalised, and perpetuated under the guise of progress.

The chapters addressing masculinity, misogyny, and modernisation – particularly those that trace sexual and physical violence against women in Habsburg Bosnia and the 'silent abuse' in interwar Yugoslavia – embody the profound disillusionment that often accompanies expectations of progressive change. Traditional patterns of violence not only persisted but were reconstituted within new institutional frameworks, rendering them more insidious or, at the

very least, more complex. If there is a mitigating factor, it is the relatively limited number of cases examined in these chapters. Despite this, their thematic weight is considerable and reinforces the imperative to pursue lines of inquiry that deepen our understanding of violence against women in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian context.

When read sequentially, the manuscript reveals a dramaturgical rhythm that demands attentiveness to the historical tempo and narrative flow. This structure enables readers to anticipate the intensification of violence across historical epochs. When chapters are approached individually – such as the one detailing the suffering in the Second World War – the monograph's emotional and intellectual demands become more acute. As contributor Adnan Jahić argues, destruction and apocalyptic scenes of gendered violence are central to the wartime experiences of Bosnian-Herzegovinian women. The fragmentation of territorial control and proliferation of competing political and military actors – i.e., states, pseudo-states, armies, militias, and regular and irregular forces – created conditions in which violence was both systematic and indiscriminate. The way these actors treated women was strikingly similar, regardless of affiliation. The victims were women of all age groups and backgrounds, in villages, cities, and concentration camps. Jewish, Serbian, Bosniak, Roma, Croatian, and many other women – some documented, others not – were subjected to rape, persecution, imprisonment, and murder. Whether politically engaged or not, they were united by their gender.

The significance of this work likely exceeds the aims of its authors, as it exposes a deeply entrenched cruelty toward women, amplified by war as an extreme communicative act. A thorough examination of the scope and nature of such violence against women raises critical questions about the broader historical trajectory of the modern era. The monograph invites comparisons between wartime and peacetime conditions, prompting reflection on society's evolving relationship with violence. While quantitative and qualitative differences between such periods are evident, violence itself emerges as a historical constant, thereby making it essential to interrogate the modalities through which it is communicated and the functions such communication serves.

In this regard, the study of how violence against women is represented in selected issues of Sarajevo's *Oslobođenje* newspaper is particularly illuminating, as it traces continuities with earlier historical episodes and reveals the post-war Communist government's stance on gendered violence. While the regime deserves recognition for its modernisation initiatives, which significantly improved general living standards in line with global post-war trends, it simultaneously maintained a systemic silence around unresolved wartime traumas and traditional forms of undesirable news. This duality exposes the limitations of the modernisation

paradigm, which, despite its appeal, demands critical scrutiny across a broader temporal and socio-political spectrum.

The profound social upheavals and political transformations that punctuate modern Bosnian-Herzegovinian history reached a tragic crescendo during the 1990s, as the collapse of Yugoslavia and disintegration of socialist state systems across Eastern and Southeastern Europe marked the end of the 20th century. The war against Bosnia and Herzegovina unleashed a torrent of violence and mass atrocities against civilians and society, including expulsions, killings, ethnic cleansing, the terrorisation of urban centres, and the obliteration of rural communities. Violence against women – particularly sexual violence – was recurrent and intensified, exacerbated by the collapse of institutional structures and the radicalisation of the conflict. In this context, the documentation, interpretation, and legal framing of various forms of sexual violence against women was not only necessary but central to understanding the broader dynamics of the war. The chapters that examine legal discourses and post-war sociological analyses of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society are a critical component of the monograph, and these contributions will undoubtedly provoke reflection among discerning readers.

To extract meaningful historical lessons, it is imperative to expand the scope of education, not only in formal institutions such as schools and universities, but also through broader societal engagement with the concept of learning. A deeper understanding of (particularly gender-based) violence requires a critical examination of how the phenomenon is represented in educational frameworks. This could include an analysis of curricular materials (as partially explored in the monograph's final chapter) and a broader interrogation of the implicit expectations embedded in educational outcomes. The final chapters may fall outside conventional historiographical methodologies, but they are invaluable because they demonstrate that violence against women must be approached from multiple disciplines, and that research in this domain demands innovative and diverse analytical perspectives. This integrative approach renders the monograph a cohesive and comprehensive whole, and makes it essential reading for scholars, educators, and engaged citizens. Its ultimate value, however, is in the answers it gives to pressing questions, and in the intellectual space it opens for posing new ones. This work both informs and challenges, offering insights while demanding further inquiry. It does not merely respond to a societal need – it compels the reader to engage.

Amir Duranović