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Albanian Personal Narratives of the Kosovo War and the Struggle for a National Narrative

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Abstract: **This paper looks at the "war of memories" taking place in postwar Kosovo through a close reading of diaries and memoirs written by the protagonists of the war - both fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army and civilians. It argues that the two narratives emerging from this literature correspond to gendered variants of the Albanian national self-identification fixated in the early nineteenth century.**

Keywords: **Kosovo, Albanian National Narratives, War Memories, Imagined Communities, War and Masculinity, National Narratives and Masculinity.**

I. Introduction

In this paper we analyze how Kosovo personal narratives construct war memories by "imagining" the Albanian national community. This imagination is an artifact that does not imply falsity. On the contrary. Kosovo's personal narratives persuasively show how the national community they conjure through language manages to command a strong attachment, even love, among its members (Anderson, 1991: 141-48). Taken together, they thus provide a rich portrait of the composite cultural production that is the Albanian nation in postwar Kosovo. Their analysis also shows that the contrasting and dissonant narratives of victimization and heroism we found in them are not spontaneous creations of the recent war. They correspond to variants of the Albanian national self-identification that were created in the early twentieth century and periodically reappear, sometime more self-consciously, in interaction with particular social and political dynamics.

We address our interest in this "war of memories" by taking a critical look at personal narrations of the war. By personal narratives we intend diaries and memoirs - whether little known or publicly dominant, written by ordinary people or leaders. They have the quality of being written by people who "were there" and seem more "authentic" than other forms of narration. They promise to be a more immediate reflection of reality, although the emphasis on immediacy and reflection is obviously different whether we are talking about a diary or a memoir, and this difference is meaningful (Hynes, 1999: 208). Powerful public figures

overshadow less famous authors but can also be suspected of turning memories into political dividends. Ours is not a search for witnesses' authenticity. We focused on the relationships between individual and group memories and narratives, with the understanding that the acts of remembering and forgetting have wider cultural and political implications.

The memory of war, and its political significance for the imagined national community, to use Benedict Anderson's term, is the subject of scholarly work (Winter, 2006; Winter and Sivan, 1999). We chose to discuss war narratives because "the written recollections of the men who performed the acts that taken together constitute a war must also be memorials" (Hynes, ibid.: 205). Here, we took personal narratives as cultural "vectors of memory" that help shape the collective memories of the war (Rousso, 1991: 219-20).

II. The Fighters Narrative as Heroic Narrative

Many KLA fighters kept diaries, which remain in the possession of their families. Only a few have been published (Elshani, 2001; Hyseni, 2003; Kurtaj, 2012a; Pllana, 2000 and 2001; Simnica, 2000; Tahiri, 2001). The voice of their authors is generally rather impersonal and detached. They describe in plain language the hardship of the war, fought very unequally by groups of ill-equipped and ill-trained volunteers against one of the strongest European army. They contain many discussions of fighters' comings and goings, meetings, playing cat and mouse with the enemy. They record the names of the victims. Plenty of pictures illustrate the texts, portraying groups of smiling, uniformed, armed young people posing for the camera, of KLA platoons trekking across the mountains, and of postwar photos of burial ceremonies.

There is a number of memoirs written after the war. One of them is also based on several fighters' diaries - the author's and his closest comrades' - among other sources (Zhita, 2008). Some memoirs organize different material gathered during the war by the authors in their capacities of fighters or journalists (Çetta, 2000; Gashi, 2006; Kurtaj, 2012b; Lushi, [2001] 2009). Others collect interviews with KLA fighters to preserve the memory of the war (Hamzaj and Hoti,2003; Shala, 2002). Long interviews with KLA leaders have been serialized in the newspaper *Zëri* and later published in the volume *Libri i Lirisë* (2003). There are a few that stand out as biographical war memoirs by fighters who later became public figures: Gani Geci (2001); Commander Remi in conversation with Safet Zejnullah (2000); and Ramush Haradinaj in conversation with Bardh Hamzaj (2000).

What Kosovo's memoirs and diaries have in common is that they only partially propose a soldier's narrative. If we take Fussell's reading of war memoirs through the lens of Frye's modes of fiction, we would expect to find in them a mix of "low mimetic" and "ironic" modes (1975: 311-313). In other words, we would expect that the narrators and the other characters move from a somewhat normal situation to one of frustration and absurdity, in which the individual is diminished by the group, his pleasure by honor and duty. Taken to an extreme, this ironic condition turns into the representation of existential hell - a classic soldier's narrative. Both KLA diaries and memoirs, however differently, follow mostly the "high mimetic" mode of the epic, which is the common mode, across cultures, of the memorialization of the hero-martyr. What is striking here is that the epic mode is used to celebrate also the hero-veteran, who is alive.

In Haradinaj's memoir, the present glory as the founder and leader of the party *Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës (AAK)*, is prefigured by an equally glorious past as the member of a patriotic family that sacrificed the lives of two sons to the nation. Haradinaj's biography is indeed an heroic tale - from his successful defeat of Serbian forces attacking his home in Gllogjan to his role as commander of the KLA Dukagjini Operational Zone, and to his leading role in the demobilization of the KLA and its transformation into a civilian emergency organization. The narrative hints at a political career as successful as his military career. Haradinaj indeed became Prime Minister but was also indicted for war crimes and spent years in detention at The Hague before being acquitted.

Geci's war experience, also firmly embedded in a family history of patriotism, is recalled in a memoir that has two main goals: propose Geci's account of his killing of another KLA leader, Abedin Rexha, during a personal dispute; and establish a link between the leaders of the peaceful resistance of the 1990s and the KLA. Unique in the KLA literature, his book does not imply that the peaceful resistance turned Albanians into a passive crowd and humiliated them. It does the opposite. It praises the peaceful resistance as something wise and helpful, while indicting the underground parties in the Diaspora, such as the LPK, for having highjacked the KLA and for allegedly having allied themselves with the socialist leader in Albania, Fatos Nano, and Greek socialists - in other words, for being subordinated to a "Serbo-Greek scenarios." In this case too the discussion about the war has the intention of glorifying the author as a member of a political party that was overshadowed by the war. In 2010, Geci lost his re-election as an MP because his party, the *Lidhja Demokratike e Dardanisë* (Democratic League of Dardania, LDD), did not pass the threshold.

III. Manhood, Sacred Death, and the Nation

No matter their agenda, KLA fighters' personal narratives are unified by the heroic mode of narration, which is common to the "martyrs narrative." The biographies of the fallen collected by the War Veterans Association in a multivolume series, *Feniksët e Lirisë: Dëshmorët e Ushtrisë Çlirimtare të Kosovës* (Phoenixes of Freedom: The Martyrs of the KLA) illustrate this heroic narrative more clearly. These volumes are paper monuments" (Perry, 2001: 26) to the *deshmorët* (martyrs), a companion to the commemorative plaques and memorials that dot the Kosovo's landscape. They attempt to fix the memory of heroic suffering and sacrifice that is fundamental for social cohesion across societies.

The Veterans' volumes of KLA martyrs remind one of school yearbooks, similarly to the Italian commemorative literature of WWII partisans. Organized in alphabetical order, the KLA volumes show the photo portrait of each individual, accompanied by a short biography compiled with the help of friends and family. The biographies include fragments of the martyr's diaries, notes, or poems. All are depicted as ordinary people with an extraordinary love for their nation, a love nurtured by family and society. Being ordinary does not mean being common, but being "of the people." The heroes are exemplary citizens, full of "Albanian" virtues - pride, honesty and love for family and country - from an early age. The first martyr to be listed is Adem Jashari, called the Legendary Commander for his resistance until death, together with

his extended family, against Serbian troops. Jashari is identified as the model for all other martyrs, he showed them how to fulfill their call, by pledging their lives to the nation's redemption, and gaining eternal life throught this glorious death.

The individual biographies of fallen KLA, commissioned by family and friends and published separately from the Veterans' volumes, don't depart from the standard commemorative format described above. They all partake in the "Myth of the War Experience" (Mosse, 1990: 16). In the broader Western European context, this model of personal sacrifice for the nation was sanctioned by the church and co-opted Christian symbolism, among others the idea of resurrection. The KLA fallen are equally sacralized by a system of symbols that is influenced by a deeply rooted and shared cultural model: the Albanian epic oral tradition, in which death is the price for freedom and the *amanet* (legacy) of national heroism must be passed from generation to generation, as the condition for national regeneration (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers, 2006). The martyrs, like the mythical character of the phoenix (*Feniksët*), obtain new life from the ashes of their predecessors.

Death is not just the focus of martyrs' hagiographies, it is also the focus of the veterans' diaries and memoirs. These texts talk about the necessity of war, the motives that pushed the authors to join the fight and their determination to go to the end, or their readiness to sacrifice everything to the goal of Kosovo liberation. The authors are not afraid of dying, and celebrate the war by reiterating the heroism of themselves and other fighters, who present themselves as victorious in their fight for independence, despite the limited engagement with an overpowering enemy. Their strength rests on the camaraderie generated by the war and founded on shared masculine values of "will, power, honor, courage" (Mosse, 1996: 4) - an experience common to the West. Masculinity is expressed through intense feelings of love for other fellow fighters. The ubiquitous snapshots of the smiling fighters taken as if they were going to a picnic rather than war, often death, rarely include women. They project the death-defying image of the youthful male warrior.

In many passages we detected an evident connection between manhood, death and the nation, which crystallizes in the emotional bonds among men at war. Bashkim Hyseni, a graduate from medical school who joined the KLA as paramedic, makes this connection explicit in this exchange between two commanders, after a shoot out with the enemy: "Commander Kaçiku [..] greeted all of us with a handshake, while he gave a hug to Commander Buja. Like men, right? Commander Buja smiles to Commander Kaçiku. Certainly, until death, Commander Kaçiku replies with a tired and saddened voice. For four days and nights, none of us had slept for a single moment" (Ibid.: 22). Hyseni feels elation at being a member of a group of fighters. The gun and male camaraderie empower him.

Uk Lushi was living a comfortable life in New York City as a stockbroker but returned to Kosovo at the start of NATO intervention with an all volunteer group, the Atlantik Batallion. He finds pride and community with his fellow fighters, who are his family and the only concrete connection between him and the nation: "Honestly, for the first time since am I aware of my national belonging, I feel almost completely alone in the world. I have nothing else, except for this belonging, which is the only reason why we are so undesirable for our Serbian neighbors"(Ibid.: 51).

Fighters committed to die through pronouncing a solemn oath, the *besa,* a key concept in Albanian traditionalist culture, which has been elevated to a national essential character. Taken from customary law, *besa* means "faithfulness" to one's word - "loyalty" or "allegiance guaranteed." It is "at the core of the ancestors's will or 'pledge' (the *amanet*) as it demands eternal faithfulness to the cause - here that of fighting for national liberation, independence and unity - beyond an individual's life and through the generations" (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers, ibid.:520). The verses written by a much celebrated martyr, Agim Ramadani (aka "Katana"), vividly express this idea and appear in a few texts. They open Gashi's memoir on the battle of Kosharë, while Milazim Elshani, an early KLA recruit from Suhareka, reads the *besa* that he has written on the wall of his room. Hajrush Kurtaj's diary, an account of the war in the Ferizaj region, includes the photocopy of an handwritten KLA *besa*, used at the front.

The obligation for a man to die for his country because freedom must be purchased with blood is what makes an Albanian. Ramush Haradinaj presents the KLA values as national values. "I will not allow myself in any form to talk about KLA political values, or the KLA, as values of just one group. These were values of our people, I was just one of them" (2000, 145). Those who don't share in these values and do not join the fight are traitor to their Albanian-ness. Volunteers such as Hyseni and Lushi express surprise and dismay at the fact that only few have answered the call to arms. Here's Lushi, "Where are Albanians?! Where is their historic heroism?!" (ibid.: 44-45). He is borrowing from the Albanian literary canon, in particular from Gjergi Fishta, the Franciscan father who wrote the epic poem *Lahuta e Malcis* (The Highland Lute, 2005), weaving together folklore, real historical events, and his rising national consciousness. In Canto 6, the poet asks, "Where, Albania, are your heroes?"

IV. The Personal and the Political

There is little room for sentimentalism in the memoirs. When Haradinaj discovers that his older brother Luan is dead in an ambush during a crossing of the Albanian border, he carries the body to a safer place and then goes back to collect his things. "I have to say I was a bit lost" (Ibid.: 37), is the only comment that he makes about his feelings at that moment.

The omnipresence of death, sometimes the death of a friend or a kin, links individuals to the nation. Hajrush Kurtaj finds out that his brother Xheladin and two other men are killed in a siege and he establishes a connection between his brother's death and past heroes of Albanian history. The rethoric is overwhelming, evidence that the nation is conceived in language as much as in blood.

Like Hyseni, Drita Simnica didn't have any previous military experience when she joined the KLA. Her authorial voice is also more intimate. Because she is a woman, her relation with the group is different and narrated in a different tone. She talks about how she has to struggle to find her place in the war. When she volunteers in April 1998, she is first told that Drenica was not prepared to accommodate women. She manages to join the zone of Shala a few months later, where she is stationed at the headquarter, the village of Oshlan, until NATO bombardments. With other three volunteers, she deals with administrative work. Her story is one of displacement, deep fear, insecurity,

and boredom, as much as determination to fight and die for the love of country. Simnica's voice, especially at the beginning, is the breathless voice of a twenty-four year old writing her journal during extraordinary times. Often at cross-purpose with the commander Rrahman Rama, Simnica feels despondent and insecure. Hers is an atypical first person narrative.

More typically, women are talked about by others, who portray them mostly as mothers. Kurtaj begins the short chapter of his memoir dedicated to KLA women, rather incongruously, with a discussion of motherhood. Hyseni's description of the death of Commander Kaçiku and the reaction of his family focuses on the mother as a defender of the nation, "I hear his mother say, "God bless you, my son, for you gave your life for your homeland." (Ibid., 24). When Hyseni describes the death of a KLA woman, he focuses on her being a mother, not on her valor in combat. Trying to describe the role of women in the guerrilla war, Kurtaj cannot find better words than Ismail Kadare's definition of village teachers "*të urta gjer në dhembje, të thjeshta gjer në madhështi"* (calm in distress, simple in greatness). This sentence appears in the same page where the author names the three fighters fallen in his operative zone, including a teenager Emsale Frangu, and Mukadeze Like-Muhaxheri, a mother who sends her five children with her husband to Skopje and continues the armed struggle until killed in an ambush. Women who die in combat are all described as mothers and sisters in the short bios of the Veterans' Album (twenty of them published so far). The seventy-year old Sala Xhemajili-Jashari is the "great mother of Drenica". As the wife of the well-known fighter Fehmi Ladrovci, killed in the same action, Xheva Krasniqi-Ladrovci is portrayed as the ideal partner and the "older sister" of other women fighters. Her very early engagement in politics, as one of the protagonists of the 1981 students' riots, is not mentioned (Farnsworth, 2008: 26).

V. The Victim Narrative

After the war, one of the main topics of conversation among Albanian civilians, young and old, was the war experience. "Where were you during the war?!" was one of the most frequently asked question. Everyone had a story to tell, and they did readily tell stories, true to centuries' long Albanian oral tradition. Stories of victimization and suffering were told over and over again and composed an oral narrative of the war. They were rarely published. The very few that were published much later reached a much more limited audience than the KLA diaries and memoirs. Sevdije Ahmeti's diary (2003), the story of a leading human rights activist, has been published only in French and never in Albanian.

The three diaries included in this paper were written by two men - Agim Byci (1999) and the late Sabri Ajdini (1999) - and the nine year old Rrezarta Abdullahu (2012). Only Byci's diary is a book. Ajdini's wrote on pieces of paper, mainly torn from flour sacks, for fear of being caught and punished. Following the war, he hand-wrote the entries into a notebook, and later typed them and sent one copy to the National Archives of Kosovo. His diary remains unpublished to date. Rrezarta (Rreze) Abdullahu wrote in a school notebook, which she found in 2012, when she offered it for publication. Parts of her diary have already appeared in local media, and a book is forthcoming.

The common theme of these diaries is the suffering of the Albanians under the Milosevic regime, especially as victims of an unjust war. It is an experience the authors connect with a dominant Albanian national narrative, based on the assumption that as a group they have been targeted for extermination by Serbia since the 1912 annexation of Kosovo. But only in 1999, when Serbian troops began to empty out cities and load civilians on trains to Macedonia, Albanians felt they had been turned into victims of a genocide, like Jews in the Holocaust (Di Lellio, 2007: 5). Both Byci and Ajdini explicitly compare their fate to that of the Jews in the Second World War and mention Anna Frank. Byci writes: "Paramilitaries are after us like the Nazis were after the Jews" (Ibid.: 38). Ajdini's enemy has the same name, "Nazi and chauvinist Serbs" (Ibid.: 4). Rrezarta Abdullahu has been called the Anna Frank of Kosovo and her writing has received much media attention.

All of them talk about fear, suffering and hopelessness: "us" and "them," the "good" versus the "bad," the "victim" versus the "perpetrator." They talk of the "unnatural" death they feared to experience at the hands of Serbian forces. The two men write about feeling emasculated by the war**.** They thought that their inability to protect their families was due to a lack of personal strength or youth. Forced to leave their families behind and run into hiding or take them to safer places and face the war alone, they acknowledge overwhelming fear.

When his neighbors leave - pushed out of their homes by Serbian troops or on their own accord before being brutalized - Agim Byci decides to stay, and becomes a refugee in his hometown of Gjakova. The war has emasculated Byci by making him a man on the run, unable to protect himself or his family: "What a miserable situation, how humiliating for us, as men. I look at all these helpless men, hiding behind bushes and roses, in the bathrooms, on the roofs, behind torn walls... it's so tragic-comic, because sometimes I have the feeling we are playing hide and seek (ibid., 38). Byci testifies to another element of reduced masculinity when he lets himself cry. Byci is a writer. He believes he has a special responsibility to not let the memory of the suffering of his people remain confined to the oral tradition. His references are literary. He draws parallel between the tragedies of great writers and his own. He blames Kuteli, Zola, Tagore, London, Solokov... for having taught him to love his home.

Although the suffering of the Albanians is a theme that occurs in all narratives related to war, Byci's writing includes another aspect rarely mentioned and much less talked about - rape: "The aim of the Serb military policy is to rape Albanian women to hurt their moral and their soul. With this, they aim to hurt the pride of the Albanian men, to weaken the manhood of the nation" (Ibid.,:171). This quote gives away another cry for the emasculation of men.

Ajdini also moved his family to safer places before March 1999, and faced the war alone. He wanted to keep his word that he would not turn his back to his home and homeland (Ibid.: 3). He is less afraid because he knows his family is safe, and as a man of 65 he is not a primary target. Like Byci, he thinks that he can take any insult, psycho-physical repression, maltreatment and persecution, but only if his family does not witness his humiliation. Unlike Byci, he evokes the heroism of those who dared to resist.

Nine year old Rreze is the ultimate victim. Her writing is not sophisticated, she does not need subtext to

show how she's feeling. She describes what she sees and does so in an innocent manner. The idea of a Serb who can also be a good person is unknown to her and she is surprised by human reactions in a soldier: "I approached a Serb soldier who was keeping guard. I told him it was my birthday and asked him if they were going to kill us. He started crying, I always thought Serbs don't cry, I got really scared and left quickly, quickly."

A reoccurring theme in Rreze's writing is death. She has nightmares in which her family gets killed, her brothers are taken away "to be raised first and then killed" and her mother is wounded trying to protect her. She has an emotional outburst when her house in Komogllave (Ferizaj region) is burned down and the family dog killed. But it is her death that scares her most. "Dad said that I am dad's princess and Serbs do not take away princesses. But I am not a real princess. I am a princess just to my dad. The black hand does not care if I am my dad's princess or not!" Rreze writes to record history. As a witness for the entire nation, she will not die.

VI. Conclusion

There is a limited number of written accounts on the 1999 war as it was experienced by civilians. However small, they are representative of many similar stories and experiences. These accounts bring to light what goes through the mind of individuals of different ages, genders and backgrounds. Taken together, these very personal individual recollections construct a narrative of collective victimization that draws on the global collective memory of the Holocaust to dramatize the injustice suffered at the hands of Milosevic and make it intelligible to the world but also to the people involved (Levy and Sznaider, 2006). In this storyline there is no room for active resistance, which would tarnish the simple moral dichotomy of "innocent victims" and "evil perpetrators" of the Holocaust - the same that provided ethical justification to the NATO humanitarian intervention.

After the war, this narrative took a back seat to the epic of the Albanian liberators of the KLA, but did not disappear. It remained private and subterraneously conflictual vis-a-vis the KLA heroic tales that connected the idea of the Albanian nation to a continuous past of gallant rebellions against powerful outsiders. But as KLA leaders, turned politicians, are facing criminal indictments both by international and local war tribunals and domestic civil courts for corruption, the heroic narrative is also being tarnished. Influential public figures, such as the Albanian writer Fatos Lubonja, have begun to criticize the heroes. Although still isolated voices, something like this was unimaginable just a few years ago. It is precisely this criticism that is creating one important condition for the victims narrative to find its way back to the forefront. The growing transitional justice industry with its focus on victims is contributing to expanding and publicizing their stories. This victims narrative is yet another form of identification for the community of people living within the state of Kosovo. Within thirteen years from the war, the Albanian collective memory of it is more fluid and contested than ever.

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