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# A War's Hidden Tragedy

NEWSWEEK and MSNBC revisit Kosovar Albanian women raped during the war

By Donatella Lorch and Preston Mendenhall  
NEWSWEEK.MSNBC.COM

CENTRAL KOSOVO — These days Drita rarely enters her former home, destroyed by Serbs during the Kosovo war. Only one and a half walls still stand; slabs of scorched concrete cast shadows across a floor littered with broken red bricks. Drita, 29, comes here to be alone, to escape the inquisitive eyes and ears of her extended family.

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**As she tells her story, Drita's eyes constantly dart over her shoulder. She is worried that someone in the family will hear.**

YET BEING ALONE-or, in this case, accompanied by a foreign reporter she got to know last year-also makes her nervous. She squats on a pile of bricks, her hands clasped tightly in front of her, and stares straight ahead toward rolling green hills.

The real damage, she seems to be saying, is not the debris around her; it's the ruin within.

Drita recalls wartime memories with as much overt emotion as she'd muster to read a grocery list. A Serb policeman dragged her away from her children, out of a room in a private house where she and other women and children were being held. He taunted her and ordered her to strip. When she screamed, he laughed and clamped a hand over her mouth. Then he pinned her arms behind her and raped her. Another man stood by, waiting his turn.

As she tells her story, Drita's eyes constantly dart over her shoulder. She is worried that someone in the family will hear.

Children are playing in the ruins of another house 20 feet away, and the rest of the family is sitting and talking under a nearby apple tree. She tugs at her mass of curly black hair. "For over a year I have not told anybody about it," she admits. "I can't. No one here talks about what happened to the women."

The Kosovo war ended in June last year when, after a 78-day pounding by NATO bombers, Serb strongman Slobodan Milosevic withdrew his forces. As correspondents covering the war, we came to know some of the women quoted in this article, including Drita. (The women's names have been changed at their request.) They told us last year in a refugee camp, in hushed tones, about the abuses they had suffered. Recently, in a joint reporting project by NEWSWEEK and MSNBC, we returned to their isolated village in Central Kosovo to find out what had become of them. What we found was a mostly wrecked place, where even the closest relationships are plagued by fear, suspicion and shame.

Since the war's end, the ethnic Albanians who make up the vast majority of Kosovo's population have been picking up the pieces with help from Western countries. Justice, though, remains elusive, particularly in cases of sexual abuse. A study issued in March by Human Rights Watch reported 96 documented cases of rape against Kosovar Albanians; the organization believes the actual number of rapes committed by Serbs during the NATO bombing was much higher.

## Rape as a weapon

### Reported incidents of rape in Kosovo



SOURCE: Human Rights Watch

MSNBC

individual Serbian or Yugoslav forces," Human Rights Watch concluded, "but rather were used deliberately as an instrument to terrorize the civilian population, extort money from families and push people to flee their homes."



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The majority of the documented rapes, the report says, were committed by Serb paramilitaries "who wore various uniforms and often had bandannas, long knives, long hair and beards." Other sexual assaults were committed by uniformed police and soldiers. "Rapes were not rare and isolated acts committed by

Drita's village, miles from the nearest paved road, sits on a ridge overlooking forests and other hamlets. Brick houses with intricately carved wooden gates are connected by narrow dirt paths. Haystacks crowd the backyards and chickens scamper underfoot. In all, the village is home to 300 people. Most of them have known Drita for many years, and most would ostracize her if they knew her secret.

Yet in private, several women told us the same basic story. On April 21 last year, Serb police and Army units marched into the village and herded women and children into three houses. For two days and nights they pulled out women one by one and sexually assaulted them. At least 10 women were raped here and human-rights investigators believe the number is much higher.

In Kosovo generally, women fear speaking about sexual assault, terrified that they will be blamed for what happened to them. A married woman risks being expelled from her husband's family and forced to give up her children. An unmarried victim will probably never find a husband. "The stigma of rape is so deep that it is often stated that a 'good' woman would rather kill herself than continue to live after having been raped," states a report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Drita once considered telling her husband the truth. "I did not want to tell him directly so I asked him 'what would happen to us if I were to be raped?' " she recalls, staring at the ground. "And he answered: 'I would never keep you'."

### Secret Sorrow

**Shame and fear hinder the collection of wartime rape statistics.** *Percent of respondents who know someone raped in war*

- **Somalia: 39%** In a 10-year cycle of conflict and lawlessness, taboo war tactics, such as rape, became routine
- **Cambodia: 4%** Upheaval has been nearly constant in the last three decades, most brutally during the Pol Pot regime
- **Bosnia: 3%** After widespread reports of sexual assaults, the United Nations voted to designate rape a war crime

ICRC, People on War Report

So silence became a barrier against further disaster. Drita's mother-in-law repeatedly reminds visitors that Drita only "served coffee" to the Serbs and never did anything "wrong." Other women may have, she says, but definitely not the ones in her family. "All the girls here are good girls," she says. "Nothing happened to them." Drita says she still screams in her sleep.

Investigation of war crimes now lies in the hands of the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague.

Patricia Sellers, legal adviser for gender-based crimes at the Tribunal, says the aim is not to prosecute individual cases of rape but rather to build a case against the top commanders and leaders who gave the orders. But to do that, investigators need witnesses who can identify the rapists by their uniforms and units. This information will help the Tribunal track Yugoslav troop movements and lead them to those in charge. It's a huge task, and the women in Drita's village say tribunal investigators have yet to talk to them (although other human-rights researchers have come). Individual prosecutions are being left to local courts. But the victims aren't likely to find justice. For more than a decade, the Serb government in Belgrade controlled the courts in Kosovo and Albanians rarely used them. The war left a judicial vacuum. Now the United Nations civilian administration has just begun the process of rebuilding a legal system. But even then, finding and identifying the men who committed assaults is nearly impossible. Serb forces have long ago withdrawn from Kosovo.

A handful of foreign-funded grass-roots organizations run programs to help women in Kosovo. But none of these efforts have reached Drita's village, where the war continues to cast a pall on everyday life. The village no longer has its own water source, for instance: when Serb forces entered the area, they executed 11 men and dumped their bodies in the village well. "It's impossible to forget what happened because everything we do, everywhere we go, we are reminded of it," says Sheriffe, one of the villagers who witnessed the abductions of women.

Drita's extended family, which includes 30 people, lives in three rooms. Almost all of the adult men are gone, working menial jobs in Western Europe and only occasionally sending money home. With no phones in the village and no working postal system, contact is sporadic. One husband left seven years ago. It is a struggle for his wife to persuade him to send money for his nine children. Still, the family proudly displays pictures of the men working in Germany. In one snapshot, two men stand ramrod straight, visibly proud of the tuxedos they wear. In the village, their children's toes poke through tattered sneakers.

The women say they are racked by anxiety, stress and depression. Symptoms include sleeplessness, chronic backaches, headaches and palpitations. One woman said she refrained from talking about the war at all so as not to upset her children. "You are forced not to remember and yet not to forget," she said.

Because the Serbs in this village raped women out of public view, people can only suspect who the victims are. One rape victim, Esma, points to other women and stresses that what

happened to her was not unique. Women and children were packed into rooms, she says. The Serbs came with flashlights to pick out the prettiest. The women had covered their faces with dirt and hair to appear unkempt and pinched their children to force them to cry and distract their captors. For two nights in a row, Esma was taken out of the room where the women were being held and repeatedly assaulted. When she fainted, Esma told a human-rights investigator, one of her tormentors carried her back to the other women and handed her an aspirin before leaving.

Even within families, the wall of silence is firm. Arjeta, 28, is one of at least two women in one family who were raped, but neither woman acknowledges what happened to the other. For her, the bitter memories of war began long before that April. Several times that winter, scared of Serb patrols, the villagers had escaped into the nearby forests. Arjeta gave birth to her youngest child in the woods. Later, while a captive in her village, she was twice raped by the Serbs. Now she battles constant and severe headaches. "Every two or three nights I have the same nightmare," Arjeta says. "Someone is coming into my tent to eat me." She suffers in silence, her anxieties seemingly without end.

*Mendenhall is MSNBC.com's International Editor.*

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