Making Muslim Women European

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INTRODUCTION

The traveler passing through the Bosnian town of Banja Luka circa 1910 could choose from a wide range of postcards to send home. While a considerable number of these cards depicted diverse aspects of the region’s rich cultural heritage—picturesque villages, ruined fortresses, men and women dancing in folk costumes—others showcased the newly-built infrastructure that was becoming an increasingly prominent part of the Bosnian land-

Figure 1: Postcard depicting Banja Luka, circa 1910.
Source: Magbul Škoro, Pozdrav iz Bosne i Hercegovine. Greetings from Bosnia and Herzegovina.
scape: iron bridges, factories, grid-iron streets, railroads, etc. One postcard in particular (see figure 1) affords a glimpse of Savior Street, one of the main roads in the city center of Banja Luka. The Hotel Austria and Elliot Café are clearly recognizable in the background, places which were at the heart of the Central European, middle-class sociability that was gradually spreading in town. At the center of the composition a couple can be seen sitting in the front seat of a car. The couple is dressed according to European upper-class fashion; the gentleman wears a suit and cap, and the lady, who is immediately obvious thanks to her white dress, wears a corset, a small cap and holds a parasol. Distributed in a semicircle around the car, the urban crowd seems to observe with curiosity this gendered performance of modernity, so unusual in early twentieth century Bosnia.

At first sight, the postcard could be a sketch of one of the many minor towns of the Habsburg Empire. Yet there are elements that undoubtedly point to the postcard’s Bosnian origin; the presence of three veiled figures—three Muslim women. Indeed, as a region that had only recently come under the control of Vienna in 1878, and had been a part of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries before that, Bosnia and Herzegovina boasted a large Muslim population—a unique case in the Habsburg Empire. The three veiled women’s position at the front of the stage is rather meaningful; they are isolated from the background context, hidden beneath heavy *feredža*, a type of Muslim garment worn by women in Bosnian towns outside the domestic space at the beginning of the twentieth century. Slightly removed from the rest of the composition, these three figures are the best proof of Bosnia’s recent Ottoman, and thus Oriental past, and of its persistent exoticism in the eyes of the Habsburg observer. Looking at this postcard, one might be tempted to think that European modernity, entering the town in the form of a bourgeois couple riding a car, has touched all but Muslim women.

The assumption that Bosnian Muslim women remained for a long time removed from social transformation has enjoyed a great deal of popularity, inside and outside the perimeter of academia. In 2009, when as a doctoral student I first started thinking about focusing on Muslim women in the first decades of the post-Ottoman period—roughly speaking, after the sultans

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1 In order to make the text more readable, in this book I refer to the historical region of “Bosnia and Herzegovina” for the most part simply as “Bosnia.”
and before the communists—several colleagues kindly suggested I drop the subject, and not just due to the risk of being accused of speaking on behalf of women and stealing their voices. The reasons given to me were both of a general nature, and specific to the research. General, because there often appears to be something improper about a male historian deciding to focus on women’s and gender history—dealing with women’s history is a job for women, and doing so implies that either you are not a real historian, or that you are not a real man. Specific, because—as I was told by several Bosnian colleagues—for the period before 1945 there was just not enough archival material for a serious PhD dissertation, and more importantly there was nothing in them that was interesting enough to be told. As I will show in the second part of this Introduction, the existing scholarship seems indeed to suggest that after 1878, Muslim women continued to lead more or less the same lives as they had in the late Ottoman period; they rarely went to school or entered the salaried job market, and they were mostly confined to the domestic space. At least until the triumphant Communist state empowered them with its emancipatory policies in the aftermath of the Second World War. I was also told that, if I really wanted to know more about Muslim women, I ought to listen to sevdalinka, a kind of folk music closely associated with Ottoman Bosnia, which even today has a lively cultural scene. These songs often tell the story of urban Muslim women, their cry for unrequited love and desire for their loved ones. The female protagonists in sevdalinakas are often described as hidden from the public eye behind a veil or mušebak, the wooden grille covering the windows of a house to guard against the eyes of onlookers. Even though there are exceptions, the majority of these female characters are represented as confined to the house, sometimes walking in the narrow streets of the mahala, or residential neighborhoods that made up the urban mosaic of the Ottoman town. At first sight, these songs implicitly reinforced my first impressions gleaned from the current state of research; Muslim women were entities removed from the public space.

According to this line of reasoning, Bosnian Muslim women represented a kind of anomaly, both in comparison with women in other Muslim societ-

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2 The term is possibly from the Ottoman Turkish savda ("passionate love"), which in turn comes from the Arabic sawda, one of the four humors of ancient medicine controlling emotions.
3 Recent scholarship is attempting a more nuanced reading of the way women are portrayed in sevdalinkas. On this topic see Damir Imamović, Sevdah (Zenica: Vrijeme, 2017), 149-52.
ies, and in comparison with non-Muslim women in the Yugoslav region. As a great deal of research has already convincingly shown, the decades at the turn of the twentieth century represent a period of major change for Muslim women around the world. At a time when the Ottoman Empire was becoming a vast testing-ground, where competing “imagined communities” were being forged and contested, the enforcement of appropriate gender roles—and in particular appropriate femininity—turned out to be on extremely contentious ideological ground. In Istanbul, but also in Egypt, the Maghreb, and the Mashrek, the developing public concern for the so-called “woman question” involved secular and religious public figures, the colonizers and the colonized, as well as men and women. In the Yugoslav region, roughly during the same decades, the history of non-Muslim women is no less charged with change. At a time when the state defined itself as a promoter of progress and modernity, women began to be considered unfit to accomplish their role as mothers and educators of future generations, and then became an object of reform and regeneration. Christian and Jewish Women of the Yugoslav region—which they lived in the Ottoman or Habsburg Empire, or in the Serbian and Montenegrin states—experienced new forms of education, learned to write and speak in public, joined the paid workforce, transformed their consumption practices and everyday life, and took part in the political struggle amidst the ranks of nationalist, socialist and feminist movements. In close relation with what their counterparts were doing in other European states, women imagined competing projects of social reform, took to the streets to demand better work and living conditions, and the right to vote. Moreover, research from the last few decades has shown


5 On women in the Yugoslav region see in particular Jovanka Kecman, Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama 1918–1941 (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1978). An irreplaceable tool for the study of the history of women in the Yugoslav region is Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi, eds., A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms: Central,
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us the extent to which women forged the course of their own lives, respecting or transgressing the boundaries imposed by class, age, political, ethnic and religious affiliations. How was it then possible to imagine that Muslim women in Bosnia were completely removed from all of these changes?

**Gendering Associational Culture**

This book is an attempt to tell a different story and to contribute to the history of Bosnian Muslims in the first decades of the post-Ottoman era, by putting women and their experiences in the picture. In a historiography traditionally focused on national, class, and ethno-confessional categories, the goal is to shift the major interest to gender and explore its heuristic power. More concretely, the book covers a period that falls between 1878, when the Congress of Berlin assigned this Ottoman province to the Habsburg Empire, and 1941, when Axis troops invaded Yugoslavia. In the space of approximately six decades, this region was integrated into two continental empires, the Ottoman and the Habsburg, and into a state based on the national principle, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. In order to explore the history of Muslim women and the evolution of a debate on Muslim, post-Ottoman gender relations, this book focuses on a specific social organization: the voluntary association. Usually associated with urban middle-class Western Europe and North America, voluntary associations became more prominent in the Yugoslav region from at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In a region that was at that time shared between Vienna and Istanbul, they turned up in virtually all of the languages in use—Verein in German, cemiyet in Ottoman Turkish, udruženje or društvo in Serbo-Croatian, not to mention the languages used in the region.

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7 At present, in the countries of former Yugoslavia, the official state languages include Slovenian, Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Macedonian, Montenegrin and Albanian. Without engaging in any of the sensitive political debates among Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins, it can be stated that Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin are mutually intelligible. In the period under study in this book, this language was referred to by the state under several terms: zemaljski jezik (provincial language), srpski (Serbian), hrvatski (Croatian), jugoslovenski (Yugoslavian), srpsko-hrvatski (Serbo-Croatian) državni.
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A kaleidoscope of local idioms that would later be called “minority languages.” Several generations of philosophers, historians and social scientists have already stressed the primary role played by associations in the making of what we are now used to calling modernity.

The term “voluntary association” generally refers to an organization that is contractual in nature, which distinguishes it from other forms of “traditional” organizations based on an assigned status, such as place of origin or blood-ties. Researchers often consider these institutionalized groups to be characterized by two principal markers, i.e. their non-governmental nature and their non-profit orientations, traits that have led scholars to consider voluntary associations as intermediary bodies that are autonomous from both the strictures of the state and family control. Thanks to this specific position, associations are usually considered as a kind of free space where individuals with spare time—men and progressively women as well—can express their beliefs, and promote their interests in coordination with their fellow members. The relationship between these communities of interest and the making of the public sphere has long been underlined; the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had already observed in the early nineteenth century that “newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers.”

Voluntary and selective membership, statutes laying out limited and explicit goals, self-government through written acts, and the appointment of roles through an elective process: these other key elements are usually associated with voluntary associations. It goes without saying that historical research has shown the extent to which this is just an ideal type; once associations leave the World of Ideas and enter into human history they undergo transformations, diversions, misappropriations, and they are not necessarily synonymous with liberal modernity.

jezik (State language), narodni jezik (popular, or national, language) or even naš jezik (our language). For the sake of simplicity, this language will be referred to as the “Serbo-Croatian language.” The approach adopted by this book is to cite the form used in the primary or secondary source. For an overview on these issues, see in particular Robert D. Greenberg, Language and Identity in the Balkans: Serbo-Croatian and Its Disintegration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

At first glance, the idea of focusing on voluntary associations in the Yugoslav region may seem bizarre or misinformed, to say the least. The Bosnian people and the inhabitants of the Balkans in general are not usually considered to be—to quote Arthur M. Schlesinger, speaking about the United States—“nation(s) of joiners.” At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, journalism, literature and scientific research have converged to reinforce an image of the Balkan peoples as the European continent’s “savages,” a sort of “internal Other” as Maria Todorova put it, or “semi-Orientals,” to quote Larry Wolff, only capable of mobilizing themselves through common ancestral bonds such as ethnicity, blood-ties and religion. The gory collapse of Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a process that in Bosnia took on a particularly dramatic turn, has only contributed to engraining this image; their associational culture, and by extension their civil society in general, has been branded as intrinsically incomplete, defective, or even entirely missing. The reason for this historical failure is most often assigned to the longue durée; at the root of this impossibility to adhere to an idealized Western European modernity, what is most often mentioned is the prevalence of rural societies dominated by autocratic empires, weak economic growth, a lack of cultural unity, and individualistic rational ethos. Built upon several years of research across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, this book aims first of all to contribute to clearing the field of these Balkanist assumptions, and to demonstrate that Bosnian associational culture was neither absent nor defective, but vital, dynamic and deeply interconnected with the development of voluntary associations on a global scale.


In a region where Muslim women remained largely illiterate, and therefore first-person literature written by them was very rare, this book focuses on voluntary associations for a specific reason. As has already been noted by scholars who have taken this subject seriously, such as French historian Maurice Agulhon,14 associations are graphomaniac actors who leave behind a plethora of written traces. At least when they have survived the injuries of time, turmoil and war, associations’ archival and printed sources represent a largely unexploited goldmine of information where gender historians can hope to discover the names, choices and ideas of the Muslim women who navigated the decades between the empire(s) and the nation-state. What I am particularly interested in understanding is how Muslim women potentially used—if at all—the new space of possibilities opened up by voluntary work in post-Ottoman Bosnia, and later Yugoslavia, be this in philanthropic, cultural, feminist or revivalist associations. How did they engage in existing associational networks? Did they establish their own associations? How did they legitimize volunteering? What really interests me here is gaining a glimpse, through the associational prism, of Muslim women in their relationships with the rest of society and how that changed over time. How did they engage in voluntary activities that challenged, at least to some extent, the prescribed separation between men and women, but also between Muslims and non-Muslims, still common in the Bosnian Muslim urban strata? What kinds of gendered divisions were established around their associational labor? How was the line separating men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, moved, renegotiated and contested? How did Muslim women manage to gain access to the public space, and how did they learn to interact with the state and religious institutions? Whenever possible, this book seeks to reassess Muslim women’s “capacity to exercise their will, to determine the shape of their own lives, and to partake in the shaping of their culture and society”15—in a word, to give them back their agency, and get rid once and for all of the Orientalist stereotype portraying them as silenced and oppressed. In a historical period in which virtually every journal dedicated dozens of articles to debating gender relations, usually framed according to the well-known formula žensko pitanje (the woman question),

special attention will be assigned to how this debate developed among Bosnian Muslims. What kind of political and cultural references did Muslim intellectuals of both sexes have? Is there any specificity to the domestication of this debate among Bosnian Muslims? How did Muslim women engage in this debate? How did class, age, level of education and religiosity shape their ideas, the circulation of these ideas, and participation in the debates that regularly exploded in the Bosnian, and later Yugoslav, public sphere?

It would be impossible to give a comprehensive image of the multitude of associations that were established in Bosnia in the period from 1878 to 1941. This research has adopted two selection criteria. First, associations in which Muslim women directly took part have been taken into account; as members, donors, sympathizers or beneficiaries (e.g. scholarship holders, students hosted in association dorms, public lecture attendees, etc.). Secondly, the group of associations that engaged with Muslim women and with the Muslim woman question is taken into account here. The information I was able to collect on these associations varied a great deal from one case to another. Many associations will only be given a brief mention in this book, either because they were short-lived or because I was only able to obtain fragmentary information about them. Other associations will make regular appearances throughout this work; the largest organization that can be associated with the pre-1945 period is without a doubt Gajret (Effort). Established in Sarajevo in 1903, this association rapidly extended to many other Bosnian towns, and even beyond the province; for example, in the Sandjak of Novi Pazar, Southern Serbia (modern-day Macedonia), and Serbia, especially in Belgrade. Besides its main mission—allocating scholarships to Muslim students of both sexes—the association expanded to a diverse range of other activities: printed journals and pamphlets, recreational and leisure activities, public lessons and literacy courses. As this book will attempt to show, Gajret became one of the main forums for Muslim (mostly male) public figures to develop a discourse on the Muslim woman question. Attended only by men in the beginning, during the interwar period the association’s doors were also opened to Muslim women. In order to distance themselves from Gajret’s openly pro-Serbian and pro-governmen-

tal stance, other members of the Muslim male elite established *Narodna Uzdanica* (Popular Mainstray) in 1924, with the same goal and structure as their rival association, but with pro-Croatian leanings. Each according to their national alignment, these two Muslim cultural associations systematically cooperated with Croatian and Serbian associations working out of Belgrade and Zagreb. Given their similar structure and agenda—working toward educating the Muslim youth—in this book I refer to these two associations as “Muslim cultural associations.”

Besides these two large-scale Muslim associational networks, a different kind of organization was also developing in Bosnia: philanthropic associations. Usually established at the town level, the main preoccupation of these associations was the care of the urban poor. As was usually the case in both the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, these associations were set up along confessional lines. In some isolated cases, Muslim women chose to establish their own philanthropic associations, such as *Osvitanje* (Dawn) in 1919, based in Sarajevo. However, in most cases, Muslim women participated in philanthropic associations through specific female branches of mixed associations. Unlike cultural associations, in which Muslim and non-Muslim women often worked together in the name of national sisterhood, the confessional homogeneity of these philanthropic associations remained unchallenged. Though Muslim cultural and philanthropic associations remain the principal focus of this book, it will also take a look at the case of *El-Hidaje* (The Right Path), an association established by revivalist Islamic religious scholars in the second half of the 1930s. Before the Second World War, *El-Hidaje* had managed to establish a network of local branches in the principal towns of Bosnia and Serbia. Even though, until the beginning of the war, membership to this association was reserved to men, this association made an original contribution to the debate on post-Ottoman Muslim gender relations, and this is why it has its place in this book.

Muslim associations were not the only institutions where Muslim

20 Muharem Dautović, *Uloga El-Hidaje u društvenom i vjersko-prosvjetnom životu bošnjaka (1936-1945)* (M.A. diss., Faculty of Islamic Sciences Sarajevo, 2005).
women became visible and that took on the Muslim woman question. This research would be severely undermined if it omitted two other poles: the feminist associations and the communist movement which, in particular in the early 1920s and late 1930s, spread their ideas in Yugoslavia, building their networks across different national and confessional groups. As regards the feminists, among the various associations of this kind that became prominent in the Yugoslav public sphere, special attention has been given to Ženski Pokret (Women’s Movement), an association based in Belgrade that in the aftermath of the Great War expanded to establish sister branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As for the communist sympathizers, special attention will be assigned to the ephemeral but vocal groups of Muslim university students in Zagreb and Belgrade, as well as their presence in several associations in Bosnia, thanks especially to the involvement of secondary school students. Even though, as this work will show, Muslim women only exceptionally got close to feminist and communist groups, both groups spoke out loudly and in public about their “Muslim sisters,” or the “working Muslim woman”—as they often called them—countering the almost complete monopoly of Muslim men on the discourse that defined the terms of the Muslim woman question.  

In research, like in every other domain, to choose is to renounce. Choosing voluntary associations as a privileged site of analysis raises problems and projects new shadows that must be addressed in an Introduction. First of all, in a multiconfessional society such as that of Bosnia, where the borders of different religious communities were far from impermeable, how should we identify Muslim women? Muslim given names and surnames were for me primary indicators in considering someone as sociologically Muslim, even if it this does not necessarily tell us anything about their degree of personal religious feeling and practice. Although this method can be most effective, this is not always the case, and sometimes people used names and surnames that are common to both Muslim and non-Muslims in the region. Even if I of course did my best to double-check all of the information I used to support my research, there is a thin margin of error, especially for names which are mentioned in the sources only once. Besides this general caveat, choosing

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to work on voluntary associations also necessarily pushes other segments of Yugoslav society to the background. First of all, associations were an eminently urban and middle-class phenomenon; they involved mostly teachers, students, white-collar workers, sometimes landowners and shopkeepers of both sexes, distinguished from the rest of the population by their level of education, working conditions and consumer habits. Muslim women who belonged to the small but growing working class, and especially the peasantry (80% of the Yugoslav population on the eve of the Second World War) will remain in the very background of this book. The same is true for Muslim women of non-Slavic origin, in particular those who belonged to the minorities of Turkish- and Roma-speaking populations, and Slavic-speaking Muslims living outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who are mentioned only episodically and fall outside of the perimeter of this research. Last but not least, it is worth recalling that associational sources do not allow us to reconstruct Muslim women’s presence in the public space in its entirety. There was doubtless much more going on in these women’s lives than what can be gleaned from written and visual archives. In particular, informal, oral interactions, which generally did not enter into the records, no doubt represented a significant segment of their experience, and remains terra incognita, and will probably remain that way.

**More Horses Than Women, Still**

Before moving on to a description of the book’s structure, it seems necessary to say a few more words about the achievements and gaps in the existing research on Muslim women at the turn of the century. My hypothesis here is that the history of Bosnian (and even Yugoslav) Muslim women in the first decades of the post-Ottoman period is located in a sort of blind spot between different historical—and political—discourses.

After the Second World War, the dominant Yugoslav historical narrative considered the National Liberation to be the “year zero” of Muslim women’s access to the public space. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and more

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particular the Antifašistički front žena (Women’s Antifascist Front, an organization established in December 1942), represented the driving forces of this emancipatory process. According to the official narrative, emancipation was a three-step process: Muslim women’s participation in the War of National Liberation, women obtaining the right to vote, and the banning of the veil by the newly established federated socialist republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina on September 28, 1950.\textsuperscript{23} As had already happened in other countries during the interwar period, especially in the Soviet Union, the public ceremonies in which Muslim women publicly abandoned the headscarf became symbolic of the end of the timeless patriarchal oppression of Muslim women, and at the same time symbolic of the Socialist palingenesis of the whole society (see figures 2 and 3).\textsuperscript{24}

All that had happened “before” this moment is therefore often downplayed, even though groundbreaking research, such as Vera Erlich’s work on Yugoslav rural families in the 1930s,\textsuperscript{25} has pointed out that, even before 1945, a deep and ongoing transformation in gender relations had been taking place. Examples of this kind of dominant socialist narrative are abundant. “The Fighting Path of the Yugoslav Woman”, a book published in Belgrade in 1972 and written to celebrate the role of women in the War of National Liberation, briefly recognized some changes in Muslim women’s lives during the interwar period: access to voluntary associations, the development of a debate on Muslim femininity, the transformation of veiling practices, etc. “In any case,” the author writes, “the difficult conditions for women, as workers, could not be improved through appeals, petitions and philanthropic initiatives. The roots [of their terrible condition] went deeper, and for this reason a transformation in women’s lives could only be brought about through their integration into the revolutionary workers’ movement and into the fight against the capitalist order.”\textsuperscript{26} The message is clear; there was no space for the emancipation of Muslim women before, and outside

\textsuperscript{23} On this topic, see in particular Senija Milišić, Emancipacija muslimanske žene u Bosni i Hercegovini nakon oslobodenja (1947–1952) (M.A. diss., University of Sarajevo, 1986).

\textsuperscript{24} For a comparative approach to anti-veiling campaigns, see in particular Stephanie Cronin, ed., Anti-Veil ing Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).


\textsuperscript{26} Dragutin Kosorić, ed., Borbeni put žena Jugoslavije (Belgrade: Leksikografski zavod “Sveznanje,” 1972), 45.
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Figures 2 and 3: Muslim women publicly abandoning the headscarf at the 1948 Antifašistički front žena Conference. 
Source: MGS, photography collection.

of, the path traced by the Communist Party. Celia Hawkesworth, who almost two decades ago contributed her groundbreaking work to the study of female public writing in Serbia and Bosnia, summarizes this process very well, stating that “the first forty years of the twentieth century represent a real ‘golden age’ for women throughout the region, but this was virtually forgotten in the aftermath of the Second World War as a result of the distorting effects of communist ideology.”

Nonetheless, even the most orthodox socialist Yugoslav history book has its merits and thus has a place in the building of this book. Eager to show how men and women of every ethno-national group had contributed to the establishment of the socialist state, in each federal republic the Institute of the History of the Worker’s Movement collected information on a number of women who had distinguished themselves in the War of National Liberation. These women had fought in the war alongside their male counterparts, in many cases losing their lives against Axis and ustaša forces. According to some estimates, around 13% of war combatants were women, of which 93% entered the socialist pantheon after the war, having received the Order of National Hero, as opposed to 1,241 men (or 7.03% of combatants).\(^{28}\) Often based on archival research and interviews, these books are an opportunity to explore the lives of several Muslim women, to reconstruct their educational and social backgrounds in the 1930s, and the different ways in which they became a part of communist organizations. A good example of these žene-heroji, or “women heroes”—as they are called in a 1967 book\(^{29}\)—is Vahida Maglajlić, a Muslim from Banja Luka who, after Yugoslavia was invaded by the Axis powers in April 1941, entered the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and joined the growing Partisan resistance movement. Vahida, who in the 1930s played an important role in different city associations, was killed by German troops. As the only Bosnian Muslim woman to receive the Order of National Hero, her name is still engraved on stone monuments and given to kindergartens and parks.\(^{30}\)

Since the late 1970s, the study of women in Yugoslavia has undergone important changes. This new approach to writing women’s history is emblematic of a “shift,” according to Ivana Pantelić and Biljana Dojčinović, “from the socialist understanding of feminism, regulated by the state, toward a more individual and theoretical approach”\(^ {31}\) that has made its way into Yugoslavia. Women historians such as Jovanka Kecman, Lydia Sklevicky and

\(^{28}\) For a discussion on these figures, see Ivana Pantelić, “Yugoslav Female Partisans in World War II,” Cahiers balkanique 41 (2013): 239–50.

\(^{29}\) Žene heroji (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1967), or “Women Heroes,” is the title of a book by Mila Beoković that focuses on the lives of nine women who died in the National Liberation War.


Neda Božinović were the main agents of this significant change in historical research, nourished and influenced by the discipline’s evolutions at a transnational level. As Biljana Kašić said of Sklevicky’s work, “one of [the] motivations for carrying out this research was to decode the demagogy at work in revolutionary ideology and analyze the gap between the declarative and the real, particularly the proclaimed emancipation of women alongside the maintenance of patriarchal structures in socialist Yugoslavia.”32 In their pioneering work, these women historians expanded their research to cover what was called at the time “bourgeois organizations,” that is middle class women’s/feminist voluntary associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.33 In the following decades, and especially after the end of the Yugoslav federation, new historians expanded this research, introduced new methodological approaches and considerably broadened our knowledge of women and gender history in the Yugoslav region.34 However, this scholarship only marginally included Muslim women. Mostly operating from the main academic centers of the country—Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana—these researchers mainly focused on the country’s northern, post-Habsburg regions—Slovenia, Serbia, Vojvodina, and Croatia. The post-Ottoman south—Macedonia, Bosnia, and Kosovo—where the majority of Muslims historically lived, remained at the very margins of this research effort.35 As a result, Muslim women were only ever included in this narrative incidentally, mostly mentioned as the object of (unrealized) emancipation by their “unequal sisters,” i.e. non-Muslim female/feminist activists. From the beginning of the 1980s, some articles seemed to announce a rise in interest specifically for Bosnian Muslim women in post-Ottoman times, in particular for

their relationship with voluntary associations and their access to education and employment. These articles started to explore the debates around the veil developing during the interwar period, which involved both secular and religious notables. Nevertheless, this interest turned out to be only temporary, and the articles produced were never followed by any kind of systematic research. The silence on this subject thus only served to implicitly confirm the idea that Muslim women had remained in the shadow of a timeless patriarchal oppression, obscurantism and passivity up to the establishment of the Socialist State.

The developments that at least to some extent affected the way in which Muslim women’s experiences were approached did not only occur within the confines of Yugoslav Women’s History. Islamic studies, which during the 1980s had benefitted from significant improvements both in Yugoslavia and abroad, played a crucial role in all of this. In 1986, the Paris-based orientalist Alexandre Popovic published *L’Islam balkanique* (Balkan Islam), a book that for decades would be an important milestone in studies on post-Ottoman Balkan Muslims. The result of at least a decade of research, this work was the first to comprehensively deal with the patchwork of Muslim populations of Southeastern Europe, at that time all but forgotten by Western scholarship, as was the case for Muslims living in Socialist countries. Popovic’s book, and his work more in general, gave for the first time a critical overview of the historical trajectories of the Muslim populations in this part of Europe, of the evolution of their principal community institutions—schools, sharia courts, pious endowments, hierarchies of religious officials, etc.—and of their integration into the Balkan states. His research provided the groundwork for several generations of scholars, profoundly expanding


our knowledge of Balkan Muslims, and in some cases dealt with women and gender issues, notably the question of the veil.

While the Yugoslav state was entering its final stages and beginning to disintegrate, in Bosnia there was a growing interest for the intellectual history of Bosnian Muslims, and for Islamic studies in general. Starting in the early 1990s, scholars such as Fikret Karčić and Enes Karić explored the debates developing within the Muslim community in post-Ottoman times, including as part of their analysis the development of the so-called “Muslim woman question.” However, this line of enquiry primarily explored the intellectual history of prominent male Muslim figures since the late Ottoman period, and mobilized Muslim women only insomuch as they were symbolic figures in the discursive battlefield among these men, be they religious or secular. Scarce interest, or none at all, has been lent to “real” Muslim women and their role in the debate. Nevertheless, decades later this body of research remains of vital importance for those working on the cultural evolution of Bosnian Muslims, and has huge merits. First of all it has reappraised, at least implicitly, the importance of gender relations in post-Ottoman Muslim history, and the extent to which the debate about gender was indeed a political issue. Secondly, in stressing the importance of the relationship between the Muslim intellectuals of Bosnia and Yugoslavia, and their fellow-Muslims in the Middle East, this research has also begun to show that debating gender issues was an eminently transnational venture. Thirdly, it has shed light on the veil debate, a topic that, as stated by Ina Merdjanova, “can become a battleground on which power struggles are waged, and power relations at different levels are articulated and reshaped: between Muslims and the state, on the one hand, and among Muslims themselves, on the other.”

The “discovery” of Balkan Muslims, fostered by Islamic Studies both from within and from outside of the Yugoslav region, was rapidly cast into the limelight in the blaze of Yugoslavia’s collapse, a process that in Bosnia and Herzegovina took the form of a bloody war (1992–95). During the conflict and in the aftermath, several books were published in English on the


40 Merdjanova, Rediscovering the Umma, 94.
history of Bosnian Muslims. The primary aim of these publications was to understand and explain the conflict for an international readership that was entirely unfamiliar with this region.\footnote{Among the many texts that were published during and in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia, see especially Mark Pinson, ed., *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Their Historic Development from the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Francine Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims: Denial of a Nation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).} In consequence of the atrocious images coming out of Sarajevo, Srebrenica and many other places completely unknown to the wider public until that moment, people suddenly became aware of Bosnian Muslims—or to be more precise, of Bosniaks (*Bošnjaci*), the national name officially adopted by them in 1993, at the height of the war. Many people, including myself, at that time a teenager, discovered through TV images of half-destroyed minarets that Muslims were not a presence living somewhere beyond the European continent, or recent arrivals who had emigrated for economic reasons. As a matter of fact, there were Muslim populations that had been living on European soil for centuries. Awareness about Bosnian Muslim women increased; one need only search for “Bosnian Muslim Women” in the catalogues of leading libraries across the world, or even on the Internet, to see the impressive number of texts that have been produced on gender violence and rape as a weapon of war.\footnote{Stefano Petrungaro, *Balcani: Una storia di violenza?* (Roma: Carocci, 2012), 121–34.} This outpouring of research, also reinforced by NGOs and reports from international organizations (the UN and the European Union in particular), dealt with Muslim women mostly as victims of physical, psychological and symbolic violence. As this scholarship has widely shown, women became the embodiment of different ethnic communities; “our women” versus “their women,” as put by an article from 1995.\footnote{Julie Mostov, “‘Our Women’/‘Their Women’: Symbolic Boundaries, Territorial Markers, and Violence in the Balkans,” *Peace and Change* 20, no. 4 (October 1995): 515–29.} The activism of Muslim women during and after the war remained unexplored. Recent scholarship is trying to reappraise this period and the role of Muslim women in it, to challenge the narrative of victimhood, often gendered, mobilized by all of the political actors of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to give back to Muslim women their agency.\footnote{On this topic, see in particular Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013) and Zilka Spahić Šišjak, *Shining Humanity: Life Stories of Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).}

Invisibilized, marginalized, victimized; according to this line of reasoning, it seems that the story of Bosnian Muslim women is a perfect case of
“female invisibility in history.” Bosnia’s transition into post-socialism not only brought about the return of a patriarchal society—a circumstance that surely does not favor gender-sensitive approaches—but also instilled an obsession for ethnicity and nationality in scholarly research, which for years has obscured other avenues for exploration. At first sight, it would seem that what Lydia Sklevicky said in 1989 about women in Yugoslav historical research is still true, that there were “more horses than women,” at least for Muslims. Luckily, on closer inspection it becomes evident that this is no longer the case. In the last few years, a growing number of scholars have focused on the pre-1941 experiences of Bosnian Muslim women. What is so interesting is that they are only rarely professional historians; they mostly come from gender studies backgrounds, or are sociology, literature, and art history graduates. In many cases, they write from the margins of their academic field, and they dedicate an MA thesis to this topic before moving on to different professional experiences. The researchers are—it probably goes without saying—mostly women: students, archivists, and NGO activists that, thanks to funding from abroad, have in many cases been able to do original archival research. The topics addressed by them are numerous: representations in visual art and literature, Muslim women and philanthropy, or education and teaching, to cite a few. Some of these texts work at a local level, exploring the history of women in a specific town or locality.

50 Three volumes—two of them written with the support of NGOs—have started to explore the history of women and gender in the regions of Semberija, Bratunac (Eastern Bosnia) and Banja Luka (Northern Bosnia); Tanja Lazić, Ljubinka Vukašinović and Radmila Žigić, eds., Žene u istoriji Semberije (Bijeljina: Organizacija žena Lara, 2012); Mensura Mustaﬁć, Žene u vremenu, Donne nel tempo (Sarajevo: Forum
ers deal with the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, situated in the broader Yugoslav region. A few months before the publication of this book, a new book by Adnan Jahić on the Muslim woman question in post-Ottoman Bosnia offered a rich overview of the gender politics of Bosnian Islamic religious institutions, and deeply enriched our knowledge on this topic. Moreover, new scholarship has allowed us to establish what happened to Muslim women in the Yugoslav region in the broader context of the Balkans, and the post-Ottoman and post-Habsburg regions.

The Book’s Structure

This book is structured in seven parts, organized according to chronological and thematic criteria. The first two chapters examine the first forty years of post-Ottoman Bosnia, when the region became a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After focusing on the Habsburg public sphere's representations of Bosnia, the first chapter will take stock of Vienna’s educational policies implemented in the region, as well as the parallel development of a local associational culture. Special attention will be given to the role and position of Muslim women, and how some of them succeeded in navigating between the expectations of Bosnian Muslim society, those of the Habsburg authorities, and their own, to build a new kind of cultural capital altogether. In continuation with this line of reasoning, Chapter Two will address the debate on the Muslim woman question that was taking shape in Bosnia, and more
broadly in the Yugoslav region on the eve of the twentieth century. Special attention is dedicated to the transnational circulation of people and ideas that shaped this debate, involving both Europe and the Middle East, and on the specific role of the thin cohort of women who managed to play a part in it. These first two chapters highlight one of the major arguments of this book: that debating appropriate Muslim gender relations was a way to discuss the fate of the Muslim community as a whole, in the post-Ottoman, European context.

In the political and social turmoil that accompanied the end of the Great War and the creation of the first Yugoslavia, there was a transformation in Muslim women’s engagement in the public space. They did not simply limit themselves to written contributions in the press, or to support for associations in the form of donations, as they had done up until that point; they also engaged in volunteering, becoming physically visible in the Bosnian and gradually Yugoslav public space, in cities and in villages. For some of them, this open challenge to the rules of sexual and confessional segregation that were still being enforced at that time was also accompanied by a renegotiation, and sometimes the complete abandonment, of the veiling practice. Chapter Three addresses this crucial shift, focusing in particular on the presence of Muslim women in cultural, philanthropic and feminist associations, in Bosnia but also in the two main university cities of the country, Zagreb and Belgrade. This new situation required both men and women to find new words and ideas to describe and address it; Chapter Four thus looks at the radical reconfiguration of the Muslim woman question in the associational press during the 1920s and 1930s. If, until the Great War, discussions on this topic essentially revolved around the contents of, spaces for and limits of female education, after 1918 many new issues were added to the debate, such as the place of Muslim women in the national community. Even if different references were mobilized by the activists of these associations, the written words they produced had one strong common theme: that of fostering a growing inclusion of Muslim women in the forming Yugoslav social fabric. Here again, the idea that the Muslim population was living as a backward minority in Europe, and for that reason in need of change and progress, structured the whole debate. However, in their mission to promote their competing ideas of appropriate post-Ottoman gender rules, associations did not uniquely limit themselves to putting pen to paper, they
actively strove to put these ideas into practice. Chapter Five thus focusses on the gender politics implemented by the associations, including the establishment of vocational schools and student dorms, workshops, literacy courses, scholarship etc., and how these measures were modulated according to class variables. Among these initiatives, special attention will be given to the festive culture that the associations cultivated in the interwar years. As a matter of fact, Muslim women invested a great deal of time and energy in this apparently un-political domain of activity, using it to increase their individual and collective responsibility and visibility. For this reason, Chapter Six is dedicated to an analysis of associational festivities as a tool for the empowerment of Muslim women.

The last chapter of this book will focus on the second half of the 1930s, a short time lapse in which several major changes occurred. Shaped by radical shifts happening both in Europe and the Middle East, two new political forces gained visibility in Muslim and Yugoslav society: the communists and the Islamic revivalists. Despite taking up starkly opposing positions on virtually every issue on their agenda, these political forces had at least two points in common: they considered Muslim women to play a crucial role in their projects of social transformation; and they assigned to the voluntary association, until then considered to be a bourgeois, progressive and intrinsically liberal institution, the crucial role of spreading their ideas to the Muslim population. For this reason, Chapter Seven compares the approaches and discourses of these two political forces, and more precisely looks at how, on the eve of the Second World War, they proposed new alternatives to the political and social crisis shaking Yugoslavia and Europe.