CHAPTER 7

UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

In the second half of the 1930s, the network of voluntary associations that had developed throughout Yugoslavia saw a series of new phenomena, shaped by changes at an international, national, and Muslim community level. After almost fifteen years of being marginalized from the political arena, communist militants, despite the ban that still weighed on their party, found the resources to come out of the shadows and elaborate new strategies for gaining ground in Yugoslav society. In order to face the steady authoritarian course that both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the whole of Europe was on, militants of the Yugoslav Communist Party began to see middle-class voluntary associations with new eyes: instead of dismissing them as an expression of the bourgeoisie, these organizations were now seen as a space that was relatively protected from the state’s control, and that could be used to spread their ideas and recruit fresh forces to the revolutionary cause. The effort of influencing, and sometimes taking control of, voluntary associations—a process usually described by scholarship as “infiltration”—had tangible outcomes, such as transformations in the agenda, discourse and practices of certain existing associations, including those in which Muslim women were usually enrolled. In the same years in which the Communist Party was lifting its head, however, a different phenomenon was also emerging from within the Muslim community. Inspired by different contemporary social movements both in the Middle East and Yugoslavia, Muslim revivalist forces decided to play a different, more active role in the public space, and to organize. To this purpose, in the second half of the 1930s they established a Muslim associational network that extended to the main towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from which they could disseminate
their own message. Clearly modeled on existing Muslim cultural associations, but led by the *ulema*, this organization rapidly refined its goal: in a Yugoslav society that was becoming more and more secularized, and in which the communal boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims were fading away, revivalists wanted to put Islam back at the core of the public space. In promoting this re-Islamisation of Muslim society in Yugoslavia, they did not hesitate to use and appropriate the vast array of tools and practices elaborated by progressive associations in the previous decades, and to put them to the service of a sensibly different project.

**Hijacking Bourgeois Organizations**

As we saw in Chapter Two, after the Great War the Yugoslav Communist Party had good results at the election for the Constituent Assembly of the Kingdom SHS. However, the enthusiasm sparked by this victory was short-lived. As early as December 1920, the Yugoslav government issued a decree outlawing the party, as well as the press and the trade union close to it, rapidly dismantling the fragile network that the communists had been starting to build across the county. The decree’s enforcement, rapidly followed by other measures aiming to repress the communist presence in the country, was the prelude for more than a decade of communist marginalization. Moreover, the royal dictatorship, which aimed in general to curtail all political forces perceived to be anti-state, even worsened their position; the state’s control over factories, legal trade unions, schools, and the press became even stronger than before, making the communists’ clandestine activities more and more difficult, and drastically reducing the number of communist activists and supporters. In the early 1930s, this organizational weakness was particularly evident where women were at stake: according to Jovanka Kecman, women represented no more than 1% of activists supporting the party’s clandestine activities in Yugoslavia, while the number of women enrolled in the trade union reached no more than 2000, out of a total of 28,500 members, or less than 10%. These figures, which were discussed in clandestine meetings throughout the country, brought the party activists before

a regretful reality: despite stressing the need for more women party-mem-
ers, the spread of communist ideas among women, and their enrollment in
the party had only extremely limited progress.

In the mid-1930s, several major political events both outside and inside
the country created the conditions for an improvement of the Communist
Party’s position. The aforementioned deadly attack against King Aleksan-
dar in Marseille on October 9, 1934, carried out by Macedonian indepen-
dentists, and backed by Croatian independentists and Fascist Italy, meant
an at least partial thawing of the dictatorship in Yugoslavia. The re-establish-
ment of political parties, and consequently of parliamentary life, favoured
the re-opening of some spaces for public discussion, though often only af-
ter close and sometimes paranoid surveillance by the Yugoslav state. In the
same months, a significant shift also happened inside the communist move-
ment on a global scale. Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, immediately accompa-
nied by an unprecedented rise in brutality against political opponents in the
country and by an aggressive attitude on the international arena, convinced
the communist leadership that a radical change in strategy was called for.
The moment that formalized this change of direction was the seventh Con-
gress of the Comintern, held in Moscow between July 25 and August 20,
1935. Breaking with what had been done until that time, the representatives
of the sixty-odd parties making up the Communist International launched
the policy of the so-called “Popular Fronts.” According to this new strategy,
communist parties were instructed to form broad alliances with other anti-
fascist political forces in their own country in order to create a cordon sani-
taire against pro-fascist forces, secure some kind of social advance at home,
and a military alliance with the Soviet Union.

In Yugoslavia, insofar as the Communist Party was still banned from
political life, this strategic shift did not bring about the creation of true po-
itical alliances, as happened for instance in France and Spain. In this spe-
cific context, the Popular Front policy rather led to a change in communist
strategy toward voluntary organizations. Still then considered, and openly
denigrated, as bourgeois organizations par excellence, and for this reason
unable and unwilling to bring about progress beyond the restricted cir-

3 Nielsen, Making Yugoslavs, 207–38.
cle of the urban middle class, voluntary associations began to be looked at with new eyes. As organizations that were essentially independent from an authoritarian State, in the 1930s associations began to be seen as a potential “free zone,” from which the communist ideal might be spread and activists recruited, a sort of surrogate organization in a period in which the party was still banned from public life. Cultural, musical and sporting associations, which brought together an urban educated elite mostly composed of teachers and students, began to be seen as a privileged way to reach out to the country’s intelligentsia and to radicalize their quest for social change. Philanthropic associations, whose very raison d’être was to help and discipline the urban poor, were excellent sites from which the most unprivileged sections of urban society might be reached and politicised. Last but not least, feminine and feminist associations had the potential to be able to address half of the Yugoslav population; still excluded from full civil and political rights, women thus were seen as having good reason to call for a radical social transformation. For these reasons, associational branches and all the institutions established in their perimeter in the previous decades—student dorms, journals, libraries, workshops, etc.—became for the communist activists a battleground for resisting fascism and preparing the revolution.

The communist effort to gain the minds and hearts of the Yugoslav youth had of course to be pursued with the greatest care and circumspection. The state, and more precisely the Ministry of the Interior, but also the Ministry of Education—which, during the interwar period, was responsible for monitoring all cultural institutions in the country, and schools in particular—put a great deal of energy into rooting out and suppressing alleged anti-state activity. As has been thoroughly demonstrated in Yugoslav historiography, police officials often participated in associations’ sessions, and monitored activists’ activities—including apparently less political initiatives, such as picnics and parties. In several cases, when the local authorities felt that they had gathered enough evidence of communist allegiance in an association, they did not hesitate to close it and arrest the activists.\(^5\) Repression was of course not the only way to prevent the youth from joining the ranks of communist activists and sympathizers. The state also invested its energies into

reinforcing the existence of competing associational networks, and in particular the Yugoslav Sokol Union, the gymnastic association that under King Aleksandar’s dictatorship became an organ for strengthening Yugoslavist and royalist loyalties among the youth. However, this last strategy appears to have come up against one sizeable shortcoming: the association was unable to recruit members beyond the Orthodox Serbian population.\(^6\)

Muslim activists of both sexes involved in voluntary associations were also touched by this wave of sympathy for communist ideas. The two main cultural associations, Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica, as one of the principal sites where the educated Muslim elite gathered, showed a clear degree of permeability to Communist activists. According to existing scholarship—which nevertheless admits the difficulty of measuring the actual extent of communist support—in 1936, Gajret reading rooms in Poračić and Koraj were already substantially controlled by activists with communist sympathies. Approximately in the same period, even Gajret’s different associational offshoots in Mostar followed the same path.\(^7\) Attraction for communist ideas also spilled into other kinds of Muslim associations: by the mid-1930s philanthropic associations like Muslimanska Zajednica (Muslim Community) in Zenica, Merhamet (Compassion) in Livno, or Muslim reading rooms such as Brazda (Furrow) in Teslić, as well as Bratstvo (Brotherhood) in the Vratnik district of Sarajevo, were already under the control of communist sympathizers.\(^8\) Far from becoming hegemonic, the spread of communist sympathies was nevertheless a significant phenomenon that touched important segments of the Muslim associational network.

The Muslim branches where communist sympathies appear to have been the most visible were of course those in Zagreb and Belgrade, largely animated by university students. The local Zagreb branch of Narodna Uzdanica, chiefly composed of university students from Bosnia, underwent

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significant changes in 1935. The year, the JMO made the decision to leave the opposition and join the government: this situation resulted in new poles forming within the local branch. Muslim students in Zagreb, who had traditionally been openly pro-Croat, made no attempt to hide their growing support for the Croat Peasant Party, thereby distancing themselves from the main Muslim party and its decision to form a government with Serb centrists. Meanwhile, another active group of Narodna Uzdanica scholarship-winners became acquainted with the communist ideas that were already being widely circulated among academic circles in Zagreb. Seizing the moment, in 1935 two leftist students of this group managed to get themselves elected as secretaries, and in 1936 they represented the branch at the association’s annual assembly. Though representatives from the central branch in Sarajevo were sent to Zagreb on several occasions, including president Mulabdić himself in order to reconcile the parties, the conflict between leftist and peasant party supporters continued to shake the local Zagreb branch of Narodna Uzdanica until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The tangible increase in communist sympathizers among the Muslim youth involved in associational life was received by Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica’s leadership with a great deal of concern. This was particularly evident in 1936, when the first large-scale strike was successfully organized by secondary-school students in Sarajevo. Strikes of this kind, mixing very practical requests for better living-conditions in schools and student dorms with anti-authoritarian political demands both in Yugoslavia and in Europe, became more and more common in the second half of the 1930s. Members of Gajret’s central branch increased their vigilance against this form of politicisation among secondary-school and university students. In 1937, at the Annual Meeting in Sarajevo, Gajret’s secretary felt the need to warn the activists to protect the Muslim youth from dangerous exposure to the “con-

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9 Hasanbegović, Muslimani u Zagrebu, 104–6.
11 Hasanbegović, Muslimani u Zagrebu, 104; 108.
temporary ideas of the world,” and to call for each associational branch to carefully monitor the circulation of communist ideas among the pupils. That same year, the central branch felt obliged to issue a special regulation for its student dorms across the country, explicitly asking the directors to quell the spread of communist ideas. Moreover, the participation of a Gajret pupil in street protests was invariably punished with expulsion from the student dorm or the suspension of their scholarship.

The Muslim cultural associations’ offensive against the spread of communist sympathies did not stop at internal repression. They also developed an ideological offensive that aimed to curb the success of Marxism among the educated youth. In the late 1930s, texts that directly or indirectly attacked the theoretical basis of communism abounded in the press. Interestingly, in doing so the cultural associations did not hesitate to enlist conservative ulama, showcasing their publications in the associational press. One example is a text by Mustafa Busuladžić (1914–1945), educated at the Gazi-Husrevbeg medresa in Sarajevo, and published in the 1937 Gajret Yearbook. The text, which is eloquently entitled “Islamic Socialism,” had a broad goal: to defend the primacy of religion, and of Islam in particular, over philosophy, and address the materialist system of thought that structures Marxism. Interestingly, this medresa graduate opened his dissertation by referring to Russian thinkers, in particular to the anti-Boshevik existentialist philosopher Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev and the writer Leo Tolstoy; a clear sign that Busuladžić knew he was speaking to a audience with a secular education, nourished by cultural references that were not necessarily Islamic. The core of the author’s argument is that Muslims, the people who received the revelation through the Quran, do not need socialism. By quoting a series of hadiths and suras, as well as texts by classical Islamic thinkers such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun, the author aimed to demonstrate that equality lay at the very core of Islam, thus implying that young Muslims who felt the need for greater equality in society should look not to socialism, but to Islam. “Islam is in its essence socialism,” Busuladžić went on to say, and “Muhamed a.s. had a deep social sensibility.” Busuladžić argued that the best proof that equal-

14 HAS, G4, Gajretov ženskog konvikt, GOG to Gajret student dorms (1937).
ity is intrinsic to Islam is the importance assigned to the institution of zek-
jat, ritual alms for the poor and one of the five pillars of Islam, or the prohibi-
tion against taking out interest on loans; the combination of these precepts
were, to his mind, sufficient antidote against the concentration of money in
the hands of a single person or family, and thus against the basis of capital-
ism. In this respect, for Muslims Marxism was thus an unnecessary emanci-
patory ideology.

**Signing for Change**

How exactly did this competition between communists, the associational
leadership and the state, to win over the Yugoslav youth play out? Were
Muslim women, in Bosnian towns or in the university cities, somehow in-
volved in this process of “infiltration”? Searching for answers to these ques-
tions is not easy. First of all, there are the objective difficulties of measur-
ing a phenomenon that was carried out informally and in secrecy as one of
its preconditions for existence. Secondly, Yugoslav historiography of the so-
cialist period generally tends to exaggerate the influence of communist mil-
itants over interwar voluntary associations, often stating for ideological rea-
sons that entire segments of Yugoslav civil society were firmly under the
control of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, if we abandon the idea of
finding a quantitative answer to this question, and decide to focus instead
on the more qualitative aspects, several remarks can be made.

One of the possible starting points for this enquiry are the universities,
and in particular the two higher-education institutions that the vast major-
ity of Muslim students attended in the late 1930s: the universities of Zagreb
and Belgrade. Even if, as will be demonstrated in the following paragraph,
the former had its own very active leftist groups, it was in the latter that the
stronghold of a radical student movement close to the Communist Youth
(*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*) could be found. The radicaliza-
tion that this university’s population underwent was deeply linked to the
social transformations occurring in the interwar period. Between 1921 and
1931, Belgrade saw striking demographic and urban developments, jump-
ing from a population of 112,000 in 1921 to almost 240,000 in 1931. This
rapid increase in the city’s population also made class differences in the ur-
ban space increasingly visible: the downtown district, where institutional
buildings and bourgeois residences were showcased, was rapidly flanked by poor neighbourhoods. In this changing urban landscape, university students became an important component of the urban social structure. Student dorms, including that of the association Gajret Osman Đikić, where the majority of Bosnian Muslim students of both sexes were housed at that time, were also situated in the pulsing heart of the Yugoslav capital. As has been demonstrated by scholarship, student dorms were extremely important institutions for the socialization and politicization of young women: in them, free from the tutelage of their families and communities, they joined and participated in an extremely intellectually fertile and socially diverse milieu.¹⁷ For many students, coming from the smallest and/or remotest towns, setting foot in these universities represented an opportunity to be exposed to a world beyond Serbia and Yugoslavia for the first time.

An openly leftist student movement was already visible in the University of Belgrade in the 1920s. Students had first mobilized to protect the administrative autonomy of the university, while at the same time asking for better living conditions for the students, especially the poorer ones or those who came from the countryside. With the proclamation of the royal dictatorship in 1929, the movement acquired more marked political leanings, and had been organizing strikes since 1931 against the authoritarian turn taken by the state, and also—as a consequence of the Great Depression—expressing frustration about the difficulty of finding employment comparable to the education they had received. The expression of this dissatisfaction increasingly assumed Marxist tones: by the early 1930s, in the universities of the Yugoslav kingdom it was not unusual to receive clandestine flyers rejoicing the ongoing “crisis of capitalism,” denouncing Yugoslavia as “a capitalist, more in general fascist, dictatorship,” while at the same time shouting a “hurrah to the Third International, principal guide of world revolution.”¹⁸ In the second half of the 1930s, the student movement found in university classrooms, student dorms, literary and other associations their principal meeting-places. As has been highlighted by a huge amount of scholarship, participants in this movement were ideologically close to communist ideas, and some of them were also enrolled in communist organizations like the Com-

munist Youth. Through them, it was able to enlarge its platform: the movement, in which female students were very active, added demands for female suffrage to agenda, and more in general for an end to the unequal legal treatment to which women in Yugoslavia were still subjected.¹⁹ As a consequence of efforts by the state and the university authorities to isolate these forces within the university, tensions increased and the conflict also had its victims: three students were killed, both by fascist groups and the gendarmerie.²⁰

Prima facie, the dozen Muslim girls that left Bosnia and Herzegovina at that time to pursue a university education in the university cities, and in particular in Belgrade, were not at the frontline of the movement. The few traces of Muslim women participating in strikes, street demonstrations, or the student associations that are usually considered to have been the closest to the Communist Party and to the Communist Youth are extremely weak. There are neither Muslim names among the dozens of women that, with 1600 volunteers, left for Spain to join the fight against fascism, nor among the female students arrested for subversive propaganda in the Yugoslav capital.²¹ It seems, however, that the first Muslim women to study at university chose a different method: they signed public petitions along with their comrades from Bosnia. According to several sources under the directive of the Communist Party and its youth organization, in December 1937, March 1938, and December 1939, a group of Bosnian students published three open letters signed by more than five hundred students of each confessional group and of both sexes that had been printed and circulated clandestinely. If we pay careful attention to these three documents, we see a steady increase in the number of Muslim women among the petitioners. In the first petition, out of 380 Bosnian student signatories, 97 were Muslim and 2 of them—Fatima Brkić and Hiba Šerbić—were women.²² In the third one, signed by 509 students from 66 different locations throughout Bosnia, and more precisely by 179 Muslim students, ten of them were female students.²³ These are of course small numbers, but are suggestive of a growing involvement. What's more, if we then cross-check the names of

¹⁹ Kecman, Žene Jugoslavije, 266–311.
²¹ Kecman, Žene Jugoslavije, 397–404.
²² Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 236.
²³ Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 238–9.
the Muslim female petitioners against the registers of Belgrade-based Ga-

jret Osman Đikić, we find additional information: in the case of the 1937
case of the 1937 public letter, more than half of Muslim students, including the two young
women, had studied (or were studying) in Belgrade thanks to the associa-
tion. In 1937 the number of female Muslims who, thanks to the dormitory,
were able to attend the Yugoslav capital’s high schools and university rose
to almost thirty.24

Even though they were written in years in which the political situation
was undergoing rapid changes, both inside and beyond the borders of Yugo-
slavia, these petitions seem to bear several common traits. Firstly, a preoc-
cupation with events occurring on the international arena, and especially
with the rise of the Axis powers in Europe. Yugoslavia’s shift in international
alliances in that period—from a traditional partner of France and England
to an ally of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, a process particularly visible
under the ministry of Milan Stojadinović (1935–1939)—was cause for con-
sternation. However, the episode that most stirred Yugoslav students’ at-
tention and contributed to a general radicalization of their positions was
the Spanish Civil War.25 In the following years, the Austrian Anschluss in
March 1938, and even more the unilateral Nazi annexation of Czechoslova-
kia’s northern and western border regions in September 1938—a country
with whom Yugoslav students had nourished friendly relations and many
exchanges26—transformed anxiety into rage, a rage equally shared against
the Axis Powers and the leaders of the liberal democracies, who had de-
cided to abandon the Slavic country to its fate. In its description of the in-
ternational situation, and of a war that has already touched the heart of Eu-
urope, the document celebrates Soviet Russia, designated as the only foreign
country authentically seeking for peace, in contrast with the other countries
in the service of capital (France, England and the US) or aggressive national-
ism (Germany, Italy, Japan). In the text, Russia is celebrated as the pro-
tector of the little people of the Balkans against the aggression of the Axis
powers, while the so-called liberal countries have already sacrificed Spain,
Austria, Czechoslovakia, Albania and China. The injustices committed by the great powers on a global scale were mirrored by another violence, this time against Bosnia and its population, on a Yugoslav scale. In the 1937 open letter in particular, university students from Bosnia denounced what they called “bourgeois anti-popular forces”—meaning the Serbian, Croatian and Muslim parties of that time—who with their constant rivalries had doomed Yugoslav society to conflict and had neglected the needs of the vast majority of the population—the youth, the workers, and the peasants. The tone of the 1939 open letter is even more tragic, given the changing political context. As already mentioned, on August 26, 1939, the Yugoslav prime minister Dragiša Cvetković and a Croat politician, Vladko Maček, signed an agreement that intended to solve once and for all the demands for autonomy of the Croatian political elite. The agreement established a Governorate of Croatia, an autonomous Croatian entity in Yugoslavia which was specifically intended to include as many ethnic Croats as possible, whose borders had mostly been drawn at the expense of the integrity of Bosnian territory. In reaction to this measure, taken without consulting the Bosnians themselves and used as a stop-gap solution to an internal conflict, the students—referring to themselves as “young brothers and comrades,” “Serbian, Croatian and Muslim youth!”—asked for a new agreement that would recognize the autonomy of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a democratization of Yugoslav political life.

Another common trait that these documents share is the desire of the university youth to participate, and to make their voices heard, in a period in which Europe was running toward tragedy. In the words of the 1939 open letter, “While millions of working people are unnecessarily spilling their blood we, sons of the people, educated youth, we want to have our say on the events happening around us, and on the risks we run.” Small and marginal as these signatures might seem, they nevertheless suggest that Muslim female students in the capital city saw the same process of politicization as the rest of the population.

27 AJ, 66, 75, 208, Third Open letter of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Student Youth (Zagreb-Belgrade, December 1, 1939).
28 AJ, 66, 75, 208.
Gendering Infiltration

Besides the issue of measuring the true dimensions of this infiltration, an issue that has been neglected by historiography is the gender dimension of this process. What were the consequences on gender discourse and practices when the branch of an association turned red? What was the role of Muslim women in this process? Two relatively well-documented case studies can give us several clues as to the gendered dimension of infiltration.

The most striking example of a Gajret local branch taken over by communist sympathizers is probably the Mostar case. The ways in which this process happened are deeply linked to local circumstances. As we have already seen in Chapter One, this branch had been established since the Habsburg period in the principal Herzegovinian city. In 1928, the city also saw the establishment of a Popular Muslim Library (Muslimanska narodna biblioteka), established for, and run by middle-school pupils. A few years later, the library associated itself with the local Gajret branch, thus joining the network of the country’s main Muslim cultural association. Renamed Gajret’s Library (Gajretova Biblioteka) following this shift, this organization (which maintained separate elected charges) became the hub of associational life in Mostar, not only for Muslims but for the population as a whole. From the mid-1930s, a group of university students that had recently returned from Belgrade was elected to the library’s governing committee.29 Using the popularity of the library in town, these young men managed to get their delegates elected into the local branch of the association, and even to have one sent to the yearly assembly in Sarajevo. Three founding experiences united the members of the group of students who managed to take control of the Mostar Gajret branch: they had spent several years in Belgrade as university students, and had been hosted by the association’s dorm, and they were already well-known as left-wing and antifascist activists.30

Under its new management, the library radically expanded the scope of its activities. First, the library acquired several dozen Marxist texts, thereby contributing to acquainting several thousand library users with commu-

29 Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 219.
nist ideas. A range of activities were also organized, including parties, plays, concerts, lectures and extra classes for middle-school pupils. Given that the majority of middle-school teachers in the city were also library members, families—even those opposed to Gajret and its post-1936 political line—were happy to send their children to this institution. With more than 1000 members, the library became “the largest institution in terms of visitors and members in pre-war Mostar.”

High on the library’s agenda were women, and in particular—given their extremely high illiteracy rates—their education. Domestic sciences and literacy classes were organized, as well as talks on specific subjects. Though the association’s usual cultural tools were used, the library was pioneering in terms of the topics it broached. For example, lessons and informal meetings focused on domestic and international politics (particularly of the Soviet Union), women’s political rights and Clara Zetkin’s ideas on the emancipation of women. The association’s ability to build relationships with other associations and local institutions—such as Seljačko Kolo (Peasant Circle) and pupils living at the Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica boarding houses—suggests that these new topics may have circulated well beyond the thousands of library members. Besides this, it also seems that under the new management Muslim women became increasingly involved in the running of the associational library. From 1938 a sizeable group of women, including a number of Muslims, worked their way into the managing committee. In addition to the ten or so non-Muslim schoolteachers, there were also almost a hundred Muslim students who were at or had graduated from the local secondary school; this group included the most active supporters of the association until the outbreak of the Second World War. At least three Muslim university students became part of the library’s managing committee: Nedžida Hadžić-Novak, who graduated in law in Belgrade and who was probably the first female provincial judge; and Bisera Pužić and Fatima

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33 Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 219.
Brkić, who both studied medicine. All these women lived in Belgrade during their university years and Brkić at least boarded at the Belgrade branch of the association.

The unconventional activities of the Mostar branch were a grave concern for the Gajret central branch in Sarajevo. In 1937 the local branch openly attacked the association’s management, accusing it of centralist politics and being “detached from the population” because of its nationalist stance. In consequence of this, Gajret’s president Hasanbegović decided to appoint Besim Korkut as director of the student dorm in Mostar, in order to strengthen monitoring of the branch. The appointment of the latter, who had previously taught religion at the institute, sparked an all-out war between the central and local branches. Maintaining that employing a religious studies teacher as director would result in the students receiving a “reactionary education,” the local branch openly violated the associa-

35 Konjhodžić, Mostarke, 35–8.
36 SANU, 14411, Kartoteka studenata Beogradskog Gajreta.
37 ABiH, FG, 20, 616, MPG Mostar to GOG, (1937, undated).
38 HAS, G4, Zapisnik Plenarne sjednice Glavnog odbora Gajreta (October 27, 1937).
tion’s statutes and independently appointed Ismet Milavić, a former resident of Belgrade-based Gajret Osman Đikić, as director of the boarding house. Within the local branch, disputes between supporters and opponents of Korkut became violent, causing quite a stir in the newspapers. By late October 1937, the central branch recognized the eminently political and antifascist nature of some of the branch and the library’s initiatives: from Sarajevo they decreed the chapter dissolved and sent the police and representatives of the central branch to the scene. This decision did not have the desired effect. The library group was so well established that it proved impossible to expel them from their elected seats. In August 1938, the central branch was forced to admit to the presence of communist supporters in the newly-elected local chapter, which, though under police control, remained active until the outbreak of the Second World War. 39

The Banja Luka branch of Ženski Pokret (active from 1935) is a second example of an association that gradually assumed pro-communist leanings. The situation in Banja Luka caught the attention of the press and the state authorities alike. As Mitar Papić tells it, ever since the siege of the Vrbas governorate in 1931, the city’s school network had been growing rapidly. 40 In 1933, following a rise in the number of pupils attending secondary school, Kolo Srpskih Sestara opened its first boarding house for girls in the city, which housed twenty or so girls of mixed faiths each year. 41

When we take a closer look at the activities of the feminist branch of Ženski Pokret in Banja Luka, it is clear that over time the feminist and communist agendas gradually began to blend into one another. Events which in a certain sense characterised the feminist struggles of the time—such as the Yugoslavia-wide demonstrations for women’s suffrage in 1935 and 1939, and conferences on civil law reform for better equality—were increasingly held alongside other events related to international communism. According to Perko Vojnović, Ženski Pokret activists regularly got involved in activities that would happily have fallen into the category of International Red Aid: for instance, fundraising support for communist political prisoners in Yugoslavia and for help the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. 42 The merging of feminism and

39 Konjhodžić, Mostarke, 38.
40 Papić, Školstvo u Bosni (1918–1941), 115.
42 Vojinović, “Ženski Pokret”, 115.
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communism is also apparent in the branch’s social calendar. From 1935 until the outbreak of the Second World War, Ženski Pokret celebrated the International Day of Peace every November; from 1937, Women’s Day (March 8) and Labour Day (May 1) were also celebrated. Labour Day was celebrated as Dan prijateljela priroda, “Day of the Friends of Nature,” to circumvent police prohibitions: outings in the countryside, which were very popular among women, were the perfect opportunity for socialising and political debate. 43

In an interview given several decades later on the activities of the association, activist Stana Kušmić gave a precious personal account of the specific atmosphere of those years. She remembers thus the activities of the association’s festivities for International Women’s Day in 1940, held at the Hotel Bosnia, with the participation of the association’s choir:

In addition to the “Women’s hymn,” other songs were also performed, all of them from the Soviet Union. In the planning of the program several members distinguished themselves by their active engagement i.e. Ajša Karabegović, Boško Košanović, his sister who danced the Spanish dance, Kata Djin who recited a poem with the following lines: “you are not invited to go to the ball/there go the girls of the upper classes/You do not know what the foxtrot or the tango are/since you come from the popular classes.” The police gave her a fine for that. The party was swarming with police officers who finally forbade the party’s opening address. All former Yugoslav army officers were invited to leave, on the grounds that it was a communist party.44

The association’s dynamism not only caught the attention of the police (which constantly monitored the association and even banned certain events), but also the leaders of Alijansa, the aforementioned federation of women’s and feminist associations in which Ženski Pokret was involved. In 1939 the head of the federation openly complained about the overtly antifascist nature of demonstrations organized by the Banja Luka branch of Ženski Pokret.45

Documents and printed sources related to the Banja Luka branch of Ženski Pokret show that three Muslim women—Fahira Fejzagić, Ajša Karabegović, and Boško Košanović—were actively involved in the association’s activities.46

43 Vojinović, “Ženski Pokret”, 122.
45 Vojinović, “Ženski Pokret,” 114.
begović and Vahida Maglajlić—took part in associational activities, alongside a majority of non-Muslim activists. While there is no information that enables us to determine the role, education and social class of two of these women with any degree of certainty, we know that the third, Vahida Maglajlić (April 17, 1907–April 1, 1943), was “first secretary and then president of the Banja Luka Ženski Pokret,”46 and a great deal of information on her does exist. Vahida distinguished herself, and died, during the Second World War on the partisans’ side and she is therefore documented in numerous publications. The first-born of a Banja Luka kadija, Vahida received a standard education for her time: mekteb, primary school and then a school for female handiwork. According to accounts gathered after her death, when she started to be celebrated as a socialist national hero, it appears that as a young girl Vahida wanted to follow in the footsteps of her younger brother Ekrem and go to study in Zagreb. This her father opposed, as he believed “there is no need to send daughters [to study] away from home,”47 and Va-

46 Vojinović, “Ženski Pokret”, 114.
47 Beoković, Žene heroji, 183.
hida was forced to stay in Banja Luka, where she became strongly involved in local associations. Communist ideas probably entered the Maglalić household through Ekrem, who studied at the University of Zagreb and was a supporter of the Communist Party. In a volume of memoirs dedicated to his older sister, Ekrem writes that he used to send her books, pamphlets and letters so that she could participate, as much as possible, in the political and intellectual climate of Zagreb.48

From her mother’s, brother’s and childhood friends’ accounts, one gleans a picture of a life in which revolutionary ideas went hand in hand with small domestic revolutions, as well as arguments with her kadija father about clothing, lifestyle and taking charge of her own body and mobility. As her brother Ekrem recounts:

When in 1931 I returned to my parents’ house after a particularly long time away, I immediately noticed that a revolution had taken place in relation to my family’s lifestyle. As soon as I stepped inside I noticed that the table was laid with ceramic plates, one for each member of the family. I was astonished and asked myself what on earth could have persuaded my father to get rid of his beloved sofra. It was Vahida.49

A transformation of the public space was often accompanied by transformations in dress and in body culture more in general. As recalls again Vahida’s brother, the veil question was at the very centre of conflicts between the girl and her father: “My father had been very tough on this—continues Ekrem Maglalić—but in the end Vahida won.” The question was not only whether she should veil herself or not, but how she should cut her hair and whether she should wear her clothes according to Western fashions:

I remember that at a certain point she decided to cut her hair: following her example, other friends and family members also cut theirs. For my father and grandmother this decision was a complete tragedy, particularly since other women in the family were following her example. Nobody was able to persuade her that cutting her hair was something of which she ought to be ashamed.50

49 Beoković, Žene heroji, 187.
50 Beoković, Žene heroji, 190.
This corpus of memories, that stressed so much the importance of generational factors in explaining the different attitudes toward these changes in personal and family life, also reveals unexpected solidarities between Muslim women of different generations. As stated later on by Vahida Maglajlić’s brother:

To try and make her see sense, my mother and grandmother took her to visit aunt Ziza. She was the eldest woman in the family and well-respected and esteemed by the district as a whole. When she saw Vahida with her new haircut, Ziza turned to the two women who had accompanied her and said, “don’t look at her like that. In our time we did what was right, today things have changed. Every era has its own style!”

New forms of engagement in the public space were therefore associated with small revolutions in the private sphere, each mutually legitimizing and reinforcing the other.

**Bringing Class into the Woman Question**

In these years of fervent left-wing activism in Bosnia and in the main university cities of the country, it is also possible to register the development of a new approach to the Muslim woman question. The melting-pot for this largely original approach to the issue was Zagreb, a city whose student population grew from 2,800 in 1920, to almost 7,000 on the eve of the Second World War, and where in the late 1930s there were almost sixty different student organizations and clubs. In female student associations, readings of the evergreens of socialist feminism like Zetkin and August Bebel were alternated with more recent biographies of Soviet women, thus putting them on an equal footing with inspiring figures for the younger generations. Immersed in these texts, students of both sexes were often fascinated by the women perceived to be the most backward and enslaved in the country: Muslim women. Vera Erlich for instance, at that time teaching anthropology and psychology at the University of Zagreb, recalls how the issue of Muslim family relationships in rural areas, and more precisely of Muslim women, considered as “enslaved,” was

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51 Beoković, *Žene heroji*, 190.
52 Pavlaković, “Radicalization,” 491.
a topic that regularly haunted the conversations with her fellow-students. In this city Muslim male students from Bosnia influenced by Marxism strove to create a new discourse on the Muslim woman question, taking in account not only gender and confessional variables, but also class. The journal that in this period gave the strongest contribution to the recharging of the Muslim woman question was, beyond any doubt, the magazine *Putokaz* (Signpost), published in Zagreb between 1937 and 1939. The journal was established by left-wing Bosnian Muslim students who, from the publication’s outset, claimed to belong to a “third generation” of educated Muslims, in opposition to a first generation of the Habsburg period, and a second nationalist and bourgeois one active in the 1920s and early 1930s.

A first specific characteristic of this group is that they insisted a great deal on the importance of class variables in explaining the subaltern position of Muslim women in Yugoslavia. This idea modified the discourse on Muslim women developed until then, which so far had been implicitly limited to urban and middle-class populations, framing gender in a broader context. According to this group, women’s oppression was universal, but the different social classes had to be taken into account with it: “women’s slavery is not the same across all classes; the level of slavery changes according to class.” This group looked favorably, and with some curiosity, upon the Soviet gender policies being implemented in Central Asia, a region predominantly inhabited by Muslims. In any case, sympathy for the Soviet world and for left-wing solutions for the emancipation of Muslim women did not prevent this group from expressing admiration—again—for Kemalist gender politics, and from celebrating the “development of the Turkish woman” in every domain of public life.

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56 Rizo Ramić, “Tri generacije književnika muslimana,” *Putokaz*, no. 1 (1937): 17*. The page numbers for the *Putokaz* articles marked with a star (*) are not the original ones, but the those found in the reprint; Muhidin Džanko and Esed Karić, *Putokaz, književnohistorijska monografija* (Gradačac: Biblioteka Alija Isaković, 2006).
57 Mustafa Orlanović [pseud. for Benjović], “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” *Putokaz*, 6 (1938): 197*.
58 Fanina Halle, “Muslimanke dalekog istoka bude se...,” *Putokaz*, no. 6 (1938): 213-5*.
As one Putokaz article from 1938 put it, responsibility for the subordination (podređenost) of Muslim women should be assigned not to Islam in itself, nor to men’s patriarchal attitudes, but to a specific group defined in the text as the feudal class, i.e. the Muslim landowning families (begovat). According to the author, the Ottoman ruling families, in order to protect their family fortune and mark their social difference from field labourers, created a set of new gender roles upon which they built their own political hegemony. They “invented a closed family model and, in a bid to implement it, imposed restrictions on what women should wear and deprived women of their most basic rights in matrimony.”\(^{60}\) In order to reinforce their dominant status in Ottoman society, they “created new rules, which however went against religion, and suited them better,”\(^{61}\) including introducing compulsory veiling for women. Interestingly enough, the Putokaz circle seems here to recall the Islamic progressive argument that saw the veil as a non-religious garment (see Chapter Four).

Putokaz’s contributors seem to have acknowledged that 1878 was a year of crucial change for the Bosnian social order. Nevertheless, the arrival of the Habsburgs is not analysed in cultural terms as some kind of “new era” announcing a Muslim intellectual renaissance, but as the arrival in Bosnia of capitalism. As stated in the same article:

capitalism does not care about gender [spol], it does not care about age. It cares for more profit and it has no compassion for anyone or anything... [it] drags women and children into the production process, a cheaper work-force than men... [it] brings an end to the tradition of Muslim women having a strong connection with their families.\(^{62}\)

Under the capitalist system, traditional sexual and confessional segregation in Muslim urban society was fading away.

An unreserved contempt for urban upper- and middle-class women is expressed in the pages of Putokaz. As we read in the same article, Muslim women from the growing bourgeoisie “are human beings that do nothing, like

\(^{60}\) Mustafa Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” 195*.
\(^{61}\) Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” 195*.
\(^{62}\) Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” 198*.
a doll [lutka], a luxury object. They are parasites and even if they are educated
dey do not become productive members of human society.”63 Here again, we
can hear an echo of the omnipresent Orientalist arguments about Muslim
women—passivity, luxury, being an object in men’s hands—although here
the image is not applied to all Muslim women, but instead used to describe
upper-class women as a way to discredit the Muslim economic elite.

The group’s interest was openly oriented instead toward Muslim women
working in factories, where they “work alongside working-class women of
other faiths, they collaborate together, they share their lives and their goals”64
and especially Muslim peasant women. This shifting focus from the city to
the countryside made Putokaz’s contributors highly attuned to the interplay
between women’s and worker’s questions. The conditions of Muslim women
field workers was particularly criticized. In a 1937 text, a female contributor
to the journals offered a moving fictional portrait of Mejra, the ideal figure
of the Muslim woman peasant, described as a:

poor and wretched twenty-year old woman; close [to where she reaps], under
the walnut trees she can hear her child crying. A swarm of flies has covered
the stooping body of this poor creature whose bitter destiny was decided the
day she was born into a family of poor peasants. Oh, how much she would
love to pick up her child and feed him. How happy she would be to throw
away the sickle that has rubbed painful sores into her hands. She would do
all this. If it wasn’t for wretched Mujaga, whose half-closed eyes persistently
follow the reapers’ every move.

This short story sketches a poor Muslim woman who works in the coun-
tryside and who is distanced from maternal care due to her hard job. Her
 overseer is described as “once very rich,” now working for others—an exam-
ple of the economic decadence and marginalization that the Muslim elite
saw in post-Ottoman times.

“Look at how we are forced to live,” thinks Mejra. “We country women have
to work in the fields and at home, in the winter we weave all day until late at

63 Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” 201*.
64 Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke u Bosni,” 198*.
night, we have to feed and look after the children, while our husbands hardly
recognize, hardly see what we bear, what we suffer!” This is what Mejra
thinks and Mejra’s life is the life of Muslim women living in the country...
Our Muslim women are the worst sorts of slaves. They are enslaved in the
fields, enslaved in the home and enslaved by their husbands.65

The specific feature of the Muslim woman question, developed by this
group of university students, is tangible. Not only for the points raised
above, but also for those that were neglected. Indeed, this group was less
concerned with the veil question, and clearly considered it to be a mar-
ginal question. In February 1937 Safet Krupić, a philosophy student in Za-
greb and a regular contributor to Putokaz, advised Muslim women not to
get involved in “marginal and secondary issues like whether to wear a hat, a
fez or the veil, when economic, social, political and educational issues
were being ignored.”66 The strategy to improve these conditions and reach
the final objective of “freedom of and total equality between the sexes [slo-
boda i potpuna jednakost spolova]”67 was simple: “[Muslim women] must
join the rest of the working world in its struggle and awaken an inner sense
of class consciousness to tie together progress and freedom between the
sexes and oppressive types of work.”68 In other words, Muslim women
should put aside lesser issues such as clothing, and dedicate themselves
to more social issues to address the larger priority of working toward the
global struggle against capitalism.

Tracing the Right Path

As we have seen until now, in the second half of the 1930s the spread of left-
wing ideas among the Muslim educated youth became a growing concern
for the leaders of many associations: cultural, philanthropic and feminist
alike. Nevertheless, middle- and upper-class secular Muslim notables were
not the only ones to be alarmed by the resurfacing of communist sympa-
thies among the Yugoslav youth. Many ulema in particular put themselves

67 Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke,” 201*.
68 Orlanović, “Položaj muslimanke,” 201*.
at the forefront in opposing this process. This growing hostility toward communist ideas was, for religious leaders of conservative leanings, part of a larger source for discomfort: the worry that Yugoslav society was becoming increasingly secularized, especially in towns. Islamic learned men were not alone in feeling this. As Sandra Prlenda’s research on Catholic organizations has shown, religious officials of all faiths shared the belief that rapid social change—education, media, urbanization, consumption practices—posed a threat to religious institutions “in their position as the supreme arbiter in society.”69 If Catholic institutions were probably the most active in the interwar period in forging a militant Catholicism in contemporary Europe, other religious institutions did not remain passive. In the second half of the 1930s the ulema in Bosnia proved themselves capable of adopting new strategies in order to reaffirm their leading role in the Muslim community, and challenged more openly and with new tools progressive discourses and organizations.

In the late 1920s, something seems to have changed in the relationship between the ulema and the press. As seen in Chapter Four, until that time the interventions of conservative religious officials in journals were extremely rare: the press remained a domain firmly in progressive, and more broadly secular, hands. The debates sparked in 1928 by Čaušević’s declarations provoked a major shift: the conservative Islamic scholars decided to play the game of the public debate, and after this point became visible in the Bosnian Muslim press, publishing a long list of articles, public statements, and pamphlets. Some of Čaušević’s more conspicuous attackers decided in 1929 to establish the journal Hikjmet (Wisdom) in the Bosnian town of Tuzla, with the explicit purpose “of demonstrating... the wisdom and the positive features of the Islamic precepts and institutions.”70 The journal was led by muftija aforementioned Ibrahim Hakki Čokić, who had received his education at a local medresa and at the Sarajevo School for Sharia Judges. Čokić had then gone on to complete his education in Arabic language and literature at the University of Vienna, before becoming a teacher of the same subjects in the high school of Tuzla. In its seven years of activity (1929–1936),

**Hikjmet** became the mouthpiece for those conservative **ulema** in Yugoslavia who openly rejected the Islamic modernist interpretation of the sources.\(^{71}\)

In the second half of the 1930s, a group of Islamic scholars moved a step further and launched a new project: the establishment of a large-scale Muslim association led by religious officials. This new association, established in 1936 in Sarajevo, was called **El-Hidaje**—“Right Path” in Arabic.\(^{72}\) The establishment of this organization brought about a significant shift within Bosnian associational culture. Until then, voluntary associations had been synonymous with the liberal and pro-Western elites eager to catch up with European modernity; with the establishment of **El-Hidaje**, the association was for the first time brought into the service of a different, diametrically opposite agenda, which aimed to bring Islam to the very center of society.\(^{73}\)

As it is possible to read in the pages of the association’s monthly journal, the eponymous **El-Hidaje**, the motivation that led to the establishment of the association was a clearly pessimistic perception of Muslim society at that time, and of its imminent future. As explained by one of the activists in 1938, “the lives of our peasants, merchants, artisans and workers are not even close to being in accordance with Islamic moral and religious prescriptions,”\(^{74}\) and this lack of Islam affected both the public and private space. The association’s creation was seen as a solution to this state of affairs. As explained during the first assembly, the aim of the association was to “give Muslims a religious and moral lift,”\(^{75}\) to strengthen Muslim economic solidarity, and to consolidate the economic means of the Islamic institutions. In a society perceived to be increasingly secular and open to ideas that were indifferent, or openly hostile, to religion, the association decided to take on an ambitious goal: “to strengthen the authority of the **ilmija** as the spiritual guides of Muslims”\(^{76}\) and to reorganize the Muslim youth.

The establishment of this association in the second half of the 1930s is often explained as a consequence of the shifting balance of power within the Muslim community. The relaxing of the dictatorship that followed the as-

\(^{71}\) On the **Hikjmet** experiment, see Adnan Jahić, **Hikjmet: Riječ tradicionalne uleme u Bosni i Hercegovini** (Tuzla: BZK Preporod, Općinsko društvo Tuzla, 2004).


\(^{73}\) On the relationship between religious officials and associations, Dautović, **Uloga El-Hidaje**, 12–18.


\(^{75}\) Dobrača, “Zadatak i svrha ‘El-Hidaje’,” 52.

assassination of King Aleksandar in 1934, and the following return of parlia-
mentary life, deeply modified the position of the JMO, which after several
years of marginalization had regained importance in Yugoslav political life.
After the 1935 election, Mehmed Spaho accepted to participate in the for-
mation of a government with Stojadinović and Korošec, asking in exchange,
among other things, for new regulations for the Islamic institutions of Yu-
goslavia. The new text, adopted in October 1936, reintroduced the elective
principle for the leaders of the institutions, the seat of the Reis-ul-ulema was
returned to Sarajevo and the charge of the muftija abolished. Moreover, the
new regulations assigned a greater role to secular Muslims in the admin-
istration of the pious foundations, de facto reducing the role of the ulema
in this domain. Moreover, the JMO managed to place its men in many key
positions in the institution, de facto putting Islamic institutions under the
control of the main Muslim political party. Spaho’s biggest success never-
theless came two years later when he managed to have elected as new Reis-
ul-ulema Fehim Spaho (1877–1942), a man with a limited religious educa-
tion and who had the principal merit of being... Mehmed Spaho’s brother.77
With this context in mind, the establishment of El-Hidaje can be interpreted
as a means for religious officials to protest against their marginalization in
the decision-making processes of the Islamic institutions. In this respect,
it is not astonishing that El-Hidaje’s leaders repeatedly called for a revision
of the 1936 regulation of the Islamic institutions, and expressed coldness,
sometimes open hostility, toward Fehim Spaho.78 As a delegitimizing act,
the association refused to grant membership to their own Reis-ul-ulema, jus-
tifying this act by stating that, given his secular education, “it [was] not pos-
sible to affirm that he is a member of the ilmiijja.”79
At the same time, the establishment of this association can and must be
understood on a different scale, as part of social and political changes hap-
pening in the Muslim world more in general. In order to grasp this second
dimension of the establishment of El-Hidaje, it is important to take a look
at its founders. In their biographies it seems possible to detect two different
generations of Islamic learned men. First, there is an older one, composed
of people born mostly in the 1880s, educated in Bosnian religious institu-

77 Jahić, Islamska zajednica, 521–47.
78 Dautović, Uloga El-Hidaje, 42–63.
79 Jahić, Islamska zajednica, 551.
tions and sometimes in Istanbul, and who at that time were already serving in important Islamic institutions: Muhamed Tufo (born 1883), professor at the Muslim Teachers’School of Sarajevo, Muhamed Mujagić (born 1876), sharia judge, Mustafa Mujezinović (born 1883), teacher at the Gazi-Husrevbeg medresa in Sarajevo, etc. The religious officials of this generation were also accompanied by men of a different generation, born in the early 1900s, often educated abroad; among the leaders of the association were Muhamed Fočak (1906), professor at the School for Sharia Judges and the Gazi-Husrevbeg medresa, or Mehmed Handžić (born 1906), librarian and vaiz (preacher) of the Careva mosque in Sarajevo. Handžić, who was probably the most active Islamic scholar of this constellation, and a very prolific author, began his career as an El-Hidaje activist; treasurer in 1936, between 1939 and 1943 he was elected president of the association, and was also the journal’s editor-in-chief for many years. 80 A common trait in the trajectories of these men, and in many of the other founders of the association, was that they had studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, a city that, at that time, was a melting-pot for new conservative Muslim initiatives. It seems that the initial idea of establishing a Muslim conservative association was directly linked to this stint in the Egyptian city: Ali Aganović (born 1902), who graduated from Al-Azhar, and was one of the founders of El-Hidaje, seems to have attempted as early as 1927 to establish in Cairo two fairly unsuccessful associations for Bosnian Muslim students, one named El-Hidaje and another named Mladi Muslimani (Young Muslims—the name that during the Second World War was assumed by El-Hidaje’s youth branch). 81

A privileged link with the Middle East was visible throughout the association’s lifetime: the association’s journal gave, for example, full coverage to initiatives of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization established in 1928 in Egypt by the schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna who in those years became a global model of Muslim engagement. As highlighted by Moaddel Mansoor, Al-Banna’s Muslim Brotherhood proposed a new kind of Muslim activism “sharply defined in its opposition to liberal nationalism, Western capitalism, and international communism. A series of binaries defined its identity and distinguished [the Muslim Brotherhood] from

81 Jusuf Ramić, Bošnjaci na El-Azheru (Sarajevo: Rijaset Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini, 1997).
other movements: Islamic activism versus religious retreatism and apathy, Islamic unity versus political parties’ disunity and factionalism, puritanism and modesty versus sexual laxity, gender segregation versus the mixing of sexes... spiritualism versus Western materialism.”

Educated and socialized in the same city, the promoters of *El Hidaje* and of the Muslim Brotherhood shared the same vision of Islam as an all-encompassing religion.

The association—which, interestingly, in its internal structure mimicked the structure of the progressive association *Gajret*—was based around a central branch in Sarajevo, with local branches throughout the country. Offering itself as a meeting-point between the Muslim population and the Islamic officials, *El-Hidaje* sought and succeeded in systematically building relationships with the numerous Muslim associations in existence. Even its relationship with journalism and public writing seems to have changed radically: as stressed by Article 3 of the association’s statutes, one of the aims of the association was “to strive toward the public debate on Islamic-religious questions being conducted in an appropriate and suitable way as to these questions, exclusively involving people with far-reaching religious qualifications and solid expertise.”

Interestingly enough, Handžić himself strove to demonstrate the Islamic legitimacy of printing a journal by the *ulema*, reasoning that “this method of explaining the faith has also been used by the same Alejhi-selam [Muhammad], who wrote letters to foreign rulers inviting them to [convert to] Islam.” In accordance with its statutes, however, the association also decided to resort to a supplementary set of tools: sermons (*vaz*, or *hutba* in the case of Friday ones) held by qualified itinerant preachers sent by the association, but also public lectures, the organization of *mevluds*, etc. All of these organizational means were openly put to the service of an ambitious project: as stated in the association’s journal in 1938, “we have to become real Muslims [*moramo postati pravi muslimani*]. We have to cooperate with one another and always undertake every action together. Wrongdoers are those who put their own interests before the interests of the

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84 *Pravila društva “El-Hidaje” Organizacija ilmijje Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Sarajevu* (Sarajevo: Štamparija Omer Šehić, 1936), 1–2.
community [zajednica], and who sew discord in the community.”\(^{87}\) In other words, in a period perceived to be one of open decadence and of the degradation of religion among the Muslim population, the association aimed to promote a re-Islamisation of the Muslim population of Yugoslavia.

### The Cornerstone of (re-)Islamization

Unsurprisingly, in this ambitious project of making Bosnian Muslims “real Muslims,” women were deemed to have a crucial role. Before analysing *El-Hidaje’s* gender agenda, it is worth saying few words about the transformation of gender norms in Muslim urban society in the 1930s. A text written by the aforementioned Maksim Svara—who was a fervent admirer of Mustafa Kemal’s reforms in Turkey—provides a useful opportunity for gaining a glimpse into these transformations. In addition, the rich photographic repertoire conserved in the Bosnian archives can help us to visualize what the Croatian journalist from Sarajevo had in mind.

In this 1932 text, entitled “The Emancipation of Muslim Woman,” Svara dedicated several pages to the ways in which, in the interwar years, Bosnian Muslim women had transformed their dress practices in urban spaces, in a period in which Bosnian towns were becoming increasingly mixed from a confessional point of view.\(^{88}\) According to Svara, if you were to walk in the towns of Bosnia at that time, you would have encountered three kinds of Muslim women. The first to attract your attention would be those walking unveiled: “A fairly significant number of women and girls, coming almost exclusively from the more educated social circles, dress in a completely European way, stroll with their faces uncovered [otkrivene].” His endorsement of these women, who as seen in Chapter Five and Six found in associations one of the privileged spaces of expression, is unreserved: they “represent the vanguard of the new era, the guides of the Muslim religious community’s female half... It is beautiful that these women’s numbers are growing and that today a growing number of them go to school—and graduate from it.”\(^{89}\)

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\(^{89}\) Svara, *Emancipacija muslimanke*, 38.
One of the most delightful examples of a woman from this group is probably a picture of Ifaket Salihagić, the wife of Suljaga Salihagić, an engineer and a well-known Gajret activist from Banja Luka.\footnote{On Suljaga Salihagić, see Kemura, 
_Uloga Gajreta_, 75, 145, 200–3, 246, 378 and 388.} In this picture, dating from the second half of the 1930s, and probably taken for private use, Ifaket poses in hunting dress, wearing “knickerbockers,” her curly hair showing beneath a cloth cap. Standing outdoors, she poses as a victorious hunter with her prey, a dead bear, at her feet. Motherhood is somehow still present: her sons, Omer and Halil crouch at her feet. However, she still presents herself here as a hunting mother, far from traditional representations of appropriate femininity.

If we return to Svara’s line of reasoning, after this first group of Muslim urban women, you would be likely to spot a second group on the urban

Figure 37: Ifaket Salihagić with her sons Omer and Halil, Banja Luka, late 1930s. 
Source: MRS, photography collection.
streets of Bosnia, one that still wore feminine Muslim garments. The author notes that the choice to maintain this kind of garment was not only linked to the conservatism of the women or their family, but also to class variables: traditional Muslim female clothing was particularly prevalent among the urban poor, who typically made these kinds of garments with poor materials, until the end of the Second World War (see Figure 38). Many pictures taken during the 1930s confirm Svara's observation. As it is possible to see by the pictures below representing the Sarajevo market, Muslim women covering their faces with the peča remained part of the Bosnian urban landscape throughout the interwar period. Among the numerous pictures of Bosnian urban spaces taken in the late 1930s, one is particularly striking: taken at the funeral of the former Reis-ul-ulema Mehmed Džemaluddin Čaušević in March 1938, the picture shows several rows of women poorly dressed, observing the passage of the coffin along the wall in the court of the Gazi-Husrevbeg mosque in Sarajevo, wearing the peča—the garment whose abolition the deceased Reis-ul-ulema tried to enforce in 1928 (see Figure 39).

The third category of woman that Svara identified in Bosnian urban spaces was one that chose an intermediate path between the two. As stated by the journalist:

today, there are not many Muslim women in the cities that observe the custom of veiling attentively. If someone does not believe this he should take a tour in the čaršija, and he will see that women, when they are about to buy things, raise the peča. There are none that do not do this, since none will take the risk of being cheated: something that could easily happen if women circulated at all times covered by the veil. Few women now cover [their faces] before their neighbors or friends, even though the list of people to whom they can show their faces is strictly defined. If they say the opposite, it is not true. I would like to make a public appeal: find at least one girl who, when her boyfriend comes to meet her under the window or in another place, goes out with the veil, even within the more conservative families. And while those without the veil have a job, go to school, dance at parties and more generally enjoy their youth like all other women in the world, those half-unveiled [poluotkrivene], whose husbands and parents cannot accept the present state of affairs, walk fully-dressed in European style, and wear a small hat on their heads to which is usually attached a veil that can be raised. In such a way, the
women can, in the neighborhood [mahala] or in any other place, when she wants to look interesting or pious, let it fall over her face. This is the [third] kind of woman, the woman of transition [prelazni]. This kind [of woman]
especially loves short skirts: because, while it is “immoral” to show the face, it is moral to walk in incredibly short skirts.91

Svara’s words here are interesting for several reasons. First, they show that the dichotomy between “veiled” and “unveiled” women, and “modern” and “traditional” dress, was nothing but a male construct, and that in everyday practice, women were able to mix traditional and modern garments, combining them according to their age, class—and personal taste. As shown by several researchers, since the beginning of the twentieth century towns in the Yugoslav space were increasingly exposed to fashion trends from the two imperial centers, Istanbul and especially Vienna, and Muslim women of every social class were influenced by them.92 The interwar period accentuated this same process, and a new set of fashion newspapers, mostly published in Zagreb and Belgrade, began to circulate in Yugoslav towns, influencing the tastes of Yugoslav citizens and tailor shops all over the country.93 Pictures from that period taken in different Bosnian towns, especially those taken in Sarajevo, show how Muslim women mixed styles, accessories and materials, combining veils, bags and sandals in very original ways. Svara’s reference to the hat, a fashionable garment that could cover both the head and even the face when a black reversible foulard was added to it, represents the best example of this hybridity between a (supposedly) “traditional” and (supposedly) “modern” way of dressing.94 Here again, pictures of that time give us many examples of the variety of ways in which Muslim women dressed up and dealt with the veil. Women produced hybrid dress styles, depending on their means and personal taste, and negotiated their dress styles with family, neighborhood, and national and transnational trends.

A final, important feature that emerges in Svara’s text are the performative and relational features of the veiling practice. The moments in which Muslim women chose to use the veil depended on context—be it in the res-

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91 Svara, Emancipacija muslimanke, 39.
92 On the evolution of dress styles in Zagreb and Belgrade across the 19th and early 20th centuries, see in particular Mirjana Prosić-Dvornić, Odevanje u Beogradu u XIX i početkom XX veka (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2006) and Katarina Nina Simončić, Kultura odijevanja u Zagrebu na prijelazu iz 19. u 20. stoljeće (Zagreb: Plejada, 2012).
93 Marina Vujnović, Forging the Bubikopf Nation: Journalism, Gender and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 29–68.
94 On hybridity between “traditional” and “modern”, see also Zorislava Čulić, Narodne nošnje u Bosni i Hercegovini, (Sarajevo: Zemaljski muzej, 1963).
Figure 40, 41, 42: Muslim women from Sarajevo, 1930s.
Source: HAS, photography collection.
idential quarter, the mahala, or the city market, the čaršija—and their activities—buying something, strolling, meeting with friends, going to the cinema—and the people they met—a shopkeeper or a relative, a Muslim or a non-Muslim, a boyfriend or a father. Muslim women thus clearly showed themselves to be capable of playing with the veil, negotiating its use (or non-use) with their environment.

It was precisely against this variety of ways of wearing the headscarf and the face veil that the men around El-Hidaje launched their attack in the second half of the 1930s. Women’s laxity in wearing these garments became an object of constant criticism from the Islamic learned men in the press, which they assimilated with a violation of sharia. As stated in an article in the association’s journal, abandoning the practice of completely covering the body should to be considered a true “profanation” (profanisanje) of Islam:

Today we are witness to the conscious and unconscious profanation of the zar and the peća. While some of our mothers, wives, sisters and daughters continue to wear this wonderful piece of Islamic clothing, others have shamed it. Zar are stitched in such a way as to leave half the face, neck and chest uncovered… Zar and peća are stitched in such a way that when the peća is lifted, it would be impossible to tell Hanka apart from Anka. Some women, on the other hand, wear the zar without the peća. I also know that prostitutes sometimes wear the zar, as it seems a most useful thing for them. Most of all, I ask myself why nobody revolts against all this, why nobody protests. A great ill roams among us!95

These lines represent a vehement act of protest against the abandonment, but also the relaxation, and even the misuse, of the female veil. And the consequences of this process were clear: “it is not possible to tell who is Hanka [a Muslim female name] and who is Anka [a Christian female name]” i.e., to distinguish a Muslim woman from a non-Muslim woman. The protest here is against the invisibilization of religious belonging, the “incorporation” of Muslims into the Yugoslav population, and a consequent reduction of the faith to a private issue, invisible to the public space. This invisibilization of the Muslim religious specificity, this dilution of the Muslim element into

the broader community seems to have been the principal preoccupation of the ilmjija gathered around El-Hidaje.

When it comes to men—ulema, fathers, husbands—as the guardians of female morality, the article focusses mostly on the Muslim men who had ceased to preserve Islamic institutions. The targets here are the secular and religious intellectuals who, in deference to progress, have allowed their women to use gendered customs that enter into conflict with religious principles. The author continues:

Even those who should not, given their religious education and influence on others, have started to do it. Not long ago I met an old hafiz with his family sitting around a table in the middle of a pastry shop. The hafiz was wearing the fez, his wife was wearing the zar with the peča lifted and a cigarette in her mouth, and his daughter-in-law wore no zar at all! From what we can gather, this hafiz respects Islamic precepts, but does not like the prescriptions that order women to wear the veil and which prohibit them from taking walks. Evidently he likes walking... If a woman wants to wear the zar and the peča, then she must wear it properly and not go out walking or stand in front of a coffee shop; if, however, the zar and the peča bother a woman, then she had better take them off completely. It is better that way, rather than watching the profanation of that wonderful symbol of Islamic purity.96

The right path outlined here thus proposed to draw a clear line between Muslims and non-Muslims, and to reinforce the visible markers of the Muslim community.

**Toward a Resegregation of Yugoslav Society**

With this discourse in mind, it seems worth asking what kind of gendered division of associational labour these men aspired toward. According the statutes of El-Hidaje, membership was open to both “Muslim men and women who are citizens of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia”; all members had to conform “to Islamic adab [etiquette] and to behave, everywhere and anywhere, in an immaculate way, as exemplified by the sainted class of the

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96 Sadik, “Profanisanje zara i peče,” 45.
Because the registers, and indeed all archival material for this association, is missing, it is very difficult to know whether, in the association’s lifetime, any of its 2000 to 2500 members were women. From what can be gathered from its journal, Muslim women were not regularly involved in the association as members. Nevertheless, women were regularly included through several of the association’s initiatives especially devoted to them, such as female mevluds or lectures. In some cases, the students of the female medresa of Sarajevo, established in 1933, took part in these initiatives. Otherwise, it seems that women did not have any decision-making roles in the association, which remained firmly in the hands of male religious officials.

One of the first actions of the association was to condemn the forms of sociability that, since the end of the Great War, had been gradually putting Muslim women in contact with non-Muslims and with men. Unsurprisingly, they regularly attacked the practice that in the interwar period had become the most popular tool of the association: the zabava. Mehmed Handžić, the president of El-Hidaje, protested virulently and regularly against the spread of these events among the Muslim population. As he said in his letters to Muslim associations in the spring of 1940, the associations’ need to augment their revenues should never excuse initiatives that were in contrast with Islamic precepts:

parties are a tool through which large amounts of money depart from Muslim hands; only some, and to tell the truth, a minority of this money, goes back into Muslim society [muslimansko društvo]. The majority lands in the pockets of traders, most of whom are non-Muslims, or is spent on luxury goods of which—given our current economic situation—we should be cautious. At parties, men and women mix in a very sensitive way, and from this mixing could spring bad consequences.

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98 Dautović, Uloga El-Hidaje, 94–5.
100 HAS, NU14, 554, Mehmed Handžić to GONU (May 20, 1940).
In this rejection of modern festive culture, two interesting points are helpful in informing us about the association’s project. First of all, the rejection of sexual and confessional desegregation, a point that has already been discussed in Chapter Six. Moreover, Handžić stresses here that parties meant a transfer of Muslim economic resources beyond the Muslim population, and that this was a negative outcome. Clearly, from these lines we can conclude that the Muslim community is the only collective intent that deserves to be stressed and enforced, while any form of national solidarity—Serbian, Croatian, Yugoslav—is completely absent.

*El-Hidaje*, however, did not simply limit itself to fighting the popularity of non-Islamic social events whose *raison d’être* was the desegregation of the Muslim population. In its almost ten years of activity, the association’s central and local branches implemented a set of practices that were labelled as truly Islamic. The rightfulness of these practices was primarily dictated by their calendar: while associations like *Gajret* and *Narodna Uzdanica* adopted mixed calendars for their activities, i.e. the Islamic calendar and the national and/or state calendar (see Chapter Six), *El-Hidaje*’s activities were uniquely elaborated around the religious calendar. The month of Ramadan, *bajram*, the Islamic New Year’s Eve thus became core periods of activity, in order to bring back an Islamic temporality among Muslims. 101 In this purely Islamic calendar, the date that became the most important day for this association was the seventeenth night of Ramadan, the *Lejletul Bedr*, or the Badr Battle. That night Muslims celebrated a key battle in the early days of Islam and a turning-point in Muhammad’s struggle with his opponents among the Quraysh in Mecca. The celebration of this military victory was an opportunity for local branches of the association to organize *meviluds* and/or public lectures or sermons.

This special calendar of activities also required different spaces of sociability. While Muslim cultural associations chose fancy, non-Muslim venues such as theaters, cinemas, and ballrooms, *El-Hidaje* put a different kind of space at the center of its activities, in particular the headquarters of the Muslim philanthropic associations, 102 but especially the mosque. Of course, the choice of venue helped to reinforce the sexual and confessional segregation

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that the association wished to foster. For example, in the town of Goražde, the local branch of the association organized in 1937 a *ramazanski vaz* for women on the Tuesday in the Sinan-beg mosque, and for men on the Friday and Sunday in the Džafar-beg mosque. The same went for the Banja Luka branch, which for the seventeenth night of Ramadan organized two lessons, the first for men and the second for women.  

In an increasingly secularized Yugoslav society, the activists of *El-Hidaje* strove to put the mosque back at the center of Muslim social life, and to bring women back within the perimeter of the religious community.

**Young, Muslim, and Radical**

As already stated, *El-Hidaje*’s leaders openly took on the challenge of the public sphere and decided to contest the progressives’ hegemony in the domain of the press. *El-Hidaje*’s journal had a double aim: “to spread the ideas of the association in the propagandistic and moral-religious direction, and to be the house organ of the *Ilmija* professional organization.”  

The journal had a fairly good circulation. In 1937, it had a print run of around 2000, and by 1939 the journal was read by around 1000 subscribers. One of the journal’s principal aims was to oppose the idea, widely broadcast by the progressive press (see Chapter Four), that the woman question was not a social but a religious question, and thus that other people besides Islamic learned men—that is, secular Muslims—could legitimately contribute to the debate in this domain. However, beyond this defensive action, the journal also proposed new models of appropriate Muslim femininity.

The skills of *El-Hidaje*’s activists in Arabic allowed them to read, and translate journals from the Muslim world. As several publications have shown, Bosnian Islamic scholars, even after the Habsburg conquest, did not cease to read journals and texts from other regions of the Muslim world.

The association’s journal translated several articles by a certain Aziza Abbas Usfur, contributor to many Egyptian magazines, in particular *El-Feth*. Her texts seem to have been so well-appreciated by *El-Hidaje*’s Banja Luka branch, that it decided in 1937 to print one of her articles in a brochure—the first of a long series published by the association. Despite the very sparse information we have on Aziza, we know she was Egyptian, a law student from Cairo University. In her 1937 text, the author—who ironically admits to having been called in Egypt “the girls’ enemy”—intervenes on difficulties in marriages and makes a strong statement: “women are responsible for the crisis of marriage.” Her line of reasoning deserves attention:

Girls have changed their lifestyles and taken a road that is not theirs. In consequence, men have lost faith in them and have started to doubt their purity [*čistoća*] and innocence [*nevinost*]. Girls have let go of the way they previously lived their lives and have taken their freedom too far. They have forgotten their country’s traditions and abandoned their faith. The girl has left her home, she has stamped on her honour, destroyed herself and lost her reputation [*ugled*]. They have therefore committed an injustice to themselves, to their family, to their country and to their husbands. So they have been punished, because what is not right must be punished.

According to the author, when women lived a traditional lifestyle in the home, marital crises were practically non-existent. Nowadays, however, women “walk around half-naked, flaunting their feelings and saying to men: are there any suitors, are there any friends?” Aziza provides here a direct criticism of the idea of marriage that had been imported from Western Europe—a monogamous marriage, based on romantic love, chosen more and more autonomously by the two partners involved:

you will certainly agree with me that “women are to blame”... Before, these poor creatures [*bijednica*] were happy at home, satisfied with themselves and

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108 According to the information we have from *El-Hidaje*, the articles were published in *El-Feth* 549 and 654.
with their lives. They were happy to pray to God and love their children and they considered it the greatest honour to submit to their fathers and obey their husbands. They loved their husband because he was theirs and they loved their children because they were theirs. They therefore considered marriage to be the foundation of love and not love to be the foundation of marriage.113

*El-Hidaje* paints a portrait here for its readers of a woman rejecting the ideal of Western romantic love, and (re)inverting the relationship between love and marriage. Aziza Abbas nevertheless does not stop here. In the same text, she addresses one of the issues that had gone uncontested among the new generation in Bosnian educated circles: the right for women to choose their life partners themselves, instead of that choice being dictated by their families. As Aziza continues:

By working for their independence [*samostalnost*] and for increased freedom, women have started to believe they have the right to choose the man they think is right for them, but they end up choosing a worse husband than their parents would have chosen. Women think that love is the foundation for marriage and so they start to look incessantly at men’s faces until they no longer feel the need to get married.114

Aziza’s texts were also used by the activists of *El-Hidaje* to challenge one of the very goals of interwar progressives, i.e. to legitimise and foster access for women to higher, and in particular university education. In the same article, Aziza uses vehement language to denounce the intrusion of women into what she calls the “male sciences” (*nauke muškaraca*), an expression that in fact refers to all of the formal disciplines with the exception of pedagogical sciences. The entry of girl students into these faculties had a major consequence: it put women “in competition with men [*takmičenje sa muškarcem*],”115 in this way engendering deep and long-lasting tensions, visible from a smaller scale (the family) to the broader one (society) between the two sexes. Women who chose to receive a higher education in disciplines not directly connected to her primary function, motherhood, “become a

danger to their husbands”\textsuperscript{116} and more broadly, to the entirety of God’s order. What is interesting here is that these words come from a young female university student, who studies Law, and who has not hesitated to enter into the public sphere herself.

The association’s journal also published a second text by Aziza, a public letter that had been printed in \textit{El-Fetah} (Victory) that same year and was addressed directly to no less than the rector of Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious forum for the education of the \textit{ulema} in Egypt. The letter is written from Port Said, a city that lies in north-eastern Egypt on the Mediterranean coast, established in 1859 during the construction of the Suez Canal. Due to its strategic position, this city had become one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, where many non-Muslims and Westerners settled and did commerce, lived and introduced their own social practices. In Aziza’s words, this place recalled a theme that was important to the Bosnian \textit{ulema}; the \textit{miješanje}, or “mixing,” of men and women, and its terrible consequences. She also criticized the tourist culture, and the relaxation of Islamic customs due to an osmosis between Muslim and non-Muslim social practices, as well as places of new sociability in this colonial place—“coffee houses, clubs, restaurants, cinemas, dance halls, where they \textit{[men and women] sing their shameless songs and dance their nauseating dances in shameless groups.”}\textsuperscript{117} In these places Muslim women sat in restaurants, or on beaches, “in the company of young men and people without any difference of nationality, class or religion, so that—Sir, \textit{alim}—with your daughters sit the non-Muslims.”\textsuperscript{118} Again, we see here the resurfacing of an old adage: the penetration of Western practices, provoking a pernicious desegregation, multiple in nature: sexual, confessional, class, mixing up everything, invisibilising boundaries. The very end of the text announces the saviours who could repair this state of affairs:

I walked along... the beach and I saw such a show that virtue became sick, and faith lifted its hands and screamed: “help me, help me you sitting on the chairs from where you should protect me, you who are responsible for my defence!

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\textsuperscript{116} Usfur, “Djevojka je glavni uzrok,” 127.
\textsuperscript{118} Usfur, “Miješanje muškaraca,” 170.
\end{flushright}
Help me, ilmija! Why do you remain sleeping, while the daughters and wives of your people do such things that destroy the wall [zid] that you have built to protect them, and whose destruction will bring you so much evil?”

Religious officials are presented here as being capable of bringing back segregation in Muslim society, and restoring the wall separating men from women, Muslims from non-Muslims.

Reinforcing the Borders of the Community

The article cited above, with this reference to walls, brings us to the very core of El-Hidaje’s political proposal. In other words: what kind of community did they aspire toward? What kind of social bond did they hope to foster? In the texts published by this group of Islamic learned men, several keywords seem to have been borrowed from the nationalist rhetorical repertoire: the need to build a “fraternal tie” (bratska veza), or to awaken “consciousness” (svijest) among Muslims, while the association El-Hidaje is openly qualified as the “matrix” (matica) for building and fostering this goal. However, this first impression is misleading. In El-Hidaje’s discourse there is simply no place for nationalism, neither Croatian, Serbian, nor Yugoslav. The dominant, and mostly unique, dimension that can be detected in the public discourse of this circle of religious leaders is instead a religious one. Even a quick glance through the pages of the journal of the association makes it very clear that Islam is the only legitimate social tie mentioned; the umma, both in its global (the community of believers beyond time and space) and the local (Muslims of Bosnia and Yugoslavia) declinations are described as the only ground upon which a sense of collective belonging and action should be built.

This drive to consider the religious as the only meaningful collective bond was not only visible in the association’s public discourse, but also in concrete initiatives taken in the late 1930s, in particular in the domain of marriage, and more precisely interfaith marriages—called mješoviti brakovi, “mixed mar-

120 “Društveni glasnik,” El-Hidaje, no. 6 (1937): 90.
riages,” in the press. According to Hanafi law, the juridical school officially in use in Bosnia since Ottoman times, this kind of union was scrupulously regulated and admitted only in one case: when a Muslim man married a non-Muslim woman, and when the spouses agreed to raise their children according to Islam. As highlighted by Adnan Jahić, mixed marriages of this kind remained extremely rare in Bosnia and Herzegovina, confined almost exclusively to the educated upper class. Despite their limited number—in 1937, it seems there were no more than 800 interfaith marriages involving Muslims in the entire province— the choices that led to these unions had the power to excite debate and reprobation in the population and sometimes in the press. Almost absent from the public debate in the 1920s (the 1928 text by Hasnija Berberović mentioned in Chapter Four being an interesting exception), interfaith marriages became in the 1930s a recurring controversial topic. The activists of El-Hidaje were at the forefront in leading the charge, multiplying in the pages of their organ attacks against this behaviour.

A long article by Mehmed Ali Ćerimović (1872–1943), a judge of Islamic law, published in El-Hidaje in 1937, gives a clear idea of the arguments opposing to this kind of behaviour. According to the author, mixed marriages had remained very rare in the Habsburg period, gradually becoming a social phenomenon only after 1918. The secularisation of Yugoslav society, and in particular the decreasing weight of religion in orienting individual and collective choices was considered to be the main reason for the normalization of this problematic practice. As Ćerimović stated with open regret, “we are now gradually getting used to the idea, as if in Islam marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim was an uncomplicated issue.” Insofar as “the subject has not been discussed enough, particularly with regards to the damage it does to families and the Islamic community,” his first goal was to open the discussion among the Islamic scholars and to push religious institutions to take concrete measures: “what would happen,” he asked with concern, “if Muslim families broke away from the Islamic community?” Incidentally, launching the debate on interfaith marriages provided the author with the opportunity to underline two additional points; first, the prox-

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123 Jahić, Muslimansko žensko pitanje, 376. On the same topic, see also Karčić, Šerijatski sudovi, 137.
126 Ćerimović, “Mješoviti brak,” 33.
imity of El-Hidaje to the Muslim population, ready to support the popular strata’s disdain for this kind of behaviour, in contrast with educated circles; second, the exclusive competence of the ulema to discuss and decide upon these issues. The participation of secular intellectuals was thus firmly excluded from the outset.

For Ćerimović, and for the other men gathered around El-Hidaje more generally, campaigning for the total ban of interfaith marriages was not self-evident. For a circle who was very suspicious of innovation, introducing changes in the rules codified in the first centuries of Islam demanded cautious justification. After introducing marriage as “a contract between a man and a woman agreed in accordance with Islamic laws with the intention of living a shared life,”127 the author listed eight aims for marriage:

1) To procreate until the end of time. If Muslims procreate more than others the community will be strengthened and therefore be able to protect its members’ happiness [blagostanje] and cultural, economic and social progress.

2) To maintain morals and fight against immorality. No evolved society can exist without morals.

3) To protect descendence, because it is imperative to be clear about the paternity of a child.

4) To protect inheritance, as it is imperative to know who owns what and who has the right to inherit.

5) To bring up children in the Islamic faith and according to Islamic morals.

6) To keep children and a wife, as it is imperative to know whose duty it is.

7) It is imperative to know whose duty the mehr [dowry] is.

8) It is imperative to know the degree of kinship of the man and woman entering into marriage.

This definition of marriage was seen as the basis for a stable society: it moralized individuals and their sexual lives, it provides rules for inheritance and paternity, it fixed different duties and the rights connected to them. As we can read in the first point, this institution also brought about “progress” (napredak) for the community—a community that is essentially a Muslim

one. With this definition in mind, Ćerimović stresses, a marriage between Muslim spouses was of course the best configuration.

But on what ground was it possible to delegitimise interfaith marriage, and with it centuries of well-established Hanafi jurisprudence? The core of Ćerimović’s arguments centres around the current position of Bosnian Muslims as a religious minority in an overwhelmingly European and Christian state. As the author recalls, in the lifetime of the founder of the Hanafi juridical school, in the eighth century, Islam was a victorious and expanding polity; the idea of Muslims living permanently as a religious minority outside of Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam, denoting regions where Islamic law prevails) was considered unlikely. The first half of the twentieth century offered a very different and despairing picture: the vast majority of Muslim peoples were under the yoke of European colonialism, and in Southeastern Europe Muslim minorities ran the constant risk of being assimilated into the non-Muslim majority. As the author continued, “they [the Islamic scholars] could not have foreseen that mixed marriages would put the Islamic family [islamska obitelj], and particularly children, the main aim of and most precious treasure to come out of marriage, in danger.”

In such unfavourable political and demographic circumstances, Bosnian Muslims should do their utmost to ensure that no member of the Muslim community turn his or her back on Islam, or that any alien presence, i.e. a non-Muslim woman, enter the sacred perimeter of the family and endanger it. For Ćerimović, the Muslim family:

absolutely must not be lost; the Islamic institution’s concern in this regard is absolutely understandable. We know that a Muslim man, and especially a family, should not and cannot be allowed to break away from their milieu of origin [sredina]. Islam does not force anyone to accept it: as it says in the Quran, “forced conversion is not permitted” (surah El Bekare, 257). But if one is already a Muslim, then Islam does not permit one to break away from the faith in any way.

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According to the Islamic learned men gathered around El-Hidaje, not only should Muslim women be considered the very touchstone of the family and the community, but they were also pivotal to the successful re-Islamisation of a Muslim population who has lost its compass. No matter the reasons and feelings that might push two Yugoslav citizens of different faiths to establish a family: new rules in the domain of Islamic family law had to be discussed and introduced, in order to prevent a non-Muslim woman from undermining Muslim families and the border between Muslims and non-Muslims in Yugoslavia.

In the following years, El-Hidaje activists continued to publish articles of this kind and to spread their ideas among Bosnian Muslim religious officials, proposing a complete ban on mixed marriages, or at least that they only be exceptionally allowed after close monitoring by the Islamic authorities. A few months after the publication of Ćerimović's article, the campaign among Muslim religious officials bore tangible fruit: on December 21, 1938 the Reis-ul-ulema and the supreme council of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia officially banned any form of interfaith marriage involving Muslims, thus introducing a significant innovation into the Islamic law of the country. Even if in the following months the ban was softened, the adoption of this rule represented a sound victory for the men gathered around El-Hidaje, who managed to transform their vision of a Muslim community under siege, at risk of losing its authenticity, into a legally binding regulation.

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Two brand new phenomena shaping Muslim society come to the fore when we look at Bosnian associational culture in the second half of the 1930s; first of all, the growing success of communist ideas and organizations among the youth, especially those who received a secondary or university education. Secondly, the rise of an Islamic revivalism that aimed to counter the progressive secularization visible in Bosnian and Yugoslav society, by reinstating the representatives of the ulemas in their dominant position in the Islamic institutions. Both communist and revivalist groups injected fresh ideas into the debate on the Muslim woman question, and introduced new social practices.

At the crossroads between changes happening both in Europe and the Mid-

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130 Jahić, Islamska zajednica, 600–3.
Middle East, the Muslim population adopted in this period new political opinions that expressed radically different ideas of modernity.

The visibility of both communists and Muslim revivalists is of interest to us for at least three reasons. First, because despite their conflicting political projects, they both saw in the Muslim woman question, and more broadly the issue of gender relations, the potential to realize their respective political projects. Thanks to the associational structures that they created, or to those they were able to bring under their control, these forces promoted new forms of (in)visibility and (non-)involvement for Muslim women, both in associational life and in the Yugoslav public space more in general. The communists put class at the center of their critique of society and their project for social change, judging the political project of the Muslim progressives leading the cultural associations to be ineffective and moderate. The revivalists grouped around El-Hidaje put Islam at the very center of their analysis and action, launching a project for the (re)Islamisation of Muslim society and reframing religion as the only legitimate factor upon which the political community should be built. Second, especially when we analyze the spread of communist ideas among voluntary associations, we see a changing participation in public life by Muslim women, as shown in particular by the case of Vahida Maglajlić in Banja Luka, and by the Muslim female students who began signing petitions for peace and against fascism. In other words, in the years preceding the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, we witness Muslim women’s first steps in politicization. Third, and more broadly, the rise of both communists and revivalists in Yugoslav civil society threw into crisis something that is often considered to be a postulate of Western associational culture: its assumed intimate, somehow natural bond with liberalism, and its supposedly active role in the secularization process of modern society. Conversely, the late-1930s shift tells a different story: voluntary associations could also be a space where individuals could prepare a revolutionary subversion of the existing political order in the name of radical ideals.