

## Unveiling Muslim Women in Socialist Yugoslavia: the Body between Socialism, Secularism, and Colonialism

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### Abstract

The creation of the second Yugoslavia (1943–1992) heralded the legal and economic emancipation of women, a social change deeply indebted to the role of female combatants in the Partisan army, and catalyzed by post-war state-building. The Anti-Fascist Women's Front (AFŽ) was a primary agent in rapid social changes that followed. Along with education and literacy campaigns, from 1947–1950 local chapters of the AFŽ organized campaigns to unveil Muslim women in Yugoslavia, as the practice was deemed incompatible with economic and political participation as well as multiethnic unity. This paper focuses on the Bosnian case, though unveiling also took place in Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro. This paper investigates how state secularism put women's 'emancipated' bodies to the fore as signifiers of progress and modernity. The process of unveiling in Yugoslavia is analyzed both within the context of the reconstruction and the consolidation of the socialist state, and the nexus of ideological conflicts in the region. Unveiling drew on Orientalist discourses, as well as the promise of a radical socialist future and an indigenous Yugoslav feminism, while popular support for the AFŽ problematizes notions of the oppressive nature of state-sanctioned feminism. The paper interrogates the discourses surrounding these campaigns of unveiling, as they draw on and confound various dichotomies.

### Keywords

veil; Bosnia; secularism; socialism; orientalism.

In contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the wearing of the Islamic veil has experienced a postwar resurgence, though this has been twinned with a prevalent sense that the revival is due to outside influences from key investors in BiH, such as Saudi Arabia. Discourse and debate on banning face or body veils has been discussed on several levels, most recently with the judiciary banning

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the hijab for employees. However, this debate is of a rather different calibre than contemporary debates in Western Europe or North America. Many contemporary Bosnians tend to perceive veiling as something which is foreign to Bosnia, as Mesarič notes in regard to her field research in Sarajevo (2013: 20); this is strikingly similar to the prevalent discourse of feminism (or LGBT rights) as a Western import with no place in the local context. In fact, both Islamic dress and feminism have very strong indigenous roots in Bosnia, though necessarily affected by the complex interplay of colonial, transnational, interreligious, and historical dynamics.

The fact that this custom has been 'forgotten' is evidence not only of a process of consolidation of a new, post-civil war identity on the part of Bosnian Muslims (Mesarič 2013: 26), but also as a result of a state-enforced erasure of veiling from the collective memory during socialist Yugoslavia in the 1940s and 1950s. My paper suggests that the socialist Yugoslav state, acting through the Anti-Fascist Women's Front (henceforth AFŽ – *Antifašistički front žena*), banned the veil as part of a process of constituting a new identity for female citizens in a burgeoning socialist state. As a signifier of hierarchical class and gender relations, women's illiteracy and unemployment, ethnic differences, and colonial pasts, stripping the female Muslim population of the veil had the symbolic power of ridding society of these unwanted features of the previous system. It was also a practical step in the emancipation of women, which occurred immediately after the war and took large strides in a short period of time. Within the AFŽ's agenda of women's 'cultural elevation,' unveiling was also aimed at increasing literacy, employment, and political consciousness among Muslim women in particular. For the state, the bodies of Muslim women served as a crucial marker of society's progress toward socialist goals, state consolidation, and the enforcement of state policies of secularism and multiethnic unity.

The AFŽ was a socialist women's organization (which I conflate with feminism, as they were concerned with full equality between the sexes<sup>1</sup>) which was founded during the Second World War and made a profound impact on the lives of Yugoslav women. Their initial agenda was especially radical and drew on pre-war feminist activism as well as socialist feminism, such as the work of the Zhenotdel in the early USSR. Yugoslavia managed to achieve a level of legal and practical equality which was ahead of even some Western states at the time. This historical moment and speed of social transformations is crucial to understanding the paradigm in which unveiling was implemented, as it problematizes the discourse of Orientalism apparent in other episodes of unveiling (in Turkey, Iran, Algeria, or contemporary France or Quebec), as well as the embedded notions of modernity, progress, and civilization. Operating outside of a framework of liberalism, within a complex colonial history, unveiling and secularism in socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina displayed features of a unique paradigm which has resonance to the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: I use the terms 'feminist' and 'women's rights' interchangeably, as women's groups under socialism were evidently motivated by the goal of full equality between men and women and the denaturalization of traditional gender roles. The Communists used the term 'feminism' in a negative sense which implied a greater concern with women's issues than those of the broader revolution (i.e. liberalism), but I use 'feminism' to connote simply the belief of equality between the sexes.

## Colonial Influences

As a colony of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, dress in Bosnia was regulated and served as a marker of ethnoreligious differences, class, and political status in various moments. In the 1800s, near the end of Ottoman rule, the dress of ethnoreligious groups was differentiated mainly by fabric and colour, but habits of veiling or head-covering were present among all religious groups (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Sephardic Jewish) – as indeed in most of ‘Western’ European society before the mid-20th century. The *feredža*, a long, wide cloak, was worn by both Muslim and Sephardic Jewish women, often accompanied by a variety of veils covering the head and a *peča*, a black fabric that covered the face, either partly transparent or with a slit for the eyes. This garb reflected the wealth of the wearer, and the wives of rich *bey*’s were more prone than poorer women to cover their face with a *peča* when leaving the home or going on long journey (Niškanović 1980). Poorer women and those from rural areas often wore only the *boščā*, a large scarf covering the head and shoulders (Mesarič 2013: 25). The *zar*, a burqa-like garment which covered the whole body and face, was introduced in the mid-19th century by a wealthy women returning from a trip to Turkey – it quickly became fashionable among Muslim women.

Indeed, until the Austrian occupation in 1878, the veil was more status symbol than religious marker, and the *zar* was often an expensive, luxury garment which signified the wearer’s elite status (Mesarič 2013: 25). While Christian and Jewish women had largely stopped veiling between 1878 and 1914, the arrival of the Austrian occupation fixed the *zar* as a religious garment worn by urban Muslim women. Although Austro-Hungarian imperial administrators saw themselves as missionaries of modernity, they were hesitant to spur massive social changes which would cause unrest, and thus ‘the monarchy’s administrators went to great lengths to preserve intact the social structure which they had found on their arrival in 1878’ (Donia 2007: 1). They were loath to challenge local traditions, which entrenched traditional dominant elites in a quasi-feudal society and effectively froze political transformation, though urbanization and industrialization increased in this period (Donia 2007: 2). The literacy rate rose little in the period of Austrian rule as the empire’s administrators failed in their proposal to build a solid network of schools. Instead schools were mainly funded by religious communities, which in turn increased nationalism and ethnic insularity (Donia 2007: 7). Muslims, feeling threatened by suddenly becoming a religious minority in a Catholic empire, began to retreat into the Islamic community, especially insisting on closing Muslim women off from the outside world. Muslim women adopted the *zar* on a mass scale, were excluded from schooling, and lost the privileged status they had enjoyed in the Ottoman Empire (Šeta 2011: 81). The Austrians opened one school for female Muslims in Sarajevo with the aim to ‘civilize without converting’: it focused on family economics as ‘childbirth and child-rearing were assumed to be women’s primary and most important contributions to society’ (Giomi 2015: 283). In essence this vision did not fundamentally challenge women’s segregation into the private sphere and failed to grapple with the question of female empowerment.

It was in this period of reaction to Austrian colonialism that the practices of veiling and seclusion became intimately linked to a lack of education and employment. It is generally accepted that veiling in the Muslim world greatly increased during the colonial period, partly in response to the intrusion of

Westerners, suggesting the invalidation of 'the notion of tradition as a stable foil for the dynamism of modernity' (Cole in Müge Göçek and Shiva 1994: 24). Bosnian traditions of veiling, hardly static, were shaped by tumultuous economic, social, and aesthetic forces, and the zar shifted from being a symbol of wealth and prestige, to Muslim identity, to political and social backwardness. The interaction between Islam, the decay of the Ottoman Empire, and the Austrian occupation meant that veiling became a marker solely of Bosnian Islam. Because the veil had survived in that community precisely as a marker of identity and dwindled among other faiths, Islam became the sole carrier of all that was oppressive about the patriarchal system. In this process, all of the negative traits that the local community presumed to be associated with veiling – patriarchal family relations, female illiteracy, lack of political consciousness, female unemployment, old-fashioned gender norms, violence against women, and seclusion in the home – were handed over onto the Muslim population, even though they could be found in the Christian population as well. Indeed, anthropologist Vera Stein Erlich found that norms of female modesty and silence in 1930s Yugoslavia were common across all ethnoreligious groups (1966: 147). Nonetheless, veiled women began to embody the religious norms which were increasingly thought of as anathema to 'modern' life. Photographs of Bosnian Muslim women in the interwar years, which show them in European dress, bearing ankles and arms, with short black veils covering only their faces, fittingly illustrate this dissonance.<sup>2</sup>

## The Coming of Modernity

The early 20th century brought about sociopolitical change, the creation of the unified Yugoslav kingdom (1918–1941), and debates about modernity and progress. In the Bosnian Muslim community, the 'woman question' was raised for the first time, not only in regards to veiling but also women's employment, literacy, and participation in public life. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed (1992) point out that, in this early period, the question of veiling and women's emancipation in the Middle East was mostly a male question, concerned mainly with the creating of a modern state or community in which the veil operated as a symbol of the backwardness of their community. Indeed, Bosnian Muslim leaders were attuned to the wave of reformist thought on how Islam could accommodate rapidly changing social and economic forces, exchanging ideas with Islamic Modernists from Lebanon, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan (Šeta 2011: 82), and the newly established USSR's approaches in Central Asia (Crouch 2010). By the start of WWII, the more reformist Bosnian Muslim leadership was fairly receptive to women's emancipation, especially in the form of female education, and saw unveiling as a necessary reform.

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<sup>2</sup> These women were mainly members of an elite which had been impoverished in the land reforms of the 1920s, and the veils signified not just religious affiliation but former wealth and status. The photographs mentioned can be accessed at the Visual Archive of Southeastern Europe: <http://gams.uni-graz.at/context:vase>. Other can be found in the newly digitized AFŽ archive: <http://afzarhiv.org/items/browse?collection=1>.

The transnational feminist climate was equally rich during the early 20th century, and the Balkans and Middle East were not exempt from the intellectual debates and advocacy for women's suffrage, education, and employment. According to Hoodfar (1993), Egyptian women had one of the 'most organized and active world feminist movements' by the 1920s, with some leading feminists publicly removing their veils after returning from an international feminist meeting in Italy in 1923<sup>3</sup> (9). After WWI, women's groups ranging in ideology from liberal to more conservative and nationalistic groups abounded in the Yugoslav kingdom. Various women's organizations from the Balkans participated in international women's rights conferences and were members of global women's rights networks such as the International Women's League and the International Alliance for Women's Right to Vote (Emmert *in* Ramet 1999: 35). Yugoslavia saw mass demonstrations by women for the right to vote in 1937 and 1939, and the first Marxist parties, formed in the 1890s, quickly included gender equality in their programs. The Community Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) was formed in 1919 and outlawed between 1921 and 1941, during which time it operated underground and illegally. By the 1930s, youth activists from the Communist party infiltrated various 'liberal' women's alliances, and helped work for women's rights and literacy within them (Jančar-Webster 1990).<sup>4</sup>

## WWII and the Second Yugoslavia

The Second World War in Yugoslavia was an exceptionally bloody nexus of conflicts, belying the predominant discourse of the war as a bipolar conflict between the Axis and Allies. In Yugoslavia, the quisling forces in Croatia created an Independent State of Croatia which also subsumed Bosnia proper, with Serbia occupied by German forces, Dalmatia and Kosovo by the Italians, and parts of Vojvodina annexed by Hungary. It was in this context that the Partisans, the armed wing of the Communist Party with a pan-Yugoslav membership, fought against the occupying forces but also against domestic (para)militaries including the Serb royalist Četniks and Croatian fascist Ustaša. The conflict thus had feature of an ethnoreligious and ideological civil war as well as a guerilla war against the occupiers. The eventual Partisan victory in 1945 entailed the subsequent project of reconstruction and state-building (in the not unique postwar context of significant loss of prewar population and physical and bureaucratic infrastructure in ruins), but also the need to legitimize the reunified Yugoslav state and entrench socialism as the dominant and, it was hoped, unifying ethos of the nation.

In the period of postwar reconstruction, women rapidly achieved what they had failed to achieve in twenty interwar years, though this swift social change was evidently not discontinuous with previous women's' struggles.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, noted Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi.

<sup>4</sup> According to Jančar-Webster 'in 1908, 40 Moslem [sic] women in the Socialist women's organization in Skopje demonstrated for the removal of the veil and the chador' (1990: 33), which suggests that the link between socialist feminism and the necessity of removing the veil had deep roots.

Jančar-Webster (1990) suggests that the war ought properly to be understood as 'a moment of "collapsed" time when the external events that would wrench women from their patriarchal anchor were telescoped into a few short years' (4). Indeed, the concept of collapsed time is particularly useful in understanding the massive shifts that occurred during this period, as well as the way that these changes were quickly metabolized by social memory. The process of unveiling in Yugoslavia must be understood both within the context of the reconstruction and the consolidation of the socialist state, but also within the nexus of ideological conflicts in the region and greater world historical process of modernity, the collapse of empires, and the beginning of the Cold War.

It is also helpful to remember the emerging popular spirit of the postwar era, which legitimized the state-level discourse of *brotherhood and unity* and the aspirations for radical equality in a society which had heretofore been dominated by feudal hierarchies since Ottoman times. To illustrate the point, large numbers of Yugoslavs voluntarily worked to build the infrastructure of the new state. What had been a largely agricultural economy was rapidly industrialized and converted to heavy industry, leading to the distinctly modern phenomenon of urbanization through an influx of workers into cities and towns (Dobrivojević 2009). The Socialist People's Front won 85% of the popular vote during the first elections in 1945, which were considered fair (Lampe 2000). It is in this context that women's emancipation took large strides.

On their part, veiled Muslim women also took part in postwar rallies, turned out en masse for the 1945 election (Hoare 2013), and thus were part of the grass-roots commitment to the socialist project and not a repressed and therefore politically unconscious or disengaged segment of the polity. Muslim women's political engagement was seen in their participation to the underground socialist movement before the war. Slipičević-Bubić (1977) records veiled Muslim women participating in the labour movement in interwar Mostar, where a large number of women were employed in industry and involved in the underground socialist movement. Women participated in courses for political consciousness, intellectual salons, and labour strikes. During the war, Muslim and Croat women were responsible for maintaining secret weapons caches for the Partisans, and took part in underground Partisan actions, Red Cross drives, protests over food shortages, anti-war crimes demonstrations, smuggling Bosnian Jewish women to territory free of German occupation, and sending food to Serb women in concentration camps. Slipičević-Bubić emphasizes that the Muslim women who were involved in these actions were almost all veiled (Slipičević-Bubić in Musabegović 1977), suggesting that the veil no longer served as a reliable marker of political disengagement.

The new 1946 constitution, partially modelled on the 1936 Soviet constitution, inscribed women's rights into law, recognized them 'as political, social and economic beings' and took a radical stance on issues of inequality between classes, genders, and ethnicities (Bonfiglioli 2012c). Women were given the right to vote, the right to equal pay, welfare for mothers, and 'equal rights with men in all fields of state, economic and social-political life' (*Ibid*). The number of women workers in the reconstruction period of 1945–1949 quadrupled and 40% of new university students were women (Pantelić 2011). Dobrivojević (2009: 108) suggests that the massive influx of women into factories was due to sheer poverty rather than ideological motivation, though certainly the socialist policies made participation on this scale possible.

The participation of women in the Partisan forces had immensely influenced the attitude towards women's emancipation. Of the roughly 800,000 Partisan troops, 100,000 were women, of whom 60% were killed or wounded in the war, many dying in Occupation death camps (Ramet 1999: 93). Many other women participated as nurses or in crucial tasks such as procuring food for the troops. The mass participation in the resistance movement, even if it did not reflect the majority of women in occupied Yugoslavia, in effect proved wrong the patriarchal notion of the passive and domestic woman outside of public life (Ždralović 2015). Thus it was not just the *de jure* equality that was earned through new legislation, but the supposed cultural shift in attitudes towards the 'proper' role of women that had previously reigned. Gender roles were confounded not just on the battleground but in the home front, where women were forced to take up all of the work on farms, in factories, and were involved in sabotage and resistance in the major cities. The idea of having 'earned' their rights through their blood and toil was prominent: legal equality was the reward.

## The Anti-Fascist Women's Front

The Anti-Fascist Women's Front was created during the war in order to recruit and mobilize women to the Partisan cause. It was formed in 1942 in liberated territory in Bosnia, and its first conference was attended by women fighters and women from surrounding villages (Ramet 1999: 93). The Party saw women's emancipation as a crucial part of the socialist revolution, and although the AFŽ operated under the Party's auspices, it was a truly women-led organization. During WWII, some sections of the AFŽ were chided by the Party for privileging feminism over purely socialist goals in their activities, and were accused of acting as a 'state within a state' (Hoare 2013: 223). Milinović and Petakov (2010) argue that the mass entrance of women into the public sphere in the postwar period of 1945–1953 simply would not have been possible without a women's organization (81). Crucially, the new state was in need of these women; after the 'enormous human sacrifices, mass atrocities, death camps, masses of wounded, disabled, parentless children, destroyed villages, cities, hunger, winter' (*Ibid*, 81) of the war, women were needed to take the places of the men who had died, and to help reconstruct the country and construct a new society. They were thus required to become educated citizens who understood the aims of socialism, who voted, worked, and upheld the socialist system.

In the period of post-war reconstruction, the AFŽ faced the task of closing the gap between the rights given in the new constitution and the reality of the everyday lives of women. They found that women were undereducated, massively illiterate (almost 85–90% of women were illiterate [Jančar-Webster 1990: 27]), over-exploited in domestic, agricultural, and industrial work, trapped in patriarchal family modes, and with a complete lack of feminist consciousness (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 106). The AFŽ was tasked with the education (or 'cultural elevation') of women, which was thought to be necessary for them to exercise the rights that the new state had awarded them (Milinović and Petakov 2010: 80), and participate in economic and political life. They organized literacy courses, courses in hygiene (in an attempt to lower rates of infant mortality), and ran a wide variety of cultural and social services. They published a magazine, organized public lectures, 'oral newspapers,' choirs, and public reading

rooms (Ždralović 2015). A 1950 brochure attested that the activities of the AFŽ consisted of developing the political conscience of women, organizing aid to working women and mothers, running maternity homes, ambulances, crèches, playgrounds, nurseries during harvest time, kindergartens, public restaurants and canteens, laundry-houses, and so on (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 191). This was all to allow women to play a greater role in economic and political life, and taking on childcare and domestic labour was a crucial step in women's economic independence – AFŽ-run daycares and public laundries enable women to enter the workforce. Since socialism saw the emancipation of women as a subset of class issues, much of women's rights were dealt with via labour laws (Milinović and Petakov 2010: 80).

The AFŽ was crucial in defining the role of women in the new state as a Partisan fighter or a shock-worker who outdid her quotas (Pantelić 2011: 83). AFŽ leader Vida Tomšič brought up in her speeches the Marxian notion that 'the condition of women in a society gives the measure of the development and civilization of that same society' (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 191). Thus the emancipation of women and the development of their rights became a standard by which the achievements of the socialist state were measured and lauded; at the same time, 'women's status – concretized in the visual marker of women's dress – ... became metonym of both tradition/backwardness and modernity/progressivism' (Ballinger and Ghodsee 2011: 15).

The AFŽ was abolished in 1953 and replaced with a loose coalition of women's groups, presumably "on the argument that the goal of gender equality could be better promoted via party agencies which were not gender specific" (Ramet 1999: 94), which harkens back to the Party's wartime objection that the organization had become too powerful, or indeed ambitious. Typically, feminist historians of the AFŽ have agreed that the legacy of AFŽ was positive and that its goals were challenged by its loss of autonomy and the 'reestablishment'<sup>5</sup> of patriarchal relations. However, more recent literature by Bonfiglioli (2012a,b,c) and Tešija (2014) suggests that AFŽ leaders themselves considered dissolution to be the best political option at the time. Although the gains that the AFŽ helped achieve in their active years were far-reaching, the loss of the organization was felt most in less developed areas of the country, such as Bosnia, where 'its dissolution left them without state support in the fight against patriarchal local structures' (Tešija 2014: 41).

## The Unveiling Campaign, 1947–1950

Though the AFŽ drew members from all of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups, Muslim women tended to be underrepresented. Eventually, the Front found that the persistence of patriarchal structures in rural and undeveloped areas, particularly in Muslim ones, was an obstacle to the socialist modernization and re-socialization of the country. Muslim women living in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo, 'came to be seen as the most oppressed subjects, in need of being saved and enlightened by their emancipated Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian sisters living in the more advanced republics' (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 191). Muslim

<sup>5</sup> In the terms of Barbara Jančar-Webster (1990).

women who were socialists and/or Partisans tended to be unveiled, and likely did not disagree with this view. The Communist Party, for its part, wanted Muslim women to participate in political life, and in the run up to the 1946 elections for the constituent assembly, the AFŽ held rallies in which they mobilized women to vote for the government, using rhetoric not just of gender equality but of the sisterhood between Muslim, Croat, and Serb women in Yugoslavia (Hoare 2013: 365).

Even in the interwar years, the regions that had longest been under Ottoman rule were seen as somehow defective by the state, and the presence of Islam considered an 'unwanted legacy of the Turkish occupation' (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 192). These Orientalist tropes persisted under communist rule. It is indeed true that Muslim areas in Yugoslavia tended to be dominated by high levels of female illiteracy and patriarchal family structures, as anthropologist Vera Stein Erlich found in her seminal research during the 1930s. For Stein Erlich, the backwardness found in formerly Ottoman territories was not due to any essential quality of Islam, but to the decline of the Empire itself in the early 19th century. She insisted that for a significant period, the Ottoman Empire and its provinces were leaders in economic, technical, and artistic spheres, and lagged only when the Empire had begun to decay – and that these areas of Yugoslavia thus had the potential to again be progressive (Stein Erlich 1966: 28). In any case, the dominant Orientalist tropes functioned strongly in this period, especially because Muslims had not participated in the resistance or the Party in very large numbers. Adding to this the fact that veiling was religious attire (unpopular with the atheist communists who aimed to secularize the state) and was seen as 'a residue of the "Turkish Yoke", and was considered particularly backward, due to its "Oriental" and "Asiatic" roots' (Mesarič 2013: 17), the custom came under scrutiny in the early postwar years. As part of the need to modernize and politicize the most 'backwards' masses in Yugoslavia came the 1947 AFŽ campaign to unveil Muslim women, and rid Bosnian society of outward evidence of a former colonial order.

Despite the clear overtones of Orientalism in this goal, Bonfiglioli describes the campaign as 'marked by a far-reaching faith in humanism and historical progress, and by a strong ideal of socialist modernization, of which women's emancipation was seen as an intrinsic component' (2012a: 192). The new leader of the Bosnian Muslim community, Ibrahim Fejić, endorsed this campaign upon his inauguration, stating that 'women cannot achieve the full expression of [the equality won by the liberation war] as they are inhibited by wearing the veil and gown' (Hoare 2013: 374). In 1947, the Islamic Community issued several statements asserting that the veil is not required by religious code, and that women needed to remove the *zar* in order to fully participate in public life. The campaign's success was limited. Officially, by 1951, it was documented that out of the 546,037 veiled Muslim women in Yugoslavia, 519,088 had removed the veil in public ceremonies, yet these decisions were often not lasting, and most resumed wearing it upon return to their village (Pantelić 2011). Some women told AFŽ activists that unless it was law, their husbands would not accept it (Karčić 2014), while other men supported the campaign (or at least found it political necessary that their wives unveil) but had trouble convincing their partners (Kačar 2000). In practice, fewer than 50% of women in Bosnian towns had removed the *zar* by 1950 (Hoare 2013: 374), and it was officially encoded into law in 1951 as the *Law on the Banning of the Zar and Feredža*, which made

wearing the veil or forcing women to wear it a criminal offense with a hefty monetary fine.

The veiling law was seen as the first step towards addressing barriers to women's emancipation in the triad of veiling, gender segregation, and the gendered division of roles and labour. The veil served as the outward symbol of an objectionable patriarchal order that relegated women to the private sphere and to home life. As Stein Erlich's anthropological work pointed out, the confluence of religion and patriarchy had more to do with the legacies of empire and economic and social changes than about essential differences. The socialist ethos was anathema to 'Islamic' ideas about gendered space and a sharp distinction between public and private, which led to the non-participation of women in the country's production efforts. Therefore, removing the veil was a 'precondition for participating in modern social and political life' (Spahić-Šiljak 2012). Some officials in the Communist Party believed that re-socializing Muslim women could 'serve as a base for the political reorientation of the Muslims' (Hoare 2013: 366), positioning women as a vanguard through which the masses could be reached. The emancipationist policy of the Communist Party thus sought to broaden their pool of support and to privilege reformist and secularist voices within the Muslim community over the conservative ones.

Unveiling was also considered a literal precondition for participating in the labour force, and the veiling custom was traditionally linked to labour. In periods of war and shortage, urban women would remove the veil to go to work (Čaušević 2014: 53), while peasant women never fully adopted the *zar* to begin with because it did not allow them do the laborious tasks their livelihoods depended on. Labour was now exceptionally necessary in the period of reconstruction, marked by rapid industrialization and urbanization, voluntary work actions to build railways and roads, and rapid increase in women's employment. At the Second Congress of the AFŽ in Belgrade 1948, an activist stationed in Kosovo relayed their efforts to get women to unveil in that area. She directly linked the need to remove the veil with the success of the Five-Year Plan put forward by Marshal Tito, plainly stating that the implementation of the plan 'cannot be successful while tens of thousands of women remain veiled' (Kongres Antifašističkog fronta žena Jugoslavije 1948). Apart from an ideological imperative, the physical bodies of Muslim women were necessary in the public sphere and in the labour force.

## Unveiling as Performance

The public nature of the unveilings during the AFŽ campaign was noteworthy, though the ceremonial unveilings were scantily documented in film. These ceremonies occurred in the run-up to the law which eventually banned the *zar*, as the Party initially wanted to maintain a voluntary appearance. Public unveilings took place at several AFŽ congresses and meetings, where following speeches about women's emancipation, women would remove the *zar* on stage and 'inspire' women in the audience to do similarly. Andreja Mesarič calls this process 'inscribing the secular onto women's bodies' (2013: 19), and points out that similar ceremonial unveilings were used by the Soviets in Central Asia in the 1920s and by the French in Algeria during the Algerian War. Thus women's bodies became one of the sites of the major historical junctures of this period.

The discourse about the public unveilings relied heavily on the idea of enlightenment and the triumph of reason over ignorance – metaphors of light and dark were used in the propaganda to convince women to remove the veil (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 192). Also prominent was language about sight, about seeing and being seen – with their bodies made visible, women could ‘see’ without a veil over their eyes. They were said to have been ‘awakened,’ to have become conscious, and unveiling provided the ultimate proof of this lack of complacency. It was clear that the Party and the AFŽ considered this spectacle a necessity. Rather than quietly enacting a punitive law, casting female bodies into the public eye was crucial, even if the campaign of the AFŽ was not very successful in eliminating this custom. Indeed, the majority of veils were not removed in public but at home, and some with considerable struggle. Yet the spectacle served to literally put the new, idealized secular body that was to take the place of the veiled woman on stage. Rather than being neutral or marked merely by the absence of a veil, the secular body too is evidently full of signification (Selby 2014b), and the socialist image of the woman had its own performative uniform. The public unveilings articulated the new norms of the socialist state through the bodies of these women who were stripping themselves of ‘backwardness’ and stepping into the future.

Though eyewitnesses apparently attest to the fact that Muslim women attending AFŽ rallies ‘unconsciously’ lifted their veils out of sheer excitement (Hoare 2013: 224), the removal of the veil was psychologically difficult for many women (as documented by Kačar 2000; Kladaničanin 2016). The public nature of these events meant that many women from the same communities would unveil together, with prominent Muslim women leading the way. They also almost always took place in all-female environments, sometimes in other towns, which physically removed women from the male gaze as well as male authority, giving the campaign the air of being ‘grassroots’ and voluntary. Some unveilings were accompanied by ‘prizes’ such as paid trips to big cities, world fairs, AFŽ congresses, or to the seaside, acting not only as incentive but a way to remove women from communities of judgment. Realistically, the majority of the women who unveiled in these public ceremonies were convinced or coerced beforehand into setting an example for their coreligionists, and many took to the veil again after the ceremony. Usually the most prominent and respected women in a town would be approached and asked to act as examples for the fellow Muslim townswomen (Hadžišehović 2003: 124). For the majority of women, who unveiled only after the law was passed, it was extremely difficult to go out into public ‘naked’ and many avoided it for years. The forcible removal of the veils was often a painful thing for women for whom it was not only habit, but a marker of identity and faith (Hadžišehović 2003; Kačar 2000). As women’s bodies were launched into the public sphere and the public eye, religion increasingly became something private, something which was not to be performed on the body.

## **State Secularism Embodied**

Like other communist states at the time, Yugoslavia was officially atheist and the state was secular; the constitution affirmed the principle of secularism, and ‘guaranteed freedom of religion, but as a private matter for each individual,’

and banned theological schools or religious teachings in public schools or universities (Zajović and Veljak 2011: 175). Thus the state controlled religion by both 'imposing an atheist view of the world; [and] subjecting the Church to state control (i.e. secret police)' (*Ibid*, 175). The strong links between the Catholic Croatian church and Serbian Orthodox church to quisling regimes during the war meant that these churches were particularly persecuted. Religious institutions were eyed with suspicion and seen as 'sources of both potential political disorder and agents of traditional forms of class and gender oppression' (Ballinger and Ghodsee 2011: 12).

Interestingly, although there was some attempt at incorporating the Islamic community into the Croatian Nazi puppet state, the Islamic leaders as such did not seem to be attributed the same level of 'accountability,' and the role of Bosnian Muslims in the war was complex (see Hoare 2013). The Catholic and Orthodox churches played large roles in stoking Croat and Serb nationalism, respectively, and thus were particularly targeted as obstacles to the slogan of 'brotherhood and unity.' While some Muslims strived for autonomy, they were not even recognized as an ethnic group unto themselves until the 1970s, and thus perhaps seen as less of a threat to the state's unity. The most conservative and autonomist elements of the Islamic community were banned in favour of a state-sanctioned and institutionalized 'Islamic Religious Community,' which was seen as more accepting of the secularist reforms (Hoare 2013: 372). It was this leadership that supported the law against the veil, though more conservative elements railed against it. Sharia courts were abolished in 1946 and schooling in *madrasas* and *mekhtebs* was forbidden in favour of universal public education. The state-sanctioned Islamic body colluded in this secularization, and it was the Religious Community itself which banned dervish orders in the 1950s (Ballinger and Ghodsee 2011: 13).

After 1953, restrictions on religion relaxed, partly due to the socialist view that religion would become unnecessary; it would be 'dialectically overcome' through the formation of new models of progressive social values and what it meant to be a free citizen (Spahić-Šilajk 2012: 195). It was believed the state's policies of secularization would simply create the conditions in which this natural process would occur. As women's emancipation was seen as a necessary step in establishing a viable socialist state, the Communist Party held the view that state secularism was as a natural ally to women's rights. However, it is interesting to note that the unveiling law was sanctioned by the Islamic Community leaders with the explanation that veiling was not required by Islamic law and was a cultural, rather than religious, practice (Karčić 2014). The Reisu-l-Ulema of the Muslim community, Ibrahim Fejić, even drew out in a 1947 speech that not only was veiling not a requirement, it held Muslim women back from enjoying the rights and duties that Islam gives them, especially if it kept them from obtaining literacy or an education. It is remarkable that in an avowedly atheist and secular state, the unveiling of Muslim women was not framed as a liberation from religion in general or Islam in particular. Rather, the authorities went to some lengths to instead remove the veil from the realm of Islam by deeming it a cultural burden and relic of the past, which must be left behind. The *zar* was deemed inappropriate as an outward symbol of religion and thus ethnic difference, but Islam as such was tacitly sanctioned if it remained in the private realm.

Unveiling belonged to a chaotic plexus of the reigning debates, ideologies, and movements that characterized this period. At the centre of these forces was the female body as the symbolic terrain upon which ideas about progress and emancipation were enacted. Since Muslim women were seen as the 'most backward' women among the already backward masses of women, the symbolism of this liminal segment of society becoming the vanguard of socialist ideas was strong. The Muslim woman's emancipated body was used as a signpost of progress and liberation, as much as it was an empirical entity required for its labour and energy. The state's secularism, and indeed, socialism, thus became an embodied experience. Muslim women's bodies became a public staging ground not just for women's emancipation but for socialism and all that it promised.

Alev Çınar defines the body as one of the main sites of modernizing interventions, as a place where the boundaries of public and private are negotiated and inscribed (2005). In her view, the body is both symbolic and material space – it is where ideas of nation are inscribed through state power. She argues that 'intervention with regard to the body, especially the strategic covering of certain body parts in certain public places and not in others, can become an important tool by which boundaries that constitute the public sphere are established or contested' (2005: 54). Thus by removing the veil's full covering, the socialists shifted the boundary of public and private – vaulting women into the public sphere and that of work and the community. It made them both symbolically and materially the type of citizen that the state required. Çınar argues that clothes have a constitutive power, in that they mark bodies for public recognition within certain identity categories such as gender, class, status, ethnicity, race, religion, and so on; they display and shield things from the public gaze (2005: 55). In essence, they are part of what Aretxaga calls the 'bodily diacritics that fuel the obsession to render threatening bodies and people legible' (2003: 404). Within the interventions that states make in regards to bodies in processes of modernization or secularization, it is often women's bodies which are directly affected. The links between woman and nation are well-studied, as the female body has always been a literal and symbol battleground for the boundaries of the nation, of empire, of public and private. In a variety of historical contexts, their being covered or uncovered has served to identify the boundaries as well as the degree of civilisation of their own community or country.

This paper aligns itself with the interpretation of many feminist authors for whom the veil itself has no intrinsic meaning. It does not signify resistance or submission, emancipation or empowerment, though it might symbolize any of these things in a given context. Untethered from a tradition of seclusion, it does not signify the lack of education or participation in political life. What inscribes meaning upon the wearing of the veil and upon the bodies that are veiled/unveiled is often state power, and how the discourse that defines the wearing. As Spahić-Šiljak (2012) points out, women '[f]orcefully unveiled ... personify modernization of the nation. Compulsorily veiled, they embody the reinstitution of the Islamic order,' with women's bodies as 'the main battlefield for secular and religious state projects' (63). With the socialist state enacting the role of emancipator of women, it essentially legitimized its own authority though it failed to fundamentally question modes of patriarchy and male authority.

## The Orientalist Discourse

Ballinger and Ghodsee argue that scholarship about the relationship between female emancipation and secularism to date has been limited, particularly secularism studies which conflate secularism with secularization, that is, 'a waning in religiosity that is a result of modernization' and interwoven with the nation-state system (2011: 6). As a result, this tendency neglects the particularities of secularism in both Balkan and socialist state, 'all too frequently rests on a dichotomized view of the world as divided between a 'secular West' and a "religious rest"' (2011: 6). Instead, Ballinger and Ghodsee see socialist secularism in Yugoslavia in particular as stemming from a local history of religious pluralism and socialist ideology, rather than the thesis of waning religiosity.

The civilizational discourse that is evidenced in the AFŽ's discourse is familiar in the contemporary context, as common tropes of Islam as anti-modern and Muslim women in need of emancipation abound (see Scott 2008, 2015; Selby 2014a,b). The language used by Yugoslav socialists is familiar to this neo-Orientalist discourse, as they too spoke of progress and rights as incompatible with the veil, and of Muslim women as in need of being awakened, enlightened, and liberated. The trope of the Muslim woman who needs saving, as Hoodfar points out, stems from a time when the Muslim world (and the Balkans) 'fell deeper and deeper into European domination' as the Ottoman Empire declined in power (1993: 7). She argues that this was accompanied by representations of the Muslim world as uncivilized, primarily due to its apparent mistreatment of women; this justified Western intervention and the 'civilizing mission' (Hoodfar 1993: 8). Leila Ahmed also argues that the issue of women's rights 'only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam in [...] the later nineteenth century, as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries' (1992: 150). Thus the image of the Muslim woman needing to be saved from a Muslim population that needed to be civilized is inextricable from a context of Western European imperialism beginning in the late nineteenth century. This period marked the practice of veiling as a symbol of the oppression of women under Islam, and an impediment to 'moving forward on the path of civilization' (Ahmed 1992:152). Saeed (2014) cites Fanon in arguing that indeed, the unveiling of Muslim women was 'a necessary and fundamental step towards full colonization – a colonization that went beyond institutions and legal systems and to the bare bones of a culture and society.' For Lila Abu-Lughod, the fundamental problem of notions of saving other women from the seeming shackles of their religion or religious dress is that these ideas 'depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by westerners' (cited in Saeed 2014). That is, they depend on the presumption that the ones doing the 'saving' or the 'emancipating' are indeed superior.

In many senses, the debates about the veil within Islamic communities in the ex-Ottoman sphere always operated on an axis both of feminism vs. traditional gender roles and Western vs. indigenous ways. What tended not to be questioned by male intellectuals was male dominance itself, or the simple chauvinism of decreeing that women either should or should not be allowed to wear a garment (Ahmed 1992: 163). Also present in these debates was the context of Western European superiority, which was either resisted or pandered to, but remained in the background nonetheless. What makes postwar Yugoslavia fit

strangely into this postcolonial story is its Non-Aligned positioning between binaries of East and West, modernity and backwardness. It does not fit neatly into the Orientalist framework of state unveilings in Iran, Turkey, Algeria, contemporary France or Quebec, or even the early USSR. This is partly because colonialism was experienced and understood in very different ways. Indeed, the anxiety about what was seen as defective Eastern ways of being, the remnants of the Ottoman times, and an aspired Western mode was real in the Balkans, and dominant communist discourse resembled Bakić-Hayden's 'nested Orientalisms' (1995), with clear patterns of Orientalism between republics and regions.

In the case of the unveilings, because Serbian Orthodox and Croat Catholic women were numerically predominant in the AFŽ and the Partisans, the campaigns began to be seen as Christian women liberating their 'oppressed Muslim sisters.' Some even saw it as punishment that the socialists brought upon Muslims who had not participated in the resistance (Hoare 2013). This was in a context where Serbian and Croatian feminist women's organizations in the interwar period had written about "the need to "liberate" their Muslim sisters from the slavery of the veil" (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 192). Bonfiglioli argues that the AFŽ propaganda was more prone to define Muslim women as 'sisters in need' than as active subjects, something which likely didn't improve the ethnic dynamics of the campaign. The idea of a global feminist sisterhood is not without its colonial roots – Antoinette Burton argues that "the concept of international female solidarity was an ideal which western European feminists were able to imagine partly through representations of non-western women as compliant in their own salvation by their feminist "sisters"" (1991: 71). The sisterhood between Serb, Croat, and Muslim women, which was trumpeted by the socialist state, was no less fraught, but also less of a fiction.

Whereas the modernizing reforms in Iran and Turkey, for example, were concerned with assimilating into a modern European framework and a secular liberalism, those in Yugoslavia were not. The veil bans in Iran and Turkey were not imposed by Western powers, but Ahmed argues that they are 'only intelligible against the background of the global dominance of the Western world and the authority of its discourses' (1992: 165). While this was no less true for Yugoslavia, and discourses of progress and enlightenment were used by the socialists, these notions were, arguably, categorically different in that they did not strive to achieve Western-style secularism. As Ballinger and Ghodsee suggest, while state unveiling efforts in contemporary France or Kemalist Turkey focused on removing religion from the public sphere, 'the socialist secular model was far more comprehensive in trying to radically reshape the material conditions of everyday life' (2011: 21). In Yugoslavia, unveiling was both symbolic of state secularism and progress and functional – removing the veil, at least theoretically, would allow women to enter the labour force.

## Socialist feminism

We can also identify a particularity of Yugoslav socialist feminism which differentiates it from dominant liberal feminist discourses. Although feminist scholars tend to discount the women's organizations that operated under communism (see the work of Nanette Funk 2014), Ghodsee argues that in fact these

organizations were often successful at improving women's lot even within the structural limitations they faced. For Ghodsee, the argument against socialist feminism is 'derivative of a liberal feminist politics that is universalistic and insensitive to cultural variation in women's definitions of self-actualization' (2014: 540), which may not be found in the same modes of individual rights or autonomy. Feminist scholars argue that in the first wave of the Western feminist tradition, civil rights were never relevant to the 'main domain of their unfreedom' – that is, the home. The private sphere was shielded from law and instead governed by norms of love and duty (Miller 2007: 352). An interesting point, given that one of the main failures that socialist feminism was blamed for in Yugoslavia was that it failed to alter the power and labour dynamics of the private sphere, in the sense that care and domestic labour remained the duty of women, which led to the 'double burden.' These were questions that the AFŽ dealt with very directly in a variety of ways after the war, including running public laundries, communal restaurants, and childcare facilities, so that women could go to work without being burdened by domestic chores. The short-lived experiment of collective farms and housing in Yugoslavia also featured a sharing of domestic labour, which was intended to liberate women from drudgery in the home. These were ultimately not effective because gendered norms failed to change fundamentally, but it is true that perhaps socialism attempted to redefine the boundaries between public and private lives more profoundly.

Although the AFŽ drew on the legacy of interwar 'liberal' feminist activism, it centralized socialism in its ideology of emancipation and radical equality. The work the AFŽ did in seeking to alleviate the women's double burden of domestic labour was collectivist in its ideology and rather different from a Western liberal view of women's emancipation. It looked to the achievements of the Zhenotdel in the Soviet Union as exemplary; indeed, this was a historical moment when 'backwards Italy' saw the USSR as a haven for women's rights (Bonfiglioli 2012a). In the 1950s therefore, socialist feminism could be seen to have been slightly ahead of the curve in terms of question of women's emancipation, suffrage, equal pay, maternity and childcare, reproductive rights, family law (especially divorce), and even domestic labour. The AFŽ saw themselves not just as feminist activists but as vanguardists of the socialist revolution. For feminists, communism was used as an ideological tool (Wang in Ghodsee 2014: 542) in order to make possible the legal and social gains that had been unreachable a decade before. Conversely, the Communist Party operationalized the language of women's emancipation in order to bolster support for its cause, define the state as modern, and gain access to a large pool of untapped voters and workers. Although the AFŽ was restricted and eventually rescinded by the state, women's rights and conditions were indeed achieved in more than just name, though not as substantially as some would have liked. Indeed, the 1970s resurgence of neofeminists was not typified by a 'liberal' feminism, but a radical one, which was unhappy that the socialist state had not done enough to alter gender stereotypes or affect the balance of labour in the home.<sup>6</sup> These feminists argued that the socialist project in fact 'tamed' the revolutionary potential of women and drew on presocialist feminist genealogies to analyze gender relations (Ballinger and Ghodsee 2011: 11, 17).

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<sup>6</sup> See in particular the work of Zsafia Lorand (2009, 2015).

The ideas of the 'modern' present in Bosnia's unveilings were also distinct from Western modernities. While both the veil and unveiling were fetishized and exoticized by European colonizers in the Middle East and North Africa (Hogan 2011), the veil in Bosnia was never eroticized as such. Mesarič points out that although postcards picturing veiled women in marketplaces were popular in the Austrian period as they symbolized the exoticness of the land, the hidden woman's body was never sexualized. This is poignant because the socialist unveilings that later occurred did so entirely outside of the discourse of sex and attractiveness that dominates 'Orientalist' unveilings from Algeria in the 1950s to France today. The contemporary niqab ban in France focuses on the veil as an obstruction to female empowerment because it limits women's ability to attract and 'seduce' men, linking women's 'femininity' to their 'very existence' (Selby 2014b). Socialist unveilings neither had the male gaze as a reference point in their propaganda, nor was the socialist woman *supposed* to exhibit what Selby calls a 'hyper-normative femininity.' Socialist campaigns referred very little to sexual modesty or morality, not linking women's emancipation to sexual liberation but to education and worker's rights. Indeed, there is a distinct lack of sexuality in the image of the Partisan women – Vera Stein Erlich refers the popular claim that sexual affairs between Partisan fighters were punishable by death (1966: 5). While this was almost certainly untrue in practice (see Hoare 2013), it was an important keystone of socialism and the socialist realist art that would portray the Partisan struggle: true socialists only kissed on the cheek. The portrayals in art and sculpture of ideal socialist women were often unfeminine, physically strong, and almost asexual. Although the socialists brought in significant changes to reproductive rights and family law, the concept of 'modern sexual ethics' was not popular until the 1960s, when ideal concepts of Yugoslav femininity again changed. In the postwar period, this was subsumed entirely to the need for educated female workers and citizens.

## Conclusion

Amidst the tangled discourses of socialism, secularism, and post-colonialism which motivated the Yugoslav state and the Anti-Fascist Women's Front to unveil Muslim women, this episode confounds the Orientalist frameworks that many such unveilings took place in. As Mesarič notes, both those who argue for and against contemporary veiling in BiH are selective in how they interpret Bosnian history and that both sides of the debate tend to claim that their view is ultimately continuous with the past. As demonstrated in this paper, veiling was never a static symbol for Muslim women, nor was it undisputed in the Muslim community in Bosnia or elsewhere. The public, gendered bodily performances of religion and dress evolved and shifted with changing empires and socioeconomic structures. Socialism attempted to erase the veil as a symbol of religion, ethnic identity, patriarchal family structures, and women's illiteracy and relegation to the private sphere, but also as a symbol of colonial oppression. The debate about veiling stemmed from indigenous feminist activism, a local socialist revolution which managed to escape Soviet ideological and material domination, and intra-Islamic debates about its continued relevance. Likewise, the unique path of Yugoslav socialism after its split with the Soviet Union and its policy of non-alignment

meant that the state's relationship with religion and the official policies of secularism were adjusted to its very complex local dynamics of religion, ethnicity, and identity and the histories of these identities. The Second World War and the formation of a socialist state acted as a strong catalyst which spurred along social changes which had stewed for decades even outside a socialist context.

What harmed the unveiling campaign, ultimately, was precisely the fact that it was a symbolic move, and thus did not actually address living conditions. Though the removal of the veil was meant to act on women's seclusion and lack of employment, it did not on its own change family structures or address obstacles to women's full equality. It had to be "accompanied by material actions which promoted women's literacy and economic emancipation through employment" (Bonfiglioli 2012a: 195) and carefully negotiated with members of the community to avoid exacerbating ethnic tensions. The fact that the Party and the AFŽ relied on 'emancipation from above' does not necessarily curtail the many achievements for women's rights during Yugoslav socialism, but it does mean that Muslim women themselves (or at least the ones who were not socialists) were not treated as active agents in their own 'emancipation.'

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