

Interview with Jelena Batinić

Roknić Bežanić, Andrea

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from the gender perspective

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ANDREA ROKNIĆ BEŽANIĆ

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Interview with Jelena Batinić

With great pleasure this issue of the Journal opens with the interview to Jelena Batinić, a distinguished historian whose research on the history of World War II from a gender perspective and women's history falls perfectly in line with the Journal's theme. Jelena Batinić is an Academic Advising Director with Undergraduate Advising and Research (UAR) at Stanford University. Batinić is a historian of the modern Balkans and Europe. Her research interests include war and society, revolutionary movements, World War II, and gender history. In 2015 Cambridge University Press published her book *Women and Yugoslav Partisans. A History of World War II Resistance* that places at the heart of research *women – partisans*, as one of the most prominent phenomena of World War II, their mass participation and involvement in the war, but also their postwar role and socio-political commitment. This book makes an outstanding contribution to the research on World War II in Yugoslavia, and especially the topic of women in those turbulent times and their role in the partisan movement and socialist activism. The book was awarded the 2016 Barbara Jelavich Prize of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

1. The focus of Your book is on one of the most important phenomena of World War II the *woman-partisan*, or more precisely on the mass mobilization and active participation of women in the war. You research the history but also the after-war memory of that phenomenon, where did this interest originate from?

I first became interested in these themes as a graduate student in the US. I was in search for a topic for a seminar paper in East European history, and my adviser recommended taking a look at women in the Partisan movement. To be honest, I was reluctant at first. Both public discourse and historiography in the Balkans had long been inundated with World War II. I recalled the official communist state propaganda about the war as well as the political debates and historical revisionism that accompanied the country's disintegration. The Partisan movement seemed too present and too exploited a subject. But after some preliminary research into the matter, I realized how little was actually known about wartime gender politics and the mobilization of women. The more I researched, the clearer it became how important, complex, and fascinating the phenomenon was. Over the years, as my paper grew and evolved into a dissertation, I recognized that the story of the phenomenon would not be complete without a discussion of its legacy and that postwar memorialization had itself a history warranting investigation. My book thus traces both the history and postwar memory of the phenomenon.

2. On what sources do You base Your research? Which archival material? Which secondary sources?

The book draws on an array sources. First and foremost, I've consulted archival records of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the Partisan army, and the Antifascist Front of Women (AFŽ), held in the central military and state archives of the former federal state. I was fortunate to have been granted access to the Military Archive in Belgrade, whose vast collections on the so-called National Liberation War (group of fonds Narodnooslobodilački Rat, NOR) inform much of my narrative. These holdings constitute the most comprehensive existing documentary base on the Yugoslav Partisan movement as a whole. In addition to original wartime sources of the Partisan army's core units, they also include materials from numerous regional and local archives of former Yugoslavia, which were microfilmed and stored there in Tito's times. Party and AFŽ documents held in the Archive of Yugoslavia have provided vital information on the Partisan leadership's decision-making and gender ideology, as well as on postwar activities of the women's organization. Second, I have also used published collections of primary documents, such as the series *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda*; however, as some sources in the communist-era collections were altered prior to publication, I preferred to consult their archival originals whenever possible.

Third, I have studied the Partisan press in general and organs of the AFŽ in particular for their mobilizing rhetoric. In addition, participant reminiscences, memoirs, diaries, and other personal narratives have offered insights into the memories of Partisan veterans; I was particularly interested in how they tell their stories and why. Finally, the book traces the changing representation of the *partizanka* in the major literary and cinematographic works of the region.

3. Can You tell us more about the historical and historiographical frame of Your work.

This project is involved in debates that belong to several historiographical contexts. To begin with, I was inspired by recent scholarship on gender and war. Scholars have noticed, first, that total war of the 20th century had clarifying powers as it exposed gender systems in flux and thus brought their workings to light. In other words, war is a good place to study gender. Second, World War II destabilized all existing social arrangements and created opportunities to change or reinforce established gender norms--and that change in gender norms is something I am very much interested in. My work explores this flux of the gender system, the ways that the Communist Party attempted to stabilize and fix it, and the ways it was recast in the process. So the main historiographical

context of my book—besides, obviously, Balkan historiography—concerns studies of gender and war. Another historiographical context involves studies of women and communism/women and revolution, where conversations had long been dominated by the question of whether the revolutionaries succeeded or not in their attempts to liberate women. Newer works have increasingly moved past these debates to analyses of gender. My book too focuses on gender, analysing how notions of gender difference informed party policy and effected a particular organization of the resistance. It documents how the party both recruited women and rearticulated notions of womanhood in order to build a strong movement and reorder society. It ultimately argues that, for purposes of mass mobilization, peasant customs and traditional gender values were adapted in a modern, revolutionary key.

Still another historiographical context is the field of comparative communist studies. The book joins current discussions in East European history, where scholarship has turned from a focus on repression alone to investigate the ways that communist regimes tried to accommodate national legacies, political cultures, and local traditions in order to create legitimacy. My study explores a peculiar wartime partnership between a modern, radical, urban-based party and the peasantry, revealing how an active adaptation of traditional culture accompanied the consolidation of communist power in its formative years. Finally, the book draws on scholarship on modernization and the modern state, with its continuing reliance on invocation and reinvention of traditions. The invocation of local traditions by the embryonic Yugoslav communist regime during the war constitutes a prime example of one of the modern state's most potent mobilizing strategies.

4. The book gives a perspective on the changes of gender norms influenced by the war, revolution and the formation of the communist regime that claimed to have abolished inequality between the genders. These changes are analysed on several levels: through political rhetoric, institutions and everyday praxis. Why are these three levels historically relevant?

It was for primarily for analytical purposes that I decided to look at these three levels. Each of them was a major component of Partisan gender politics, so separating them analytically made it possible to study each in depth and also examine their mutual interconnectedness. The three-level approach has allowed me to explore what the Partisan leadership said about gender, whether and how this language corresponded to Party policy and the movement's institutional setup, and how these policies and institutions affected the daily lives of men and women in the movement. This method has also helped me investigate how ordinary men and women on the ground responded to and shaped Partisan gender politics from below.

5. What was the strategy implemented with the mobilization of women?

The Partisans stood out among local warring factions in that they were willing not only admit women to their movement, but also make sustained efforts to reach out and recruit them en masse. The communist leadership established an institutional framework for women's recruitment. Early in the war, realizing that men would be leaving for the front and that women would have to take over the rear, the Party formed a special women's organization—the AFŽ—to facilitate mass mobilization in the support network. In addition, the Partisans opened the doors of their guerrilla army to a large number of women. Their entrance into the military opened new vistas for young female recruits at the same time substantiating the Party's claim of egalitarianism. Equally important, the Party leadership developed a rhetorical strategy to attract women to the movement and legitimize their active participation in warfare. Their rhetoric rested upon a skilful combination of traditional Balkan culture with a revolutionary idiom. In its appeals to women, the Party consistently stressed its dedication to women's emancipation and gender equality. Parallel to such statements it also drew on patriarchal folk traditions. For modern purposes of mass mobilization, the communists consciously invoked the heroic imagery of freedom fighters from South Slavic folklore, which appealed to the patriotic sentiments of the population. References to the epic lore allowed the Party's leaders to claim continuity with the legendary Balkan heroes and establish cultural authority among the peasantry. Most important, traditional culture provided acceptable models for women's participation in warfare. Party ideologues portrayed the *partizanka* as the ultimate heiress of epic heroines. The revolutionary and the traditional were reconciled in her image as a folk heroine who earned equality by proving worthy of it in battle, which was used to justify both women's mobilization and the new egalitarian order.

6. What was the role and importance in the formation of the AFŽ? What was the importance of the women's partisan press as one of the main indicators of mass mobilization of women?

The AFŽ was the only gender-specific organization in the Partisan movement. It was a unique and original wartime creation, which operated on a surprising blend of three seemingly incompatible elements: communist ideology, peasant custom, and feminist organizational experience. Let me explain. The ideology is probably the least surprising component, as the leaders and organizers of the AFŽ were female communists, members of the Party or the communist youth league (SKOJ). More puzzling might be feminist experience. Since the Party had been outlawed in interwar Yugoslavia, in the mid-1930s it adopted the popular front line, which required that the

communists form broad alliances with other antifascist groups. As Party activists started infiltrating various legal organizations, female communist youths joined feminists in the Alliance of Women's movements and ended up running its youth section. Their presence energized and radicalized the Alliance, which launched several successful campaigns for women's suffrage. Those communist women with experience in the interwar feminist movement would form the core of female leaders responsible for the development of the AFŽ during the war.

Where does peasant custom come in? The AFŽ's main goal was to channel women's labour toward the Partisan war effort. It did so largely by adapting local rural traditions to a new institutional framework. Let me give you some examples. Women recruited by the AFŽ contributed mainly through an extension of their traditional tasks in the family and village communities: they knitted and cleaned, prepared food for the Partisans, nursed the wounded, laundered and mended. AFŽ activists frequented village gatherings and joined women's conversations about their daily concerns. They transformed the so-called *prela and sijela*—as which peasant women customarily gathered to socialize and do handwork—into Partisan workshops of sorts. They organized labour groups of women to carry food and clothes to the Partisans in the woods. And they did so in a remarkably structured way, using modern organizational devices, thus turning traditional customs into instruments of mass participation in modern warfare.

Besides supporting the army, the AFŽ had a political goal: to serve as a medium for women's enlightenment, politicization, and transformation into equal and deserving citizens of the nascent socialist polity. To enlighten women, the AFŽ organized a number of educational programs, including literacy courses, special "political" courses for the most enthusiastic peasant recruits, and mass conferences at which peasant women could learn about the current events and the advantages for their gender in the new regime. The organization also tried to educate women about the values of hygiene, literacy, and efficiency, thus acting as a modernizing force in the countryside.

The AFŽ was also in charge of women's press. In 1942, AFŽ organizations started issuing publications that specifically addressed women; about two dozen different periodicals were released during the war. They constitute a fascinating collection of resistance journals, created by women, for women, and about women. The journals featured educational pieces and political texts in a simple, accessible language. They sometimes offered basic lectures on Yugoslav history and culture together explanations of recent political developments. They pointed at new opportunities that would open for women in the new system and, most of all, encouraged women to contribute to the Partisans and send their children to the units.

To be sure, they were tools for the dissemination of propaganda. Yet one should not overlook their accomplishments. Perhaps their most remarkable achievement lay in the public recognition they accorded to peasant women's

work and words—a recognition without precedent in the region. The AFŽ gave political significance to traditional women’s tasks: knitting, sewing, laundering, and mending now became legitimate ways to contribute to the people’s liberation. Those who have performed those tasks most of their lives without any acknowledgment were now praised as heroines of the war. Just as important, many female peasants were for the first time given both authorship and an audience in public. They were encouraged to speak at mass conferences, their words being heard by the masses and quoted in AFŽ periodicals. One also has to acknowledge that some of the imagery promoted in women’s press had an enormous emancipatory potential.

7. Can You tell us more about all the roles women had in the partisan movement and fight?

Women could be found in a wide range of roles and positions in the movement. In occupied towns and cities, communist activists—the so-called *ilegalke*—worked underground, preparing sabotage actions, collecting intelligence, serving as liaison personnel. In the liberated zones, AFŽ activists issued women’s journals, organized mass conferences, offered courses in literacy and hygiene. Women organized by the AFŽ, as mentioned earlier, typically participated through an extension of their customary roles: they knitted socks and sweaters, nursed the wounded, collected food, medicine and donations, laundered and mended soldiers’ clothes, and offered shelter for Partisan families and orphans. They peopled labour groups that carried provisions to the troops stationed in the woods.

In the Partisan units, too, women were employed in many capacities. Some served as political commissars, many worked in the agitation and propaganda departments attached to units’ staffs, others could be found in administrative and communications positions as typists, secretaries, telephone, radio or telegraph operators, and ciphers; still many others were used for intelligence gathering, as couriers, and in various auxiliary services. The most conspicuous, however, were two groups, nurses and fighters. Female fighters stood out as a novelty, while female nurses owed their visibility in the units to their numerical preponderance—as a simple rule, if there were women in any given Partisan unit, they were most likely found in the medical sector. The term *partizanka* itself, although signifying all women in the Partisan movement, has been most often used in reference to female fighters and nurses. A typical representation of the female Partisan in postwar Yugoslav culture is an armed girl who fights and tends to the wounded. And that’s not entirely a propagandistic image. As is often the case with irregular warfare, the line between fighting and nonfighting tasks could be blurred in the Partisan units.

8. Did sex life have a political dimension? Can You elaborate on relationships within the party, women’s sexual conduct, and the “patriarchal morality” in the party?

Sex did have a political dimension during the war. Women’s presence in the units provided the Partisans’ adversaries with exceptional propaganda material. The *partizanka* became a favourite target of their anticommunist rhetoric, much of which focused on her presumed promiscuity and sexual debauchery. In addition, women’s presence gave rise to actual tensions in the units.

To fight enemy propaganda and address many real problems in the movement, the leadership instituted a code of sexual behaviour. The Party discouraged romantic relationships and marriages among the Partisans; it was a common practice in the guerrilla army to separate couples and assign partners to different units once their relationship was discovered. Illicit sexual behaviour—such as cheating on one’s spouse, getting married or starting a new relationship without Party permission, and engaging in promiscuity—was sometimes penalized.

This relatively strict code accommodated the patriarchal mores of the peasants who peopled the Partisan units, at the same time allowing the Party to interfere, in a very modern interventionist manner, in the most personal relationships of its followers. Much like peasant custom, Partisan sexual puritanism was gendered. Though the Partisan code in theory did not differentiate between the sexes, officials on the ground ordinarily identified women as the destabilizing factor in the units and culprits in incidents of a sexual nature. Women thus figured disproportionately on the receiving end of any tutoring and punitive measures. Despite the party’s commitment to egalitarianism, sexual double standards and traditional notions about gender persisted, outliving the war and revolution.

9. What happened with the *woman-partisan* after the war? Did the changes in women’s status occur in the wake of implementing the social revolution? What happened with the AFŽ postwar?

Like female recruits everywhere after World War II, most *partizankas* were demobilized. The few who remained in the military after the war were there as reserve and petty officers, most of them in clerical positions or physicians in the medical corps. Yet unlike their counterparts in the West, who were also largely removed from the workforce in order to make room for returning soldiers, Yugoslavia’s women did not go back to the home after the war. Instead, the majority of former female Partisans moved to towns and cities, finding employment or assuming administrative positions in the new state. Those with medical training tended to remain in the profession, with the

select few working for the army. Many Party women who had fought in the war retained or assumed important positions in the postwar AFŽ.

The AFŽ remained in charge of special “work with women,” which was considered necessary in the initial postwar years. The country’s reconstruction and transformation into an industrialized socialist nation depended upon the development of a large industrial proletariat—female as much as male. Drawing women into the labour force now became as important as drawing them into the Partisan movement had been during the war. On the other hand, in communist eyes, women remained a generic category, presumably more backward, narrow-minded, and passive than the male half of the population, and thus in need of special guidance and control. At the same time, as mothers and primary educators of future generations, women were indispensable to the success of the communist project. The party wanted them to be educated in the spirit of socialism and “brotherhood and unity” in order to transfer these values to their children. For all these reasons, special work with women was deemed important and the existing women’s organization, which had already proven its usefulness to the Party during the war, seemed the best medium. The AFŽ in the revolutionary postwar years thus ended up playing multiple roles as women’s organizer, political educator, lobbyist for women’s rights, and trans-ethnic reconciler.

However, the Party’s leadership had long been ambivalent about the notion of a separate, centralized political organization for women, fearing that it might divide the proletariat along gender lines and exhibit feminist tendencies. As soon as the major battles with counterrevolutionaries and then with Stalin seemed to have been won, the AFŽ’s *raison d’être* was called into question. In 1950, the AFŽ lost its status as an autonomous organization, and three years later, after its organizational form had been pronounced outdated in view of the general trend toward decentralization, the AFŽ self-dissolved. According to the official explanation, the basic sources of women’s legal and political subjugation had by then been removed. The still existing forms of inequality and “retrograde views” about women were due to the fact that Yugoslavia’s socio-economic basis was not yet fully developed; the solution, Party ideologues insisted, lay in the further socialist building of the country. The AFŽ’s dismantling ended a unique era in the history of the Yugoslav women’s movement—one of women’s unprecedented politicization and mobilization en masse.

It is worth mentioning that, around the same time that the wartime women’s organization disbanded, pre-communist ideas about femininity started creeping back into public discourse. Scholars have noted that the cult of beauty and the culture of female fashion, which had been rejected immediately after the war, began to return. For example, major Yugoslav newspapers started featuring a “women’s page” (*ženska strana*), which was dedicated primarily to fashion, cosmetics, and culinary recipes. Looking back at the 1950s, it seems ironic that a relaxation in the political and economic spheres coincided with a

backlash in gender values and with the beginning of a stagnant episode in the history of women’s organizational activity.

10. In which way were *women-partisans* represented in the Yugoslav cinematography? What were their roles?

If we look at the ways that the female Partisan was memorialized in the region’s cultures, we can trace her journey from a revolutionary icon in the early postwar years to the oblivion of the present. The changing memory of the *partizanka* in some ways represents the fate of socialist Yugoslavia.

After the war, the *partizanka* emerged as the preeminent symbol of Tito’s Yugoslavia. The Partisan war was the foundational myth of Tito’s state, and the female Partisan was a central character of the war mythology in the postwar era. Her official image was based on notions of heroism and sacrifice for a greater cause. That image was promoted in official commemorations of the war, war memorials, communist historiography, and popular historical texts. It was also shared by postwar fiction and film in the 1940s and 50s. The very first feature film of Tito’s Yugoslavia, *Slavica* (1947), was a movie about a Partisan woman, who fought heroically and died at the hands of the occupiers. *Slavica* set a specific mould for the representation of the *partizanka* and played a major role in her emergence as the revolutionary icon par excellence.

The official image remained relatively unchanged throughout the communist era. The *partizanka*’s representation in Yugoslavia’s literature and cinematography, however, began to change and diverge from the official version. Once her heroic portrait underwent the first revisions in the 1960s, she started to slide toward the sidelines of the war iconography, where she increasingly appeared in more conventional roles. In the process, the female Partisan was ultimately dethroned through marginalization, trivialization, and sexualisation, her downfall reflecting the erosion of communism and of the Yugoslav nation itself. This process culminated in the late 1980s and 1990s, when, amid the cultural and real wars that tore the country apart, the *partizanka* virtually disappeared from the public eye.

11. What is the collective memory of the *woman-partisan* nowadays?

The best term to describe the state of affairs today is oblivion. This situation, in my view, is a result of the hyper-politicization of memory that I mentioned at the beginning. When it comes to women, the current oblivion has to do precisely with the fact that the image of the *partizanka* was such a potent symbol of the communist regime and of the Yugoslav nation, with both of which the elites of the successor states want to disassociate. Once some new

generations can approach the female Partisan less as a political project and more as a historical subject—a truly fascinating historical subject, one might add—we can hope that there will be some space in the public eye for the remembrance of the phenomenon. On a positive note, in the region there have appeared signs of renewed interest in women and revolution, both in academia and beyond, which perhaps indicates the first steps in that direction.

12. In Your opinion, why is there still insufficient interest in history of women and gender history as opposed to other historiographical interests?

The situation you describe seems typical for not only scholarship in the region but also historical literature in general. The obstacles and challenges that scholars such as Joan W. Scott identified decades ago—the field’s isolation, its ancillary position, its marginal impact on dominant and presumably universal historical narratives—are still with us. And they persist despite the turn to the study of gender, which Scott thought would end the field’s isolation. So there happens to be little intellectual exchange within the historiography of the region. Our work is mentioned in a footnote, if at all, in general historical narratives. And our findings are rarely discussed beyond the field, often to the detriment, it seems to me, of precisely those “universal” narratives.

But I am cautiously optimistic. The intellectual contribution that gender history has made to historical scholarship is at this point undeniable and, though there is still a long way to go, historians are beginning to incorporate gender as an analytical axis in their studies regardless of whether they thematically deal with women’s/gender issues or not. In addition, young scholars are increasingly showing interest in, and appreciation for, the field. The present volume of your journal is itself a testament to that trend.

Once again we are thankful to Jelena Batinić for accepting to give this interview. Her observations are a valuable introduction to the topics present in this issue of the Journal. In hope of future similar historiographical challenges we present to our readers the articles for further reading and deliberation.

Andrea Roknić Bežanić,
Editor in Chief