

SOME DATA ON THE MASSACRE IN THE VILLAGE OF IZBICË, MARCH 1999



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Abstract

The study sheds light on serious crimes of genocide level that the military, paramilitary armed forces and police of the FRY and Serbia have committed in Kosovo, with special emphasis the village of Izbicë in the municipality of Skenderaj. Archival documents, scientific literature as well as interviews in the field, which I have analyzed, treated and carried out during the scientific researches, have clearly proven that the scale of crimes against the civilian population increased in 1999, specifically from the month of March, when the OSCE observers began to withdraw from the field. Released from the pressure of international observers, numerous Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces began actions against the Albanian civilian population throughout Kosova, but the greatest intensity was in Drenica where all age groups and both sexes were not spared, showing strong evidence that Serbia as a state has committed crimes against the civilian population, respectively against children, women and the elderly, such as the massacre in the village of Izbicë where Serbian forces killed, executed, massacred in a few days 147 Albanian civilians.

During the war years in Kosova (1998–1999)

During the war years in Kosova (1998-1999), the military, paramilitary and police armed forces of the FRY and Serbia committed serious crimes of genocide throughout the territory of Kosova. These crimes were committed against the Albanian civilian population, which constituted over 90% of the population in this period. (Human Rights Watch, 2002; War crimes in Kosova, 1998–99, 2010)

All age groups and both genders were included, which is strong evidence that Serbia as a state has committed crimes against the civilian population, respectively against children, women and the elderly. The forms of the crimes were different and were committed with different means (firearms and cold weapons). Among the forms of the most serious crimes committed in Kosova are: murders, executions, rapes, kidnappings, disappearances, etc. All these crimes were committed in order to ethnically cleanse the region of Kosovo, which has historically had an absolute Albanian majority. Over 400 massacres were committed throughout Kosova during the war (KIPRED, 2005).

In the first phase of the war, from February 1998 to March 1999, the number of victims was relatively low: by September 1998, around 1,000 citizens had been killed, although the data is uncertain; the number of victims between September 1998 and March 1999 is not known exactly, but it is assumed to have been smaller. (Salihu, 2020) During this period, more than 400,000 people were driven from their homes, where about half of them displaced. Most of these internal refugees returned to their homes after the Holbrook Milosevic agreement of October 1998 (KIPRED, 2005).

However, during the war, in Kosova, the Serbian military and police forces, as we pointed out above, committed crimes against the Albanian civilian population. Murders, executions, mental and physical torture, rapes, ethnic cleansing and other crimes were committed, which are prohibited by international conventions. In the period from 24 March to 12 June 1999, the number of people killed is approximately 10,000, the vast majority of whom are Kosovar Albanians killed by FRY forces. Moreover, there are records of large-scale violations and torture, as well as looting, burning and extermination (KIPRED, 2005)

So, taking into account the number of those killed, Kosova Albanians account for more than 11,000 civilian victims, followed by Roma, Turks, Bosnians, Montenegrins and other non-Albanians, accounting for 526. The fact that some local Serbs have been killed must also be mentioned, and it was identified that a large number of them were killed by their compatriots, such as the case of “Panda in Pejë” and the case in Lipian. In addition to the civilian victims, today, 24 years after the end of the war still there are over 1,600 Albanian civilians on the lists of the missing. Rapes and sexual violence were also components of the Serbian government’s campaign to carry out the ethnic cleansing of Kosova. Throughout the territory of Kosova, over 20,000 Albanian girls and women, from the age of 7 onwards, were subjected to the crime of rape in an organized manner by the military, police forces and other structures of the Belgrade regime (Naime Mançestena - Sherifi, 1999, March-September).

The rapes against the Albanians were not rare and isolated acts, which were carried out by individuals of the Serbian and Yugoslav forces (International Tribunal, 26 Feb 2009) (Human Rights Watch, 2001). So, the crimes of Serbian forces against Albanian civilians have extended throughout the territory of Kosova, (Monograph, 2010) the phenomenon of mass murders has been recorded in particular in the municipality of Skenderaj, which suffered great human and material damage during the war. This municipality has the highest number of civilians that were killed and executed in the country. (Krasniqi, 2021) Thus, at the end of 1997, large Serbian military and police forces were brought in and stationed at the Skenderaj Hunting Ammunition Factory, turning it into a Serbian military and police base from which they could attack the entire region of Drenica (Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004).

These Serbian military-police forces committed murders, executions, rapes, physical and psychological torture, etc. (Zogaj, 2019) In addition to the mass murders, violence and terror that the Serbian army and police have carried out in this municipality, the state structures of Serbia have displaced the Albanian civilian population from their homes and forcibly expelled them towards Albania and North Macedonia (since International Criminal Law recognizes this by the term of ethnic cleansing). However, a part of the civilian population during the persecution by the Serbian forces sheltered in the villages of the nearby municipalities. The deportation of Albanian civilians was carried out with the aim of changing the ethnic composition of Kosova and, in this way, establishing complete control of the Serbian authorities over Kosova. “During the Kosova war, over 800,000 Kosova Albanians were expelled from their homes by Serbian security forces.

These data are found in a report by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which announces that 862,979 refugees left Kosova from 23 March to 9 June 1999. A similar figure is mentioned in an OSCE report, which states that 863,000 civilians were expelled from Kosova between March and June 1999. Meanwhile, another 590,000 were displaced within Kosova. Meanwhile, Amnesty International points out that “until the end of the war in Kosova in June 1999, more than half of the civilian population of Kosova lived in refugee camps in Albania and Macedonia” (KIPRED, 2005)

As for the number of those killed, executed and massacred in the municipality of Skenderaj, although it is among the smallest municipalities in Kosova, it has the highest number of victims. We rely on the data provided by the office for those injured by the war, according to which in the territory of this municipality, in the period from January 1998 to 12 June 1999, 1080 Albanian civilians were killed, executed and massacred (Xhevahire Hamiti, 2020).

It is worth noting that in the municipality of Skenderaj, during the offensives of the Serbian forces against civilians, massive crimes were committed against Albanian families, such as in the villages: Qirez, Prekaz i Poshtëm, Kllodernica, Izbica, Rezalle, Abri e Poshtme, etc. Out of the total of 52 villages in the municipality of Skenderaj, only two villages have no data on killed civilians (AAMMF), (Meta, 2019).

So, during the years 1998-1999, the violence that the Serbian forces committed against the Albanian people escalated to the level of mass crimes and large-scale massacres (Kosovës, 16.5.2019); (Bardhyl Mahmuti, 2015); (Osmani, 2015).

As a result of the circumstances of the war and countless arrests by the Serbian police and army, according to data from the municipality of Skenderaj, 128 residents are considered missing until now (Hamza). In addition to the killing and execution of over 1000 Albanian civilians in the municipality of Skenderaj, over 893 civilians were wounded as well. (Xhevahire Hamiti, 2020).

As for the mass murder, dozens of cases were recorded in this municipality where hundreds of Albanian civilians were killed and executed, including children, women and the elderly. (AAMMF). According to the data in the municipality of Skenderaj, out of 1080 civilians killed and massacred, 185 of them are children aged between 0 and 18 years (131 boys and 54 girls) (Hanumshahe Ilazi & Nystret Pllana, 2019).

Some details on the massacre in the village of Izbica, March 1999

The level of crimes against the civilian population increased in 1999, specifically from March, when the OSCE observers began to withdraw from the territory. Freed from the pressure of international observers, numerous Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces began actions against the Albanian civilian population throughout Kosova, but the greatest intensity was in Drenica region. Based on the information of the time, it appears that on 19 March, 3 buses with Serbian police, 17 trucks with cannons of different caliber entered Drenas, which were located in

“Feronikel” mining plant (KMDL NJ January–March 1999). The next day, an addition force of 10 buses and 10 trucks with Serbian soldiers were deployed. Moreover, over 30 tanks and several armored vehicles had arrived from Prishtina to Drenas, which started the action against the civilian population of the region of Drenica (Kosovapress – Volume II, 2016).

“Lubisa Dikovic, commander of the 37th Motorized Brigade of the YA (Yugoslavian Army), whose area of responsibility included Drenica, testified that a combat group of his brigade, the 37th Combat Group, arrived on 7 March 1999, while the rest of the brigade, reinforced by about 100 to 150 volunteers, joined the group in early April” (International Tribunal, 26 Feb 2009).

In this period, Skenderaj was completely blocked by the military and police forces, who had started systematic violence and terror against the Albanians. *“Serbian crimes in the municipality of Skenderaj during 1999– “...according to Lazarevic, on 18 March 1999, the joint operations of the YA and the Ministry of Internal Affairs compiled an action plan for the “defeat of the KLA” in the sector of northern Drenica and Podujeva. On 19 March, the Joint Command issued an order directing units of the 37th Motorized Brigade, together with units of the 125th Motorized Brigade and police units from Mitrovica and Peja, to attack the KLA – along the line of the villages of Mikushnica, Prekaz i Poshtëm, Polac, somewhere around three kilometers from Qirez. According to Dikovic’s daily operations report dated 20 March 1999, units of the 37th Motorized Brigade were engaged in “suppression of terrorism along the line of villages...” (International Tribunal, 26 Feb 2009).*

While according to the reports made by the representatives of the KMDL NJ (CPHRF), on 19 March 1999, the Serbian military and police forces had undertaken an action against the villages of the municipality of Skenderaj, where the town of Skenderaj was shelled and looted first, and then the villages, as well as hundreds of residents of this municipality were killed. More than 15 people were killed in Skenderaj alone, while hundreds of Albanian civilians were executed in the villages of this municipality, and over 200 people were arrested and hundreds of houses were burned (Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004; KMDL NJ January–March 1999).

According to some orders of *“The YA and combat reports accepted as evidence, it has been confirmed that at the time when the murders took place in Izbica, the YA and the MIA were conducting a joint operation in the municipality of Skenderaj. On 22 March 1999, the Joint Command issued a “decision” for the destruction of the “FTSH” (Albanian Terrorist Forces) in the Lower Drenica sector. The “decision” envisaged an attack in the eastern part of Skenderaj on the line of the villages of Polac–Tërstenik–Prelloc–Likoshan. The YA forces that participated in the joint attack were the 37th Motorized Brigade and the 125th Motorized Brigade. Seven police units also participated in the operation, two of which had to coordinate with the 37th Motorized Brigade” (International Tribunal, 26 Feb 2009).*

In their actions, the Serbian military and police forces have committed dozens of crimes against the Albanian civilian population. Thus, on 21 March, 5 people were killed in the village of Baks, while on 23 March; several people were killed in the village of Prelllofc.

On 24 March 1999, the day when NATO's intervention in Kosova began, Serbian military and police forces killed and massacred dozens of Albanian civilians.

After the start of the NATO bombings on the Serbian forces, the latter had started a powerful operation against the Albanian population in Kosova (KMDL NJ, March–September 1999).

Thus, such actions by the Serbian military and police forces were also undertaken in the villages of Skenderaj municipality, where hundreds of inhabitants were executed and then massacred. Dozens of tanks and armored vehicles had come from Mitrovica region in the direction of Skenderaj. On 20 March 1999, Skenderaj was completely blocked because hundreds of Serbian police and soldiers were stationed there (Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosova, 16 May 2019).

In addition to the persecution and arrest of the citizens of Skenderaj, the Serbian forces executed 15 Albanian civilians between the ages of 15 and 70 (KMDL NJ, January–March 1999).

Eight were executed in the place called “*Te Pishat*” (At the pines area), above the city, while the others were killed in their homes and yards and in the presence of family members. Moreover, on the same day, 13 people from Neighborhood 2 also disappeared. This massacre is considered among the most serious massacres that the Serbian forces have committed against the Albanian civilian population in the municipality of Skenderaj. As a result of the actions and crimes of the Serbian forces against the civilian population, it is estimated that in March 1999 alone; more than 30,000 citizens were displaced from their homes in Skenderaj and its villages, who took refuge in the mountains (Kosovapress–Volume II, 2016).

The operations of Serbian forces in Drenica from 25 to 30 March 1999 as well as the Massacre in Izbica – After the start of the NATO bombings on the Serbian forces, the latter had started a frantic operation against the Albanian population in Kosova. Thus, such an action by the Serbian military and police forces was also undertaken in the direction of the village of Izbicë (Zona neodgovornosti, 1999).

On 25 March 1999, many forces of the Serbian army and police had left the village of Rudnik in the direction of the village of Kllodernica and in the direction of the village of Izbica. During this offensive, dozens of Albanian civilians were killed and executed (War Archive, Vol. II, 2016). According to the documents “on 24 March 1999, the Joint Command issued another order for the units of the YA to assist the MIA in breaking and destroying the “FTSH (ATF)¹” in the Drenica sector (“Operation Drenica”). According to the order, the objective was to isolate the “FTSH” (Albanian terrorist forces) in the general sector of several villages, including Kllodërnica, Turiçec, Vojnik, and Buroje. Lubisa Dikovic acted according to this order, moving his command post to the area of Runik, a village in the northwestern part of the municipality of

¹ The so-called Albanian Terrorist Forces.

Skënderaj. He also engaged his combat group along the line of the villages of Rudnik, Vitak, Kllodërnica, Vojnik, and Buroje, as noted in the order and in the daily reports of the brigade's operations" (Tribunal, 11 December 2007)

Thus, the villages of Rudnik, Banja and Syrigana of the municipality of Skenderaj in the period of the 1998–99 war, and especially during the NATO bombings, were transformed into bases for Serbian military and police formations. The Serbian forces had given orders that their forces: *"To be moved on 25 March to the sector: Baja–Rudnik–Padalishta – and from the perimeter line: Belica–Çitak–Kodra e Vitakut, to support the forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the operation. Tasks: To support the forces of the Ministry of Interior in defeating and destroying "FTSH (ATF)" in the direction: Rudnik–Vitak–Kllodernica–Vojnik–Buroja; the defeat and destruction of the "FTSH (ATF)" in the Leqina–Kosterc–Kllodernica sector; the primary task is also the exit to the Ternava–Bajica–Kllodernica line". The objective of the Serbian forces was "Encirclement of "FTSH (ATF)" in the general sector of Kllodernica, Rakinica, Rezalla, Llausha, Likoc, Plluzhina, Abri e Eperme and Abri e Poshtme, Makermal, Kosmaq, Aqareva and Turiqec."* During the movement of the Serbian forces, Albanians were persecuted in this area where they were sheltered, and hundreds of Albanian civilians were executed. So, from 20 until 30 March 1999, dozens of murders, executions and massacres were carried out by the Serbian military and police forces in the villages of Skenderaj (Kosovapress – Volume II, 2016). Thus, in villages such as Rudnik, Llausha, etc., hundreds of civilians were killed during this action (AAMMF1–16) (Kosovapress – Volume III, 2016).

The village of Kllodërnica, although, for a long time had become a place of refuge for Albanian residents of the surrounding villages, then the local residents were also forcibly forced to move. In addition, the Serbian army and police killed and massacred dozens of civilian residents of various ages and genders of this village and those who had taken shelter in this village (AAMMF; Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004)

The killing of civilians in the region of the municipality of Skenderaj was permanent. For the killing of hundreds of civilians in the villages of Skenderaj municipality, the responsibility must be taken by the Serbian military and police forces and the Serbian government in Belgrade (Zona neodgovornosti, 1999).

Massacre in Izbica — Serbian military and police forces shelled the village of Izbica for 3 days (25–28 March) in which close to 25,000 people were evacuated. Liri Loshi also gives us data on the number of refugees in this village, according to whom: *"on 25 March 1999, people from the municipality of Skenderaj began to gather in the valley of Izbica, and on 26 March about 25,000 people had gathered there. However, he also explained that on the day they separated the men from the women, there were about 3,500–4,000 people there since many of them had decided to go to the nearby village of Tushila. Loshi was in Tushila around that time and there he found about 30,000 displaced people, "99%" of whom were civilians."* (International Tribunal, Vol 2–4, 26 Feb 2009.)

The resident of this village, Gani Behrami², affirms the same “... *thousands of inhabitants (mainly women, old people and children) of the surrounding villages were sheltered in Izbica, between the night of 27 and 28 March, nearly 4,000 residents left the village and headed towards the village of Tushilë*” (Behrami, 2020). The next day around 8:30, Serbian forces surround the area, where the civilian population was concentrated. In the village of Izbica, thousands of women, children and old people gathered. After the physical abuse, they separated the boys and men (from the age of 14) from the women, and made them walk in the direction of the village of Vojnikë–Turqefc, ordering them to continue on their way to Albania. Thus, on 28 March 1999, 127 civilians of different genders and ages were killed in Izbica, while 16 civilians were rescued, 12 of whom were injured. (Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004)

Regarding the killing and execution of Albanian civilians in Izbica, we also find information in a very important document, which, among other things, states: “*On 28 March 1999, the forces of the FRY and Serbia surrounded the villagers and approached them, requesting money. After FRY and Serbian forces stole valuables from the villagers, they separated the men from the women and small children. Then the men were divided into two groups. One group was taken to a nearby hill while the other was taken to a nearby stream bed. FRY and Serbian forces opened fire on both groups of men, killing at least 116 Kosovar Albanians. Also on 28 March 1999, women and children gathered in Izbica were forced to leave and walk towards Albania.*” (Loshi, 2009)

In addition to the crimes committed on 27 and 28 March 1999, Serbian forces also committed other crimes in the village of Izbica in the municipality of Skenderaj. Thus, on 11 May 1999, Serbian soldiers and policemen committed a massacre in Xhemajlaj neighborhood, where they executed 12 innocent civilians who had taken refuge in the village of Izbica. Those executed were mainly members of Shala family from the Buroja village³ and members of the Boja family from Kernica village (Behrami, 2020). (Archive of the Association of the Missing and Martyrs of Freedom).

So, from the village of Izbica alone, 24 Albanian civilians were killed and massacred by Serbian military and police forces, while 3 people are still considered missing (Jusuf Osmani, 2015).

After the citizens buried the victims in difficult war conditions, the Serbian forces exhumed them with the aim of concealing the traces of the crime, (from 28 May to 3 June 1999, and they reburied them in various cemeteries in Kosova, and a part of them in Batajnica, Serbia (Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004). According to the report of the KMDLNI (CPHRF) published on 6 April 2000, in the execution of Albanians in the village of Izbica alongside local Serbs from the villages

² Interview with Gani Behrami, a resident of the village of Izbica, where 7 members of his family were executed in this massacre. Izbica, 03 February 2020, time 14:00-16:00.

³ From the village of Buroja, during the war period of 1998-1999, 44 residents were killed, while 7 people died from the consequences of the war in the absence of doctors and basic items for life. Only in the massacre in Izbica, 26 residents were killed, who had taken refuge there due to the fighting in this region.

of Drenica and Burim (former Istog) the Serbian military and police forces were also involved. The following participated in the Izbica massacre: 42 members of the Tomasevic families from Syrigana, but also others.

According to the witnesses who managed to escape the crimes of the Serbian forces, all the executed were civilians and unarmed, who were executed in their homes and near their families. *“All those killed were local residents of the village of Izbica and some surrounding villages who had taken shelter considering it a safer area. That day was the Eid day”* (Milazim Thaqi, 2021). In the village of Izbica, in the municipality of Skenderaj, the Serbian army and police massacred the Albanian civilian population. This crime, which was conceived, designed and instigated by the state structures of Serbia, led by Slobodan Milosevic and carried out by the chain of command of the Serbian army and police, proves that Serbia during the years 1998–1999 in Kosova committed crimes against humanity. In fact, in terms of purpose, method and content, these crimes (Massacre in the village of Izbica) undoubtedly constitute sufficient evidence that: Serbia committed genocide in Kosova (Kosovapress – Volume II, 2016).

The level of crimes up to genocide, which the Serbian state structures (army and police) have committed in Izbica and other regions of Drenica, should be condemned by the International Tribunal for the Crimes Committed in the Former Yugoslavia (Hague Tribunal). The punishment of Serbia for the crimes committed against the Albanian civilian population in Kosova during the years 1998–1999 is necessary, to get out of the logic of the impunity of the genocide. Furthermore, the punishment of the Belgrade regime and the capture of the war criminals in Serbia, would affect the prevention of the repetition of such crimes.

In conclusion, we can say that in the Izbica massacre, 147 Albanian civilians were killed and massacred by Serbian military and police forces. While the age of the victims is from six months to over 100 years old. (The monument of the memorial complex in the village of Izbica)

From the data collected so far in the field, we can conclude that in addition to the above-mentioned massacre on 28 March 1999 in the village of Izbica, the Serbian military and police forces have killed and massacred dozens of other Albanian civilians in Skenderaj and in the villages of this municipality. (Ibrahim Çitaku, 2004) (Behrami, 2020)

So, in this offensive alone, over 300 Albanian civilians were killed and executed by the Serbian forces.

Conclusions

The crimes committed during the years 1998–1999 in Kosova were not beyond the control of the Serbian political, military and police structures, but on the contrary, those crimes were the result of a plan aimed at destroying the Albanian being and identity as such and changing the ethnic structure in Kosova. So, the Serbian crimes during the war in Kosova were committed by the Security Structures of the Serbian state: the army, the police, the secret service and the

territorial defense. The doctrine of genocide has been articulated by the Government, the Serbian State Security Structures, the Academy of Sciences, the Orthodox Church, while the Serbian media have broadcast and proclaimed it. All the acts of violence that the Serbian forces committed against Kosova Albanian civilians (murders, executions, injuries, ill-treatment, sexual assaults, violations of their physical and mental integrity, ethnic cleansing, etc.), were intended to physically destroy the Albanian people, in whole, or in part, because of their ethnicity. The Serbian government, through the army, police and other structures, committed crimes of genocide in: ideological, theoretical and practical aspects. With special emphasis in the region of Drenica, respectively in the municipality of Skenderaj and Drenas, the Belgrade government institutionally organized the killing and execution of civilians on ethnic grounds with the aim of physically eliminating the Albanian people as such.

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