

Between Incomprehensible Evil and a Moral Code of Honor: The Rescuing of the Albanian Jews During the Holocaust

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The Holocaust, also known as the Shoah, was the tragic and devastating event of the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews across German-occupied Europe. The Jews and other racial minorities were rounded up across Europe and slaughtered by the German Nazi regime. Little was done to save, and rescue Jews during that dark period, that is why the story of Albania, a small country in the Balkans, in which the entire country protected the Jewish community is so remarkable (Savich, 2002). This paper will try to examine the heroic rescuing efforts made by the people of Albania during the Holocaust while focusing on the Albanian moral code of honor known as “Besa”. This paper will also provide an overview of the impacts of those actions.

Keywords: Holocaust, Muslims, Albanian, righteous among the nations

Introduction

Jewish presence existed in Albania since the second century C.E. when Romaniote Jews immigrated to the north of the country. During the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century, the Turkish Sultan invited Jews to live under Islamic rule in the Ottoman Empire and this brought more Jews to Albania (Grebbe, 2010).

During the centuries the country had proved to be a haven for Jews, and before the second world war there were two hundred Jews who dwelled in Albania.

With Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and an increase in antisemitic activities throughout Europe, Jews felt threatened in their own countries, and began migrating from western and central Europe to Albania.

It is estimated that about six hundred to eighteen hundred migrated Jews were in Albania before the German occupation (Trošt & David, 2022). During the second world war Albania was the only European country with a Muslim regime. The Albanian people, and in particular the Muslims, went to extreme measures to save their Jewish neighbors from the German genocide (Krasniqi, 2018). Their efforts were successful, and in fact, at the end of the war Albania was the only European country occupied by the Nazis that had a larger Jewish population than in the beginning of the war.

This article will argue that two main factors contributed to the rescuing of the Jews in Albania during the Holocaust: The lack of demonization of the Jews in Albania, and the Albanian moral code of honor known as “Besa”.

The Lack of Demonization in Albania

Demonization is a pervasive phenomenon that has serious negative consequences for individuals and societies (Hovhannisyan, 2022). Demonization refers to a social and ongoing process of polarization in the society in which a group, or an idea is portrayed as dangerous, evil, or immoral.

Demonization is based on processes that perpetuates social polarization in which group members become more extreme in their beliefs and attitudes towards others while maintaining their group cohesion.

By portraying other groups, or ideas as an existential threat, demonization can mobilize public support aggressive action against them (Ghattas, 2023).

Demonization is one of the roots of modern antisemitism and was promoted by the German Nazis regime using stereotypes, prejudice, and negative labeling of the Jews throughout the 1930's.

The Germans authorities used mass media and antisemitic propaganda that tried to evoke hatred and fear towards the Jews that led to intolerance and discrimination towards them (Jones, 2010).

This process was also common at most of the Slavic countries in Europe (such as Poland, Lithuania, and others) as a political tool used for centuries to delegitimize the Jews and to justify aggressive and violent acts toward Jews. Statistical evidence demonstrates the link between the demonization process and the rates of violences in the Slavic countries and illustrates the horrific effect of the dramatization phenomenon.

The rate of Jews slaughtered in Lithuania and Poland was close to ninety percent and Slovakia had an eighty three percent rate (Krasniqi, 2018). The Albanian regime tried to promote mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence between the three religious groups in the country to foster social harmony.

Albania had a long history of tolerance towards religious minorities. The majority of this country's Muslim lived in harmony with the Christian minority, and there were no anti-Semitic laws or policies in place before the war. In 1934, U.S ambassador to Albania Herman Bernstein wrote:

There is no discrimination towards Jews in Albania because Albania is one of the most unique countries in Europe, where there are no prejudices and religious stereotypes. there is no hate in Albania, even though there are three religions in the country. (Fink, 2014, p. 3)

The government of Albania made efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in order to reduce the salience of group identity and promoted the idea of the bektashism order in Albania, of shared identity of human beings.

The Moral Code of Honor

Morality is a complex concept that has intrigued researchers for centuries.

One of the common theories of the evolution of morality was provided by Lawrence Kohlberg, who suggested a comprehensive account of the cognitive and social processes that underlie the development of moral reasoning (Narvaez, 2010).

Kohlberg's theory of moral development is an extensive model which aims to organize the evolution of moral reasoning into different stages of development (Kohlberg, 1969). Each stage has an increasing complexity and reasoning. The model emphasizes the role of social constructionism and cognitive growth in shaping moral reasoning.

The theory emphasizes the cultural and social context in which moral judgment is made.

Kohlberg proposed that individuals progress through a series of stages of moral reasoning (Nucci, 1989).

The stages can be broadly classified into three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional.

At the first stage—the pre-conventional level, moral judgments are made on self-interest and external rewards or punishments. This level is characterized by a focus on avoiding punishment and recognizing the needs and perspectives of others and an understanding of exchange relationships.

The conventional level is characterized by an emphasis on social norms and expectations. In this level individuals seek to gain approval from others by being “good” and conforming to social norms. This level also involves a recognition of the importance of upholding the law and maintaining social order (Narvaez, 2010). At the highest level the post-conventional, individuals develop a more complex and abstract understanding of moral reasoning. Their moral standards involve a recognition of the diversity of values and beliefs in society and a commitment to upholding individual rights. Their moral choices are often characterized by a commitment to ethical principles that transcend specific contexts (Nucci, 1989).

The Albanian Besa

During the second world war Albania was home to a population of 803,000 people.

Albania had a small Jewish population, mostly concentrated in the capital city of Tirana (Marashi, 2018).

Throughout the 1930’s, Jews fleeing from Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia found refuge in the country. Due to Albania’s liberal visa application process, in hope to find haven and continue to Israel or other countries of shelter. During the second world war Albania was invaded and occupied by Italy in 1939.

The Italians, under the leadership of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, enforced anti-Semitic policies in Albania (Gurakuqi, 2013).

The people of Albania did not only protect the Jewish citizens of Albania, but they also provided sanctuary to the Jewish refugees who fled the war and found themselves faced with the risk of deportation to concentration camps. The Albanian government issued a decree in 1938 that granted Albanian citizenship to all Jewish refugees who arrived in the country. This was a crucial measure that saved many Jewish lives during the war.

After the Nazi occupation in 1943, the Albanian population, in a remarkable act, refused to aid the Germans and refused to turn over lists of Jews residing within the country’s borders, reassuring the Jews that they would protecte in their country (Fink, 2014).

Furthermore, various governmental agencies gave Jewish families false documentation that allowed them to mix among the population. Muslim Albanians played a significant role in sheltering and protecting their Jewish neighbors. The Albanian resistance helped Jews escape from the Nazis and aided in their transport to safety in other countries. The extraordinary act of savior in Albania can be traced to the phrase: “Besa”—an Albanian moral code of honor (Cohen, 2016).

The “Besa” is regarded as the topmost ethical and holy code of behavior in the country.

The meaning of the word means literally “keeping a promise”—individual who acts according to the code of the “Besa” keeps their word and will protect you and your family life—it is a guarantee of trust.

The assistance provided to the Jews should be understood as a matter of an Albanian national moral honor (Fein, 2008). The people of Albania went to tremendous efforts to provide help and, seemed like they were competing, for the privilege of supporting and assisting the Jews.

One can argue that those acts of grace originated from the main principles of the bektashism order of Islam, an Islamic Sufi order originating in the 13th-century, which most of the Muslim community of Albania followed (Mais, 1986).

The order merits act of kindness towards all human beings and believes in the value of: “love thy brother”.

The “Besa” is based on those principles, as it values acts of compassion and desires to help those in need, even if they belong to a different origin and faith.

In conclusion, the “Besa” is based upon faithfulness toward one’s word in the form of loyalty or as an allegiance guarantee. It is an obligations and solidarity when conducting oneself with others and secrecy in relation to outsiders (Marashi, 2018).

Summary

The Holocaust was the biggest act of genocide in the 20th century.

It resulted in the extermination of six million Jews and other minorities across Europe by the Nazi regime left an indelible mark on humanity (Jones, 2010). While most of Europe was complicit in the genocide of the Jews, the rescue of the Albanian Jews was an extraordinary display of human decency, courage, and selflessness in times of crisis (Krasniqi, 2018). Albania stands out as a unique case of rescue, where the Albanian government and people, Muslims and Christian alike, risked their own lives to protect and rescue Jews from the Nazi persecution (Savich, 2002). This paper aimed to explore the reasons behind this altruistic act.

Kohlberg’s theory has significant implications for moral education and codes such as the “Besa”.

One can argue that the people of Albania who followed their moral compass and were guided by the honor code known as “Besa” are in the postconventional level of morality. Kohlberg’s model highlights the importance of fostering an environment that encourages ethical reasoning. The theory also emphasizes the importance of cultural and social norms in shaping moral judgment. The “Besa” and the lack of demonization in Albania were the main reasons why Albania, which was the only European country with most Muslims, achieved what no other country in Europe did (Cohen, 2016). Almost all the Jews within the Albania borders, refugees, or of Albanian origin alike, who dwelled in the country during the Nazi occupation, were saved.

Remarkably, Albania was the country in Europe that had more Jews at the end of the war than beforehand (Marashi, 2018). The reason so little is known about Albania’s unique role during the Holocaust has a lot to do with the country’s post-war history. Once the war was over, Albania fell under communist control and spent the next half-century behind the Iron Curtain (Fink, 2014).

In the last decades, the Albanian people acts of bravery and heroism have been recognized by “Yad Vashem”, the Israeli national Holocaust memorial museum. “Yad Vashem” had bestowed the honor of “Righteous Among the Nations” to 75 Albanians for their role in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust (Gurakuqi, 2013).

The rescuing of the Albanian Jews during the holocaust is an example of the power of human kindness and solidarity.

Albania demonstrated that, despite the horrors of war and the atrocities committed by the Germans, it is possible to unite and protect innocent lives. The story is a reminder that, even in the heartless and cruelest of times, there can always be hope for morality to triumph over darkness.

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