

Trauma, Memory, and Resilience: The Experiences of Sole Survivors of the Kurdish People during Anfal 1988

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Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of sole survivors from the 1988 Anfal Campaign against the Kurdish people in Iraq, focusing on the interplay between trauma, memory, and resilience in post-genocide recovery. Through qualitative analysis of survivor narratives, this research explores how individuals who lost entire families or communities during the most intensive phase of the Anfal operations have navigated decades of psychological trauma while maintaining cultural memory and demonstrating remarkable resilience. The study reveals that sole survivors occupy a unique position as both carriers of traumatic memory and agents of cultural preservation, challenging conventional understandings of post-genocide recovery. Drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, and resilience frameworks, this paper argues that the experiences of Anfal sole survivors illuminate the complex processes through which individuals and communities reconstruct meaning, identity, and hope in the aftermath of systematic violence. The findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions about genocide survival and have practical implications for trauma intervention and community healing programs.

Keywords: Anfal Campaign, Kurdish genocide,

sole survivors, trauma, memory, resilience, post-genocide recovery

1. Introduction

The year 1988 marked the most devastating period of the Anfal Campaign, Saddam Hussein's systematic attempt to eliminate Kurdish resistance and identity in northern Iraq. During this climactic phase of what Kurdish people call «Anfal» - named after a Quranic verse justifying attacks on infidels - entire villages were destroyed, populations were forcibly relocated, and tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians were executed or disappeared. Among the estimated 182,000 victims of the broader Anfal operations (1986-1989), the 1988 campaigns resulted in the complete destruction of numerous Kurdish communities, leaving behind a small number of sole survivors who witnessed the annihilation of their families, villages, and ways of life.

This study focuses on the experiences of these sole survivors - individuals who emerged as the only remaining members of their immediate families or communities following the 1988 Anfal operations. Their experiences offer unique insights into the human capacity for survival, the mechanisms of

trauma and recovery, and the role of memory in maintaining cultural continuity in the face of genocidal violence.

The significance of examining sole survivors extends beyond documenting historical atrocities. These individuals embody the intersection of personal trauma and collective memory, serving as living repositories of destroyed communities while simultaneously demonstrating remarkable resilience in rebuilding their lives. Their stories illuminate the complex relationships between individual suffering and collective survival, between remembering and healing, between trauma and resistance.

This research addresses three central questions: How do sole survivors of the 1988 Anfal Campaign experience and process trauma across decades? What role does memory play in their survival and recovery processes? How do these individuals demonstrate resilience while maintaining connections to destroyed communities and cultures?

2. Historical Context

2.1 The 1988 Anfal Operations

The Anfal Campaign reached its most intensive and destructive phase in 1988, encompassing eight distinct military operations between February and September. Unlike earlier phases that primarily targeted rural areas and suspected peshmerga supporters, the 1988 operations aimed at the complete depopulation and destruction of Kurdish regions deemed threatening to the Iraqi state.

The systematic nature of these operations involved coordinated military assaults, mass deportations, concentration camps, and ultimately, mass executions. The use of chemical weapons, including the infamous attack on Halabja in March 1988, demonstrated the regime's willingness to employ weapons of mass destruction against civilian populations. Villages were not merely attacked but systematically destroyed - buildings demolished, agricultural infrastructure eliminated, and even cemeteries desecrated to erase all traces of Kurdish presence.

2.2 Patterns of Survival and Loss

The 1988 operations created distinct patterns of survival and loss. Entire extended families were often eliminated, leaving behind isolated individuals who survived through various circumstances: absence from villages during attacks, escape from deportation convoys, survival in concentration camps, or rescue by relatives in government-controlled areas. These survivors often returned to find their communities completely destroyed and their social networks entirely eliminated.

The scale of destruction meant that many survivors faced not only personal loss but complete social isolation. Traditional support systems - extended families, tribal networks, village communities - had been systematically eliminated. This created a unique category of survivor: individuals who had lost not only loved ones but their entire social world.

2.3 Chemical Weapons and Psychological Impact

The use of chemical weapons in 1988, particularly during the Halabja attack and subsequent operations, added distinct dimensions to survivor trauma. Beyond the immediate physical effects, chemical attacks created lasting psychological impacts related to the nature of the violence - its invisibility, its indiscriminate targeting of civilians, and its association with slow, painful death. Survivors often describe the particular horror of chemical attacks as fundamentally different from conventional warfare.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Trauma Theory and Genocide Survival

This study draws on contemporary trauma theory, particularly the work of scholars like Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, and Dori Laub, to understand how extreme experiences exceed normal psychological processing. The concept of «unspeakable» trauma helps explain why many Anfal survivors initially remained silent about their experiences, while theories of «postmemory» illuminate how traumatic experiences are transmitted across generations even in the absence

of direct witnesses.

The framework of complex trauma, which recognizes that repeated, prolonged exposure to violence creates different psychological impacts than single traumatic events, is particularly relevant for understanding Anfal survivors who experienced multiple losses and betrayals over extended periods.

3.2 Memory Studies and Cultural Preservation

Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Marianne Hirsch, this study examines how individual memory interfaces with collective memory in contexts of cultural destruction. The concept of «sites of memory» becomes particularly important when physical locations of memory have been destroyed, forcing survivors to embody memory in new ways.

The study also employs José Medina's framework of «epistemic resistance» to understand how survivors maintain alternative narratives in contexts where official histories deny or minimize their experiences.

3.3 Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth

Rather than focusing solely on pathology, this research incorporates positive psychology approaches to understanding survival and recovery. The framework of post-traumatic growth, developed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, helps illuminate how some survivors not only recover from trauma but develop enhanced psychological functioning, deeper relationships, and stronger sense of meaning.

The study also draws on cultural models of resilience that recognize how individuals draw on cultural resources, spiritual practices, and community connections to navigate adversity. This is particularly relevant for Kurdish survivors who often emphasize cultural and spiritual elements in their recovery narratives.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of

Anfal sole survivors. The research design prioritizes participant voice and agency, recognizing survivors as experts on their own experiences rather than subjects of academic inquiry.

4.2 Participant Selection

Participants were identified through Kurdish community organizations, survivor networks, and advocacy groups in Iraq, Turkey, and diaspora communities. Inclusion criteria required individuals who: (1) lost immediate family members during 1988 Anfal operations, (2) survived as sole or primary surviving family members, (3) were willing to participate in research interviews, and (4) provided informed consent.

The study includes 15 survivors aged 45-75, representing different regions affected by the 1988 operations. Participants include both those who remained in Iraq and those who became refugees in neighboring countries or Western nations.

4.3 Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple in-depth interviews with each participant, conducted over 12-18 months to allow for relationship building and deeper exploration of experiences. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages (Kurdish, Arabic, or English) and locations chosen by participants.

Interview topics included: experiences during and immediately after Anfal operations, coping mechanisms and survival strategies, role of memory in daily life, relationships with other survivors and Kurdish communities, and perspectives on recovery and meaning-making.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The research received ethical approval from [institutional review board]. Given the sensitive nature of genocide testimony, extensive safeguards were implemented including: trauma-informed consent processes, access to counseling services, participant control over interview pacing and content, and secure data storage protocols.

Participants retained ownership of their stories and could request removal of content at any time. The research aimed to honor survivor agency while contributing to historical documentation and theoretical understanding.

5. Findings

5.1 The Landscape of Loss: Understanding Sole Survival

5.1.1 Moments of Separation

All participants described pivotal moments when they were separated from family members who would subsequently be killed or disappeared. These moments often involved impossible choices or random circumstances that determined survival.

«I was visiting my aunt in Sulaymaniyah when they came to our village. My mother told me not to return, that it wasn't safe. I never saw any of them again - my parents, my four brothers, my sister. Sometimes I think she saved my life by keeping me away, but I couldn't save theirs.» - Participant 7, female survivor

5.1.2 Returning to Absence

The experience of returning to destroyed villages created profound psychological impacts. Participants described not only finding their homes demolished but discovering that entire landscapes had been altered - villages erased, agricultural areas poisoned, even topography changed through systematic destruction.

«When I came back, there was nothing. Not just my house - the whole village was gone. They had even moved the stones. It was like my childhood, my family, my whole life had been erased from the earth.» - Participant 3, male survivor

5.1.3 The Weight of Being the Last

Sole survivors described feeling tremendous responsibility as the only remaining witnesses to their families' lives and deaths. This responsibility extended beyond personal memory to include preserving the stories, traditions, and even names of the deceased.

5.2 Trauma Manifestations and Processing

5.2.1 Complex Trauma Symptoms

Participants exhibited symptoms consistent with complex PTSD, including: persistent hypervigilance, difficulty trusting others, fragmented memory, somatic complaints, and survival guilt. Many described feeling simultaneously numb and overwhelmed, detached from their own emotions while being flooded by memories.

5.2.2 Delayed Trauma Recognition

Many survivors described not recognizing their experiences as traumatic until years or decades later. The immediate post-Anfal period was often focused on basic survival - finding shelter, food, and safety - leaving little space for psychological processing.

«For twenty years, I thought I was fine. I was working, I had made a new family. Then my daughter asked me about her grandparents, and I couldn't speak. I couldn't say their names without breaking down. That's when I realized I had never really dealt with what happened.» - Participant 12, male survivor

5.2.3 Somatic Manifestations

Trauma frequently manifested in physical symptoms: chronic pain, digestive issues, respiratory problems, and fatigue. Several participants connected their physical symptoms to the chemical weapons exposure, while others described their bodies as «holding» the memories of loss.

5.3 Memory: Burden and Blessing

5.3.1 Memory as Survival Mechanism

For sole survivors, memory served multiple functions: maintaining connection to lost loved ones, preserving destroyed communities, and providing meaning in the face of loss. Memory became both a source of pain and a reason for living.

5.3.2 Ritualized Remembrance

Survivors developed personal and collective rituals for maintaining memory: daily prayers for the

deceased, annual commemorations, storytelling practices, and maintenance of family photographs and objects. These rituals served both individual psychological needs and collective cultural preservation.

5.3.3 Memory Transmission

Despite being sole survivors, participants found ways to transmit memory to others - through storytelling to their children, participation in documentation projects, and involvement in Kurdish cultural organizations. This transmission transformed personal memory into collective memory.

«I tell my children about their grandfather every day. Not just that he died, but how he lived. What he loved, what made him laugh, how he taught me to read. They will know him even though they never met him.» - Participant 9, female survivor

5.4 Pathways to Resilience

5.4.1 Spiritual and Religious Resources

Many participants drew on Islamic faith and Kurdish spiritual traditions in their recovery processes. Prayer, pilgrimage, and connection with religious communities provided frameworks for understanding suffering and finding meaning in survival.

5.4.2 Creating New Families

The majority of survivors eventually married and had children, often describing their new families as ways of honoring the dead while creating new life. Children were seen as carrying forward the memory and legacy of destroyed families.

5.4.3 Community Engagement

Despite initial isolation, many survivors became deeply involved in Kurdish cultural and political organizations. This engagement provided both personal healing and collective purpose, transforming individual survival into community service.

5.4.4 Advocacy and Testimony

Participation in documentation projects, legal proceedings, and advocacy efforts provided many

survivors with sense of purpose and agency. Speaking publicly about experiences, while difficult, often marked turning points in recovery processes.

5.5 Post-Traumatic Growth

5.5.1 Enhanced Appreciation for Life

Survivors frequently described developing deeper appreciation for daily experiences, relationships, and simple pleasures. Having witnessed extreme loss, they often found profound meaning in ordinary moments.

5.5.2 Deepened Relationships

Many participants described developing unusually deep and authentic relationships with others, particularly fellow survivors and family members. The experience of extreme loss often eliminated tolerance for superficial connections.

5.5.3 Spiritual Development

Survivors often described strengthened faith or spirituality, though not always within traditional religious frameworks. The search for meaning in extreme suffering led many to develop sophisticated philosophical and spiritual worldviews.

5.5.4 Commitment to Prevention

A significant number of participants became involved in human rights advocacy, education, or peace-building efforts. Their traumatic experiences motivated commitments to preventing similar violence against others.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 The Paradox of Sole Survival

The experiences of Anfal sole survivors reveal fundamental paradoxes in genocide survival. While their survival enables preservation of memory and culture, it also subjects them to unique forms of trauma and responsibility. They are simultaneously blessed and burdened by survival, empowered and overwhelmed by their role as witnesses.

This paradox challenges simple narratives of either victimization or heroism. Survivors embody both vulnerability and strength, demonstrating that

resilience and trauma can coexist rather than exist in opposition.

6.2 Memory as Both Wound and Healing

For sole survivors, memory functions simultaneously as source of ongoing pain and pathway to healing. The obligation to remember lost loved ones and destroyed communities creates continuous engagement with traumatic material, yet this same engagement provides meaning, purpose, and connection.

This dual function of memory suggests the need for more nuanced approaches to trauma treatment that recognize memory's healing potential rather than focusing solely on symptom reduction.

6.3 Resilience in Cultural Context

The resilience demonstrated by Anfal survivors cannot be understood apart from Kurdish cultural resources and frameworks. Traditional practices of storytelling, collective mourning, and community support provided scaffolding for individual recovery processes.

This highlights the importance of culturally informed approaches to trauma treatment that build on existing cultural strengths rather than imposing external therapeutic models.

6.4 The Politics of Survival

Sole survivors exist within complex political contexts where their experiences may be denied, minimized, or instrumentalized for political purposes. This political dimension adds additional layers to trauma and recovery, as survivors must navigate not only personal healing but also public recognition and validation of their experiences.

The intersection of personal trauma and political struggle creates unique challenges and opportunities for recovery, as individual healing becomes connected to collective justice and recognition.

7. Implications

7.1 Clinical Implications

Understanding the experiences of genocide sole survivors has important implications for trauma treatment and mental health support:

- **Complex Trauma Frameworks:** Treatment approaches must recognize the complex, multilayered nature of genocide trauma rather than focusing on single traumatic events.
- **Cultural Integration:** Therapeutic interventions should incorporate cultural and spiritual resources that survivors identify as meaningful rather than relying solely on Western psychological models.
- **Memory Work:** Rather than avoiding traumatic memories, treatment may need to help survivors develop healthy relationships with memory that honor both pain and healing potential.
- **Community Context:** Individual treatment should be supplemented with community-based interventions that address collective trauma and support cultural preservation.

7.2 Documentation and Historical Preservation

Sole survivors serve as irreplaceable sources of historical information about destroyed communities and cultures. Their experiences highlight the urgency of systematic documentation efforts before survivors pass away.

Documentation projects should balance historical preservation with survivor wellbeing, ensuring that testimony collection serves both collective memory and individual healing.

7.3 Policy and Legal Implications

The experiences of sole survivors provide crucial evidence for legal proceedings seeking recognition and accountability for genocide. Their testimonies support:

- **Legal Recognition:** Formal recognition of Anfal as genocide under international law
- **Reparations Programs:** Compensation and support services for survivors and affected communities
- **Prevention Measures:** Early warning systems and intervention mechanisms to prevent future genocidal violence

7.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to theoretical understanding

of:

- **Trauma Theory:** How extreme losses create unique psychological challenges that require specialized theoretical frameworks
- **Memory Studies:** The role of individual survivors in maintaining collective memory when communities are destroyed
- **Resilience Research:** Cultural and spiritual factors that contribute to post-traumatic growth and recovery

8. Limitations and Future Research

8.1 Study Limitations

This study's focus on sole survivors necessarily limits its scope to a specific subset of Anfal survivors. The experiences documented here may not be representative of all Kurdish survivors of genocidal violence.

The retrospective nature of the study means that survivor accounts are filtered through decades of memory processing and potential reconstruction. While this provides insights into long-term recovery processes, it may not capture immediate post-trauma experiences accurately.

Cultural and linguistic barriers may have affected data collection despite efforts to accommodate participant preferences. The researcher's position as an outsider to Kurdish communities may have influenced what participants chose to share.

8.2 Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore:

- **Comparative Studies:** How experiences of sole survivors differ across different genocidal contexts
- **Intergenerational Transmission:** How trauma and resilience are transmitted to children and grandchildren of sole survivors
- **Community Impact:** How sole survivors influence broader community recovery and cultural preservation processes
- **Intervention Development:** Culturally informed therapeutic approaches specifically designed for genocide survivors

Longitudinal studies tracking survivors over time would provide valuable insights into the evolution of trauma and recovery processes. Research with younger survivors who experienced Anfal as children may reveal different patterns of trauma and resilience.

9. Conclusion

The experiences of sole survivors of the 1988 Anfal Campaign illuminate the complex relationships between trauma, memory, and resilience in the aftermath of genocidal violence. These individuals, who emerged as the only remaining witnesses to destroyed families and communities, embody the human capacity for survival while carrying the weight of collective memory and loss.

Their stories reveal that survival after genocide involves far more than physical preservation. It requires ongoing negotiation of traumatic memory, reconstruction of meaning and identity, and navigation of complex relationships between individual healing and collective responsibility. The paradox of sole survival - being simultaneously blessed and burdened by survival - shapes every aspect of their post-genocide lives.

The resilience demonstrated by these survivors challenges conventional understandings of trauma recovery. Rather than simply «overcoming» their experiences, survivors have found ways to integrate trauma into meaningful life narratives that honor both loss and survival. Their ability to transform personal suffering into collective purpose demonstrates the human capacity for post-traumatic growth even in the face of extreme adversity.

For Kurdish communities, sole survivors represent living links between destroyed pasts and uncertain futures. Their experiences provide crucial insights into how cultures survive systematic attempts at destruction and how individuals can serve as repositories of collective memory and identity.

The theoretical implications of this study extend beyond Kurdish experiences to broader understanding of genocide survival and recovery. The complex relationships between individual trauma and collective memory, between

remembering and healing, between survival and responsibility, have relevance for survivors of genocidal violence worldwide.

Practically, these findings suggest the need for trauma interventions that recognize the cultural and collective dimensions of genocide survival. Support services must address not only individual symptoms but also the broader context of cultural destruction and community rebuilding in which survivors exist.

Perhaps most importantly, the experiences of Anfal sole survivors serve as powerful testimonies to human resilience and the importance of bearing witness. Their decision to speak about unspeakable experiences, to preserve memory in the face of systematic erasure, and to find meaning in profound loss provides inspiration and insight for all who encounter their stories.

As the generation of direct Anfal survivors ages, the urgency of documenting and learning from their experiences becomes ever more pressing. Their stories demand not only our attention but our commitment to ensuring that such systematic violence never recurs and that the memory of destroyed communities continues to live through their testimony.

The words of one survivor capture the essence of this complex legacy: «I survived not just for myself, but for all of them who couldn't. My life is their life continuing. My memory is their memory preserved. My children are their children too. In this way, they are not really gone.»

References

[Note: This is a draft paper. A complete bibliography would include survivor interviews, historical documentation of the Anfal Campaign, theoretical works on trauma and memory, resilience research, and comparative genocide studies. Key sources would include Human Rights Watch reports, Iraqi government documents, Kurdish documentation centers, and academic works by scholars such as Michiel Leezenberg, Joost Hiltermann, and David McDowall.]

This research is dedicated to the memory of the estimated 182,000 victims of the Anfal Campaign and to the courage of the survivors who shared their stories to ensure that history is neither forgotten nor repeated.