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Women Organizing against Ethnic Nationalism and War in the Post-Yugoslav States

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The opposition of women to the war, violence, and politics of ethnic nationalism in Southeastern Europe represents a unique struggle to regain and reconfirm social inclusion and social integration in the region. Their efforts to build relationships among women across ethnic-national divisions and to advocate new forms of solidarity despite their own differences have gone against the tide of the exclusionary politics of ethnic nationalism. Further, women's anti-war and anti-nationalist political protests during the recent wars represent genuinely autonomous women's initiatives. By making their resistance to war and all forms of control over women visible, local women activists have refused to assume the role of passive victims of militaristic and nationalistic politics in the post-Yugoslav states. In so doing, feminists and activists have sought to denaturalize the link between "nation" and "woman."

The nationalistic discourse of the late 1980s in Yugoslavia was constructed in opposition to the socialist ideology. Its exponents successfully manipulated the millions of citizens who felt socially insecure and rootless as a result of the economic, social, and political changes that accompanied the dismantling of state socialism. After the end of the Second World War, socialist Yugoslavia experienced "one of the most rapid processes of urbanization in history."¹

Before the war, 80 per cent of the population in Yugoslavia was rural; as of 1978, however, more than 70 per cent of the population lived in urban settings. The millions of people who had moved from rural to urban areas within the time span of a single generation never fully integrated into the urban milieu. They belonged to neither a rural nor an urban life, but somewhere inbetween. For many Yugoslavs, rapid industrialization and urbanization increased the importance of wider social connections and social identifiers, which were linked to the ideology of a "workers' society" and, consequently, weakened the significance of extended family ties. But because an equally rapid process of social and political development did not accompany these changes, a considerable proportion of the population remained rootless, with poorly defined social status and identity.

Such rootlessness bred a sense of insecurity – a condition that was effectively exploited by the socialist state in its efforts to forge a collective identity and provide millions of people with a sense of belonging. During the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall (post-1989), this rootlessness was also fertile ground for the revival of ethnic nationalism. The dismantling of state socialism triggered the onset of a personal and collective identity crisis for the population in the region; it also heightened people's sense of economic and social insecurity, because they were no longer protected by the shield of the socialist state.

The first signs of this insecurity emerged in the 1980s, a time when many Central and East

European states confronted deep economic and/or political crises.² In Yugoslavia, the economic crisis, which began at the end of the 1970s, resulted in a drastic fall of all economic indicators after 1982 and in an increase in the percentage of the population living below the poverty line, from 17 to 25 per cent.³ The impact of the economic crisis on people's lives was visible and demoralizing. In such circumstances, ethnic nationalism – which promised millions of people a sense of belonging and security as well as a compelling antidote for the difficulties society would have to confront during the process of economic, political, and social restructuring – had a powerful appeal.

The first order of the day for the post-socialist nationalist governments was to create a base for an ethnic-national identity that would support their projects of ethnically exclusive states. By seeking political power over subfederal territories, politicians aggressively sought to alter the voters' ambivalence towards recognition of difference among the various ethnic-national collectivities. Employing an ethnic-nationalistic discourse of "common blood" and "common destiny," the political elite generated the notion of essentialist difference among ethnic-nations. In so doing, they successfully manipulated millions of rural-urban migrants who felt socially insecure and rootless. As Woodward points out in commenting on the results of the first multi-party elections in Yugoslavia in 1990: "The voters did not make a clear choice for nationalists and independence. They did push the nationalist momentum further, not because of the voting results themselves, but because of the use politicians made of them."⁴

These voters became the first targets of war propaganda engineered by neo-nationalist political leaders. In their rhetoric, they claimed that the "unnatural" socialist regime had replaced religion, tradition, shared blood, and kin for the emancipation of the working class, women, and proletarian internationalism. The nationalistic discourse, for its part, offered a set of values constructed as traditional, which could easily be perceived as "natural." According to these "new" values, men were assigned the role of the "real warrior," while women were assigned the responsibilities for the reproduction of the group, as well as the custody of cultural values and cultural identity. These proscriptions became the basis for the "new" society and the nationalist family in the region.

Rural-urban migrants were the initial group from whom the "real warriors" were recruited, and they eagerly mobilized behind their leaders' ethnic-national projects. A mini-survey that profiled fifty volunteers in the Serbian paramilitary forces, who were members of the Serbian Radical Party (srs),⁵ illustrates this point. Undertaken by the then Serbian independent newspaper *Borba* at the end of 1991, the survey demonstrates that most of the volunteers were of arural background but with a permanent residence in one of the regional urban centres in Serbia.⁶ Feeling economic, social, and political pressures, these men began to engage in military combat, and some committed incomprehensibly cruel crimes. Yet behind the brutal images of these male perpetrators and the inhumanity and destruction that raged throughout the region, there were many thousands of tragic examples of men psychologically destroyed by pressures to take part in these wars.

Miroslav Milenković, born in 1951, a construction worker and reservist from the Serbian town Gornji Milanovac, was among those who could not give themselves up to violence and hate. He could not accept that he must pick up a gun and kill in order to prove himself a worthy representative of his ethnic-nation, a patriot, and, above all, a real man. Milenković, like many others, was drafted as a reservist in the army. On September 20, 1991, when he reached Šid, a town on the border of Serbia and Croatia, Milenković killed himself. Standing between two groups of reservists in the town square—on the one side were men who refused to take up weapons and thus faced incarceration, and on the other side were men who had chosen to take up arms in preparation for the war front in Croatia – he shot himself.⁷

Milenković thus represents the extreme contradiction faced by these men who could not see themselves fighting and perhaps killing others, nor wanting to be stigmatized as traitors to their country. It is difficult to provide an accurate and reliable figure of the number of deserters and draft evaders from the conflict in the post-Yugoslav states. However, according to a petition of the European Civic Forum intended to protect the rights of men who fled the region as deserters and draft evaders, there were hundreds of thousands of these men within Europe alone.⁸

Indeed, militarization and war in the region were not straightforward processes of change. Political leaders and elites had to deploy different types of manipulation and control over the population in order to achieve their nationalistic goals. With respect to women, for example, the high rates of women's unemployment, which resulted from economic restructuring, were justified and embraced by nationalists as women's long overdue return to their sacred and natural family and household duties. In order to secure this natural order, nationalists established different ways of controlling women through state mechanisms, which violated their basic rights. The first instances of such control were the restrictions placed on women's reproductive freedoms and the introduction of pro-life policies.

Between 1988 and 1991, feminists in the region focused more attention on preventing the manipulation of women's reproductive rights for nationalistic purposes. Before the revival of ethnic nationalism, feminist activists in socialist Yugoslavia had voiced concern mainly about the "woman question" as defined under state socialism.⁹ This group of urban, educated, predominantly young, middle-class women publicly challenged the socialist patriarchy and the assumption that the struggle for the equality of women was synonymous with class struggle. The changing social and political context altered the character of their activism. It became a more explicitly political form of protest against the specific violation of concrete women's rights. As a result, the first autonomous women's groups, established in the late 1970s, were transformed in the early 1990s into women's lobbies, women's parliaments, and umbrella organizations. These new feminist initiatives linked women across republic/ethnic-national boundaries. Among other achievements, their campaigns succeeded in preventing the republican parliaments from prohibiting abortion, although pro-life aspirations remained one of the important social and political goals of the governments.

The outbreak of war and the violent destruction of the country and the lives of its peoples brought women face to face with new forms of oppression and victimization. Feminists reacted to the new political crisis by shifting their activism to anti-war politics. Feminist groups issued protest statements to the governments and the public, expressing their disagreement with militarization and with the warmongering tendencies of the political elite. Gradually, they were joined by some of the women who had been previously engaged in the 'Mothers' Movement,' which had emerged throughout the region at the beginning of the wars. These spontaneous protests by mothers first began in Serbia, in the summer of 1991, in reaction to the federal army's intervention in Slovenia, after the latter declared unilateral independence. Hundreds of women stormed the Serbian Parliament during its session, demanding a peaceful solution to the crisis and the immediate return of their sons involved in the military intervention in Slovenia.¹⁰ This protest was followed by similar protests in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), and Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina), which were also organized across ethnic-national lines and which were joined by feminist and peace groups.¹¹

The nationalistic oligarchies reacted immediately with repressive measures, including arrests and police interrogations, to stop the protests. Simultaneously, they mobilized the media propaganda machine to prevent further development of the women's resistance to war. The media manipulation of the Mothers' Movement was not particularly difficult, because this massive grassroots protest, though highly political in essence, had no clear strategy or well-articulated message. Nevertheless, the protests rejected the role of the 'patriotic mother' as constructed by nationalists. Gradually, however, the protests were politically marginalized and, with the escalation of the armed conflict, the role of woman was transformed into a stereotype of 'the mother of the nation, the martyr, and the heroine.' The escalation of the war's violence intensified the importance of differences among women rooted in their ethnic origin.

Partly as a result of the failure of the anti-war protests of women/mothers, and partly as a consequence of the invisibility of women's voices in the peace movements, some feminists began to organize anti-war centres. Women involved in anti-war activism continued their commitment to communicate across ethnic boundaries and borders. However, the effort to maintain communication among women who were divided by the new political circumstances was often a painful experience of broken trust, friendships, and co-operation. During the first years of the conflict, feminists had found some of these experiences almost impossible to bear. The political climate tended to force a major division among feminists that created a distinction between the aggressors and the victims. The mass rape of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina intensified this divide.

The polarization originated within feminists' different conceptualizations of the intersection of gender and ethnic nationalism in determining the character of these rapes. Feminists who stressed that women raped in the war had been subjected to this form of abuse first and foremost because of their gender and not because of their ethnic nationality have been severely attacked as traitors to their ethnic-

nations. Feminists who became supporters of the ethnic-national projects and the exclusionary politics of their governments could not accept any notion of a more broadly defined category of “women,” namely, one that would cut across ethnic-national divisions. Consequently, they have labelled the approach taken by the former group of feminists as a betrayal of the ethnic-national collective.

As numerous historical and sociological analyses have demonstrated, rape during war, and ethnic-national war in particular, becomes a powerful symbolic weapon against the “enemy.”¹² The very logic of rape as a symbolic weapon, as Mežnaric´ explains, rests upon “the use of gender as a means to control communication and to sharpen the boundaries between two opposed ethnicities.”¹³ The rape of the “enemy’s” women carries an important symbolic message for the men. As Seifert points out, it communicates to them that they have been unable to protect “their” women.¹⁴ I would add that this, in turn, functions as an important mobilizing element in further militarizing ethnic-national collectives.

Women’s groups that supported their endangered ethnic-nations and their respective states-in-the-making were the groups which Benderly describes as “[t]hose who conflated ‘women as victim’ and ‘nation as victim,’ ” and who “moved toward a sort of feminist nationalism, the patriotism of the victimized.”¹⁵ The central questions in this dispute have been whether ethnic-national identity or belonging has been a demarcation line between women and what its effect has been on the struggle for women’s rights. Because of the political circumstances in which feminists have had to function, the initial divide among women along ethnic-national lines, between “the women aggressors” and “the women victims,” has been transformed into a split between the “patriotic” and “disloyal” women and feminists.

“Patriotic” and “disloyal” women’s groups have disagreed over the meaning of rape in these wars and the protection of the rights of abused women. The realization by “disloyal” feminists of a common patriarchal male opponent has helped them to discern a continuum of violence and the consequent relation between domestic violence and war violence. They responded rapidly to the threat of further victimization of women survivors of rape in these wars by pointing to how these crimes against women are used for political purposes and to aggravate ethnic-national hatred. These “disloyal” women argued that government reports focused almost exclusively on the crimes of the “other” side in which the ethnic-national identity of the rapist and a possible fetus are the exclusive concern, dismissing both the raped women and the crime committed against them. This, in turn, further victimizes abused women.

Inasmuch as the wars have been victimizing women, they have also given some new directions for women's organizing to deal with issues that were specifically part of women's experiences resulting from the conflicts, such as the adaptation problems faced by women refugees and the trauma that results from sexual and other forms of abuse committed against women in the wars, and so on. It can be argued that the conflict has, in fact, contributed to the emergence of a number of new women's groups

in the post-Yugoslav states. Women who joined these new groups as volunteers had not necessarily ever considered themselves to be feminists. Their awareness about particularities of the position of women and of gender dimensions of war and violence grew out of their work with women in need.

The establishment and work of the women's groups would have not been possible without the generous help of women and feminists worldwide. Along with financial support, international feminists helped to establish women's self-help groups and offered seminars and training sessions that focused on feminist therapy and conflict-resolution techniques. The presence of feminists from abroad was an important path of communication through which these women - who were otherwise isolated by war - had an opportunity to contrast their experiences with women internationally. Feminists and other women activists in the post-Yugoslav states, empowered by their own experiences of organizing in the first year of the wars and by the involvement of feminists worldwide, embarked on more organized work with women in the region.

The years of war brought together those "disloyal" women with other women in the region. Relief work in multi-ethnic self-help groups for women victims of war violence, organized by "disloyal" feminists, brought their politics closer to the experiences of refugee women, who came from diverse socio-economic and ethnic-national backgrounds. The encounter between refugee women and feminist activists was a two-way communication because the experiences of the former affected and shaped the work and activism of the latter group of women. Through encounters with the pain and loss experienced by refugee women, feminist activists gained a better understanding of the relationship between victimization and empowerment. Further, the experiences of multi-ethnic self-help groups for women demonstrated that women of different ethnic backgrounds and with diverse experiences of victimization could establish and maintain relationships of mutual respect.¹⁶ The work of such groups helped women victims not only to regain their self-respect and gradually re-establish their lives but also to create a less hostile environment, facilitating the re-establishment of links across the current ethnic-national divide and fostering a reconciliation culture among local populations.

Positive and constructive approaches to crises, which had been learned over the course of the wars through work with women of diverse backgrounds and life histories, became one of the elements influencing feminist approaches to the concept of solidarity among women. This history opened up spaces for a redefinition of women's solidarity and for new forms of alliances among women in the region. Feminist activists' work with the everyday problems of women refugees and women survivors of war violence created the spaces for mutual understanding and ongoing productive exchange; spaces in which women were positioned in a compatible way and where the patriarchal hierarchy of right and wrong did not exist. Through this kind of communication they were able to accept their diverse positionings as sites of "unfinished knowledge" – knowledge that is continuously redefined in relation to the different life situations of women and their differentiated relations to power.¹⁷

The contributions of women from Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia in this volume reveal that women's

organizing represents a foundation for the creation of alliances among women in the region and that women's organizing is an important force in reconstructing the social fabric of life in these war-torn societies. Their chapters emphasize that the most important parameters of the reconciliation process may lie in a communication that acknowledges different experiences of pain and loss and, thus, differentiated positionings of individuals and groups of women in this conflict. Their continuous engagement in negotiations with others across the ethnic-national divide is an important contribution to a non-violent political culture.

Notes

1. B.Jancar, "The New Feminism in Yugoslavia," in P.Ramet, ed., *Yugoslavia in the 1980s* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p.204.
2. Chris Corrin, ed., *Super Women and the Double Burden: Women's Experience of Change in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1992; now available from Sumach Press, Toronto); Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East and Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1993).
3. S.Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1995), p.52.
4. *Ibid.*, p.118.
5. The leader of the srs is Voislav Seselj, who is allegedly responsible for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.
6. N.Četković, "Feministička alternativa nacionalizmu i ratu" (Feminist Alternative to Nationalism and War), *S.O.S. Bulletin* 6-7 (1993), pp.70-3. S.O.S. is published by the Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence.
7. D.Aleksov, ed., *Deserters from the War in Former Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: Women in Black, 1994), p.21.
8. *Ibid.*, p.50.
9. For more on the history of feminism in Yugoslavia before the conflict, see Jill Benderly, "Rape, Feminism, and Nationalism in the War in Yugoslav Successor States," in L.A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and Žarana Papić, "Women's Movement in Former Yugoslavia: 1970s and 1980s," in M. Blagojević, D.Duhaček, and J. Lukić, eds., *What Can We Do for Ourselves? East European Conference* (Belgrade: Centre for Women's Studies, Research and Communication, 1995).
10. S. Zajović, "Militarism and Women in Serbia," in S. Zajović, ed., *Women for Peace* (Belgrade: Women in Black, 1993), p.7.
11. S. Drakulić, "Women and the New Democracy in the Former Yugoslavia," in N. Funk and M. Mueller, eds., *Gender Policy and Post-Communism* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
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Women (Boulder,CO: Westview Press, 1994); R. Seifert, "War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis," in Stiglmeier, ed., Mass Rape.

13. Mežnarić, "Gender as an Ethno-marker," p.79.
14. Seifert "War and Rape," p.58.
15. Benderly, "Rape, Feminism, and Nationalism in the War in Yugoslav Successor States," p.71.
16. M. Belić and V.Kesic, "Report on Work Done between August 1993 and February 1994," in R. Boric, ed., Edited Volume: Centre for Women War Victims (Zagreb: Women's Information and Documentation Centre–Centre for Women War Victims, 1994), p.28.
17. Nira Yuval-Davis, "Women, Ethnicity and Empowerment," in K-K. Bhavnani and A. Phoenix, eds., Shifting Identities – Shifting Racisms (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), pp.179-99.