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1995

Feminist Resistance in Serbia

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Feminist Resistance in Serbia

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AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S CENTRE AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE, BELGRADE

Zorica Mršević

SOS HOTLINE FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE, BELGRADE

They have been ceaselessly killing, torturing and raping for a year and a half already. They have banished more than three million lives. They manipulate women. Blackmail men. They spread hate, destruction and death; we are left without words to express our horror and anger. . . . Fascist leaders of Serbian politics threaten us with war in Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. Meanwhile they have stopped all electricity, water and telephone systems in Bosnia-Herzegovina. People die by the minute. . . . They have separated streets, classrooms, families, cities. They are drawing lines on mountains and corridors through the countryside. (Women in Black, 28 October 1992)

INTRODUCTION

In the last four years the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has broken apart. Driven by nationalism, the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia have killed an estimated 300,000 people, wounded another 1,500,000 and forced 4,500,000 people to become refugees. While the world sees daily reports of Serbian aggression and nationalist extremism, feminists in Serbia have been protesting all acts of aggression, including that advocated by their own government and supporting the victims of violence.

This article describes the conditions and factors influencing women's lives in Serbia, and the ways women have organized to resist violence and

assist one another. In Serbia women have witnessed ordinary people become killers or victims. To resist nationalism, sexism and war feminists founded an anti-war and feminist movement. With activism and civil disobedience they have transformed women's desperation and anger into action. Since 1990, feminists have created the SOS Telephone, Women's Lobby, a Women's Party, Women's Parliament, Women in Black, the Women's Studies Research and Communication Centre, the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence, the Centre for Girls and two Women's Houses (for battered women) and a feminist publishing house – '1994'.

BACKGROUND

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a multinational socialist state in Eastern Europe made up of six republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia, and two autonomous provinces within Serbia – Vojvodina and Kosovo.¹ Throughout the 1980s nationalism among the republics grew, spurred on by the fall of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe. In May/June 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence from Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav National Army, led by Serbian leader Slobadan Milošević, resisted these moves for independence. In Slovenia, the fighting lasted ten days before the Yugoslav National Army withdrew leaving Slovenia an independent nation. In Croatia, the war was longer and bloodier. In September 1991, in an effort to stop the fighting, the United Nations imposed an arms embargo on all the former Yugoslav republics which gave the Serbian-controlled Yugoslav National Army far greater military strength than the armies of the other republics. Local militant ethnic groups and nationalists attempted to seize control of the land where their populations were concentrated. Possessing greater military force, Serbs seized the land inhabited predominantly, but in no way exclusively, by Serbs. In January 1992, a peace-keeping plan, enforced by United Nations troops, was accepted.

In April 1992, just as Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence from Yugoslavia, Serb nationalists launched the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Of all the republics in former Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most ethnically mixed. Although the conflicts have been driven on all sides by nationalism, it was the Serbs, with greater military force, who initiated 'ethnic cleansing', a term used to describe the forceful removal or killing of civilian Croats and Muslims. Throughout the conflict, the Republic of Serbia has claimed that it is officially uninvolved in the wars. Other than a few conflicts along the border, there has been no fighting in Serbia.

The efforts to create nationally or ethnically pure territories has meant that the wars are aimed primarily at civilian populations. According to the United States Committee for Refugees,

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the most extreme elements of the nationalist Serb community – aided and abetted by their patron in Serbia – have chosen to wipe out, liquidate, remove, rather than to live with, those who are somehow 'different'. Their methods are crude, but effective: artillery barrages of civilian centres; forced population movements; appropriation of property. Those who survive and are not driven out face imprisonment, rape and the forced separation from family. . . . Nationalist Croat forces and, to a lesser extent, troops of the mostly Muslim Bosnian army have also committed violent, heinous acts. (Winter, 1993)

NATIONALISM IN SERBIA

In Serbia the Communist leadership did not want to lose power through democratization, so they used ethnic nationalism to manipulate the people and create a popular base for their continuing control. They succeeded in pulling Serbs towards Serbia and pushing others towards their own nationalist groups, who then chose independence to escape growing Serbian nationalism (Korac, 1993; Denitch, 1994: 184).² Largely through mass rallies and state-controlled media people were taught to hate those who were different.

'It all began with "sweet" stories about national states, national rights, life within ethnic boundaries' (Women's Parliament, 20 May 1992). Nationalism was constructed on a highly imagined community inhabited by people whose identities had little to do with accurate history, geography or real attributes (Denitch, 1994: 187). Years-old unresolved ethnic and national conflicts were given new life. Specials were shown on television about Serbian history which recounted the victimization of Serbs. For example, the Serbian popular press retold stories of Croatian war crimes against Serbs during the Second World War (Denitch, 1994: 176). As tales of the Serbian defeats and victimizations were rejuvenated with new emotion, all 'others' became potential threats to Serbia – Albanians (in Kosovo), Slovenes, Croats and Muslims (in Bosnia-Herzegovina).

At the beginning of the wars (in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia) there were all-day media programmes against the 'enemy', whose identity changed as the war moved eastward (from Slovenia, to Croatia, to Bosnia). Every night before and after the television news there were extra segments of pictures of dead or tortured people with an accompanying commentary on 'what the enemy has done to innocent Serbs'.

A 'cleansing' of the culture initiated by Serb officials removed books,

films and works of art created by those who were not Serbs. Singers, artists and actors who were not Serbs were banned, harassed, and, finally, most of them left the country. Textbooks were rewritten to include the nationalist view of history. Beginning in autumn 1991, textbooks for elementary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia had to include a 'detailed account of wars, exterminations, tortures, destructions of people' (Imširović and Četković, 1991).³ The ideology of 'brotherhood and unity', used for 45 years to hold Yugoslavia together under Communism, disappeared. Some people with non-Serb names removed their name plates from their doors. Many people had to conform to nationalist ideology in order to keep their jobs and live in the community. Nationalism created splits among those of the same nationality. Vera, a resident of Belgrade, said, 'A painful thought for me is – will my friends be nationalists when I go to talk to them? Will they still be my friends?'⁴ As nurtured animosities grew, opportunists exploited the conditions.

The spectre of nationalism was thus awakened. Profiteers, gangsters and murderers grabbed the opportunities offered by it. A state of general uncertainty, endangerment and mistrust was created. Paranoia has become our everyday reality. (Women's Parliament, 20 May 1992)

FEMINISM PRIOR TO 1990

Compared to the other former Communist countries the borders of Yugoslavia were more open, allowing communication and exchange of ideas, one of which was feminism. The first presentation of contemporary feminist ideas was at a Croatian sociological association meeting in 1976. The first feminist conference, 'The Woman's Question: A New Approach', was held in 1978 at the Students' Cultural Centre in Belgrade. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the ideas of feminism and begin to challenge socialist patriarchy and the assumption that women's struggle was synonymous with class struggle (Papić, 1995). Inspired and motivated by this meeting, 'Woman and Society' discussion groups formed in Zagreb and Belgrade.

In 1986 feminists in Belgrade defined their organization, Women and Society, as feminist. The Yugoslav governmental organization, the Conference for the Social Activities of Women, condemned this move and accused the group of being an 'enemy of the state', 'pro-capitalist', and 'pro-Western'. The group operated independently without any state institutional or financial support (Mladjenović and Litričin, 1993). The growth of feminist groups was also hindered by the Communist ideology that everyone must work together for change. Many of the women did not want to exclude men. When men came to meetings they always

wanted to know why the group only talked about women. The fear of women-only groups still exists all over Eastern Europe.

The feminist group in Belgrade held workshops and public discussions on violence, abortion, sexuality, workers' rights, psychiatry and medicine. On International Women's Days, 8 March 1986, 1987 and 1988 they did research on the streets of Belgrade by stopping women and asking them ten questions about their lives. On the same day in 1990, women in Belgrade founded the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence.⁵

In 1990 the so-called democratization process brought the first multi-party elections to Yugoslavia. In that year feminists formed four women's organizations. In the summer of 1990 women from different non-nationalistic parties formed the Women's Lobby to create a space for women's critical voices and to influence public opinion and the policies of the political parties in the election. The Women's Lobby took a strong stand against nationalism because of the nationalists' call for women to have more babies for greater Serbia. On 5 December 1990 the Women's Lobby issued a call to voters, 'Do not vote for the Serbian Socialist Party, Serbian Radical Party, Serbian People's Renovation and all other nationalist, Fascist, warrior parties' (Women in Black, 17 December 1992).

As the elections approached in the autumn of 1990, women formed the Women's Party, ZEST (an acronym for Zenska Stranka, the 'Z' stood for women, 'E' for ethics, 'S' for solidarity and 'T' for tolerance). The women saw a need for a women's party because, 'Although legally equal and free, women have for decades been living the life of second-rate citizens and unrealised and subjected individuals in the family and society alike' (The Women's Party Charter of Intentions, 1990, cited in Cockburn, 1991). ZEST had three principles of activity: (1) 'For democracy and against all forms and aspects of discrimination and authoritarian power and authority in society', (2) 'For peace, tolerance and cooperation among nations and peoples', (3) 'For quality of life as a crucial aim of development'. Under these principles ZEST outlined eight programmatic goals (1) a system of mixed economy, (2) an independent judiciary, (3) good health care, (4) a healthy environment, (5) radical reform of the education system, (6) improvement of the quality of family life, (7) autonomous culture and (8) equal opportunities for communication. With the aim of improving the lives of women, they organized public discussions about housewives, women artists and work. As militarism grew they lobbied the parliament of the republics to negotiate a peace (Women's Party - ZEST, 5 July 1991).

The election resulted in a Serbian parliament with only 1.6 percent women (the lowest percentage in Europe), so women formed the Women's Parliament on 8 March 1991 to monitor new laws that pertained to women (Mladjenović and Litričin, 1993). Throughout 1990 and 1991

women's groups organized and participated in protests calling for women's rights and a demilitarization of Yugoslavia.

WOMEN'S ANTI-WAR GROUPS

Women have been and are the majority of the organizers and participants of the peace movement in Belgrade. Prior to the outbreak of war in the Yugoslav republics, women formed organizations against mobilizations for war. In March 1991, several women's groups from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, collectively called Women for Peace, issued a statement calling for 'a peaceful and negotiated solution to all controversial issues', and a 'demobil[ization] of all reserve police units in all republics and provinces' (Lokar et al., March 1991). Throughout the spring and summer of 1991, the Belgrade Women's Lobby took part in peace demonstrations, issued weekly calls for an end to bloodshed, and criticized media programmes that promoted nationalism and violence against women. After the start of the war in Slovenia the Belgrade Women's Lobby appealed to the federal government:

We ask that the units of the Federal Army unconditionally withdraw to their barracks. The youth did not go to serve in the military in order to impede the separation of any ethnic group from Yugoslavia. A Yugoslavia maintained by force is useless to everyone. (Belgrade Women's Lobby, July 1991)

THE MOTHERS' PROTEST

During the summer of 1991 women concerned about their sons in the Federal Yugoslav Army organized protests against the war. At the beginning of the war all regular soldiers belonged to the Yugoslav National Army, whose responsibility was to stop moves for independence by Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. Croat mothers did not want their sons fighting with Serbs to prevent Croatia's move for independence – that would put their sons on the 'wrong' side of the war. Serb mothers did not want their sons fighting in Croatia. The women used their role as mothers to express concern for their sons and to call for peace. The women stated their opposition to the war:

We refuse that our sons become the victims of senseless militarists. It is not clear what are the goals for which we should sacrifice our sons. Our sons have been deceived: they have to participate in a war for which they are not the least bit responsible, a war that has not even been declared. That they should give their lives for imperialist purposes is the project of politicians. It

is a disgrace to win a fratricidal war. (Mothers of the Soldiers of Belgrade, 20 July 1991)

The first large protest against the war was held by several hundred parents, mostly mothers of conscripted men, in the Serbian National Assembly in Belgrade on 2 July 1991. In their statement they said, 'The protests of mothers is a feminine spontaneous reaction to the disgrace of the civil war' (Mothers' Movement, July 1991). Repeatedly, throughout the summer, in letters to officials and public statements, the mothers called for an end to the war and the return of their sons.

At the end of August 1991, approximately 1000 parents, mostly mothers, from Croatia and a few from Bosnia-Herzegovina, attempted to protest in front of the General Headquarters of the Yugoslav National Army. They were forced to move to the soldiers' barracks. To enable such a large gathering 40 buses were used to bring the women from Croatia to Belgrade. The leaders of the group, Mothers for Peace, from Zagreb, had the Croatian flag as a sign of their organization. One of the authors of this paper, Lepa Mladjenović, attended the protest and participated with mixed feelings:

I was very excited. The first night the auditorium of the soldiers' barracks in Belgrade was packed with women. It was amazing. Never before in this male space had there been such a scene. At the front of the auditorium, on the podium, were the 'fathers' – the army officers. The women were sitting everywhere, talking and eating. At one point women from the villages in Croatia stopped listening to the men and started to softly sing a tender old Croat song. In contrast to the fathers in uniform with their hard strict military culture, the women's voices were from another world. On the other hand, at that time if more than 20 women got together, I had to wonder how did it happen. It usually meant that some larger political thought or organization stood behind the event.

While Mladjenović was excited and moved by large numbers of women coming together to protest the war, she recognized that some women acted with the support of men whose goal was their own nationalism and interest in preventing the Federal Yugoslav Army from intervening in their move for independence.

A woman from Pancevo, Serbia spoke about the anti-war movement there.

The mothers, wives and sisters of drafted men came to the Council Building after having spent several days in front of the barracks. Tired and weeping, the women demanded that their dear ones be allowed to return to their homes. They were torn between the feeling of obligation (in Vojvodina they say: 'Raise a son, send him to the Army') and the deepest conviction that

nothing was more important than their sons' lives. (Ildiko, 22 February 1992)

The mothers' protests were the first public resistance to the wars. Since the political tradition of 50 years of Communism had suppressed people's rebellious motivations, the mothers' protest was important in breaking that tradition. Also, the mothers' protest contained a general peace message. It was a good use of the matriarchal role of mothers to save men and stand against authority. Unfortunately, the nationalist ideology was much stronger than their peace protests. Later the statements of the mothers implied that their sons should be fighting for their own 'blood and soil' if necessary. These sentiments slowly grew into pro-Serb and pro-Croat nationalist ideologies and peace was forgotten.

CENTRE FOR ANTI-WAR ACTION

During the summer of 1991, women founded the Centre for Anti-War Action and women are still the most active participants. Men were not active in the Centre for several reasons. The Centre formed at a time when men were being mobilized by the Yugoslav National Army, so many men who feared being drafted avoided the Centre. In addition, many men found the volunteer non-hierarchical culture and organization of the Centre to be foreign to them. The men were more accustomed to working in hierarchies. Also, the work at the Centre was unpaid and volunteer work was a new phenomenon in former socialist countries. The women, who for thousands of years have been doing unpaid work in the home, as wives and mothers, understood this concept immediately. They were more easily able to see that important work is not necessarily officially recognized or paid for.

WOMEN IN BLACK, BELGRADE

By the autumn of 1991 feminists dissatisfied with the character of the anti-war protests decided to found another organization. The women were inspired by the Israeli group, Women in Black, who wore black and protested in silence their country's treatment of the Palestinians.

Women in Black made its first appearance in Belgrade on 9 October 1991. In their first public statement the activists defined themselves as an anti-nationalist, anti-militarist, feminist, pacifist group who rejected the reduction of women to the role of mothers.

The work of women in peace groups is presupposed, it is invisible, trying, women's work; it's a part of 'our' role; to care for others, to comfort, aid,

tend wounds, and feed. The painful realisation that the peace movement would to some extent also follow a patriarchal model caused a serious dilemma for feminist-pacifists. We wanted our presence to be *visible*, not to be seen as something 'natural', as part of a woman's role. We wanted it to be clearly understood that what we were doing was our political choice, a radical criticism of the patriarchal, militarist regime and a non-violent act of resistance to policies that destroy cities, kill people, and annihilate human relations. (Women in Black, 1993)

Another political aim of Women in Black is to strengthen the solidarity among women who have been separated by guns and borders.

We are the group of women who believe that solidarity is one of the deepest values of our existence, that active solidarity between women is the force and the tenderness by which we can overcome isolation, loneliness, traumas and other consequences of hatred. We are the ones who come out in the public with our bodies and our visions of the world without war, rape, violence and militarism. (Women in Black, 10 June 1992)

Every week since the formation of Women in Black these activists have protested the wars by putting on black clothes and standing silently in the Republic Square in Belgrade.

We are the group of women who stand in silence and black every week to express our disapproval against war. We have decided to see what is the women's side of this war. Women wear black in our countries to show grief for death of the loved ones. We wear black for the death of all victims of war. We wear black because people have been thrown out of their homes, because women have been raped, because cities and villages have been burned and destroyed. (Women in Black, 10 June 1992)

After the mothers' protests were over the feminists in Women in Black shifted the philosophy and approach to protesting the war. Their statements and writings became more overtly political and analytically feminist. Gone were the maternal pleadings for peace to save their sons. For example,

The militarization of former Yugoslavia has meant the imposition of military values, and militaristic language; a cult of necrophilia (expressed in slogans as 'the frontiers of Serbia are where Serbs are buried'); and acceptance of political and moral totalitarianism. (Zajović, December 1991)

With the establishment of the more radical Women in Black, a political shift in analysis and naming occurred – Serbian nationalism was seen as a motivating force and the Serbian government named as the aggressor:

We say that the Serbian regime and its repressive structures (Federal Army and paramilitary formation) are responsible for all three wars, in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbian regime leads wars in the

name of all citizens of Serbia. This way all the citizens become the hostages of their imperialistic politics. (Women in Black, 10 June 1992)

During the time the women's groups were forming and evolving, nationalism was intensifying, forcing women's groups to decide where they stood. The Women's Lobby and Women in Black took anti-nationalist stands and said so publicly. ZEST, the Women's Party, disbanded because of conflicts over nationalism. The SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence made a policy of non-nationalism which created conflicts among the volunteers. Eventually some of the women with nationalistic views left, but some stayed and have remained silent (Mladjenović and Litričin, 1993).

ETHNIC CLEANSING, RAPE AND WAR CRIMES

'Ethnic cleansing' is a term for the mass expulsion, killing and rape of people. In this war it has been carried out mainly by Serb paramilitaries and the army. These acts meet the legal definition of genocide – the attempt to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Many civilians were (are still being) killed, others were (and still are being) forced from their homes and towns to become refugees or forced into concentration camps. Sexual abuse and violence against women has been central in the planned policy of 'ethnic cleansing'. When the Yugoslav Federal Army shelled cities, maternity hospitals were targeted. Special concentration camps were created to rape and prostitute women; these hotels and prisons are called rape camps by survivors. In Vogosca, near Sarajevo, women with Croat and Muslim names were killed after they were raped; in Foca, the Serbs held women for months in an indoor sports arena where nightly men would come with flashlights to make their choices for rape; at Omarska, women were forced by Serb soldiers to work during the day and were raped according to a schedule, once every four nights (Gutman, 1993).

From the start of the war in Bosnia in 1992, Serbian paramilitary forces committed systematic rape against Muslim and Croat women. Later, in spring 1993, Bosnian Croat nationalists adopted the strategy of creating an ethnically pure Croatian sector (Gutman 1994). Forces of the predominantly Muslim government army of Bosnia have also been charged with atrocities, but these do not appear to be government policy as with the Serbs. Women of all nationalities have been raped, but Muslim women have been disproportionately among the victims, and Serbian paramilitaries disproportionately among the rapists (Stiglmayer, 1994). Also implicated in the sexual abuse and prostitution of women are the United Nations 'peace-keeping' forces (Gutman, 31 October 1993; Bernstein, 21 June 1993).

Forced impregnation has also been a weapon of nationalism and ethnic cleansing in the campaign of violence against women. In this male ideology the ethnicity of a baby is the same as its father. Serb soldiers and paramilitary troops who raped women told them that they would give birth to 'little Chetniks', or Serbian soldiers, who would grow up to kill them. Other Croat or Muslim women were told that if a woman carries a Serbian baby, then she too is Serb (State Commission for Gathering Facts on War Crimes in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 1992). Some women were held in rape camps in Bosnia until their pregnancies were so advanced that they would not be able to obtain an abortion (Tresnjevka Women's Group, 28 September 1992). Since the goal of ethnic cleansing is the creation of an ethnically and nationally pure population, the forced impregnation of non-Serb women has required some twists in thinking in Serbian nationalist ideology.

Long before the atrocities of the Serbs came to international attention, Women in Black issued a statement calling for an end to war crimes. In October 1991, the Women's Parliament and the Belgrade Women's Lobby issued a statement 'Against War Crime' in which they listed acts which are war crimes, including: inhuman treatment of civilians, inflicting bodily harm, torture, prostitution, rape, stealing or destroying the property of others, including historical and cultural monuments, and the destruction of cities, towns and villages. They reminded people that Yugoslavia had signed all United Nations conventions and agreements, including the Geneva Convention on war (Women's Parliament and Belgrade Women's Lobby, 9 October 1991). In 1992 Women in Black called for the naming of war crimes and the prosecution of perpetrators (Women in Black, September 1992).

The feminists in Belgrade have maintained the position that all survivors of rape be recognized, but stating that many more rapes have been committed by Serbian forces.

The Feminists of Belgrade and Serbia do not support the position about symmetrical suffering. They are conscious that the more powerful and better armed military-political forces of Karadžić in Bosnia (the army of the self-declared Serbian Republic in Bosnia) have the largest number of rapes on their consciences. How many exactly, it will be difficult to know, even after the war. The high percentage of Muslim women raped in the war in Bosnia is not a reason to forget the suffering of women of other nationalities and religions, atheists, or those claiming no particular nationality. (Women in Black, 1993: 92a)

REFUGEES IN SERBIA

'You can go anywhere in the world but home', said Milka Zuličić, economist and refugee from Sarajevo living in Belgrade (statement made

at a workshop at the Third International Meeting of Women in Black, Novi Sad, Serbia, 4–6 August 1994). She is Montenegrin, but keeps her husband's Muslim name, although he has been dead many years. In February 1993 she sent her oldest son, age 21, to Montenegro by train to get food from relatives living there. When the train passed near the border of Bosnia a group of unidentified men entered the train and asked for identification. Zuličić's son and 18 men with Muslim names were removed from the train. None of them has been seen since. It is thought that the leader of this paramilitary unit is a member of the Serbian parliament. Now, Milka Zuličić is an active member of Women in Black and waits with her other son for an immigration visa to somewhere else in the world.

Traditionally, refugees are thought to be those who have 'fled', but the refugees who have become politically active in Belgrade clearly and forcefully state that they are those who have been 'expelled'. They were forced to leave their homes by military aggression in their home regions. All would like to return home. Instead they are forced to apply for and await immigration to receptive countries all over the world. The implication is that they will never, or at least not in the foreseeable future, return to their homes or homeland.

According to the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and the Red Cross of Serbia at the end of 1993 there were 559,000 registered and 150,000 unregistered refugees in the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.⁶ As with most refugee populations, they are predominantly women and children. Of the adults, 84 percent are women. A sizeable percentage of the children are without parents, because their families in Bosnia-Herzegovina sent them to Serbia to be safe with relatives or friends for what they thought would be a short period of time. A number of these children have been sent since to live in orphanages or refugee camps. Over 95 percent of the refugees live with relatives or friends, only 4.8 percent live in refugee camps, which are old barracks and dormitories away from the population centres, with no transportation.

In some cases women have resorted to prostitution to feed themselves and their children. Due to the unpopularity of the Serbian regime and international sanctions, aid from humanitarian sources is scarce. Refugees are often harassed and made to feel guilty for being a burden. Fights often break out in schools between refugee and local children.⁷ Refugees are also subject to nationalistic harassment because they speak with a Bosnian dialect. Some women say they are afraid to speak in public.

At the Third International Meeting of Women in Black in Novi Sad (4–6 August 1994) many women refugees spoke about their experiences. One woman, from the Centre for Victims of War in Zagreb, Croatia,

who had been a refugee for one-and-a-half years tried to hold back her tears as she spoke about her experience with dignity:

It is hard to touch the wound which bleeds, but I will try to suffer this pain to talk. If this story could change something, I would be satisfied. I have been a refugee since February 1993. I try to raise my head and have courage. At first the pain was too heavy, but I tried to put together the pieces of my personality and I have dedicated the last of my power to share with poor people – refugees who have the same destiny. I am proud today. I have succeeded in not providing satisfaction to the enemy. I am not broken or destroyed. Through modest efforts I do something everyday to heal my own pain and suffering, as well as others who are suffering. You have to be able to enter the soul of a refugee to understand. People judge us by outside appearance. I invest tremendous effort to look well. I do not want to allow them to ruin us completely. We have survived many humiliations, but we will fight to return home again. I am feeling stronger than any dirty games they play with us. It is our hope, our vision, our destiny to return again to the most beautiful country in the world – Bosnia.⁸

This woman describes a personal form of resistance to the violence done to her and her country. She, along with other refugees who spoke at the meeting, pointed out the importance of telling their story in the hopes that it will make a difference. Her speech was halting and at times she had to stop to collect herself, but it was imperative to her to make her statement without breaking down into uncontrolled emotion. Her personal form of resistance was not to allow herself to be diminished in any way.

MOTHERHOOD AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The nationalist ideology of the Serbian leaders calls for women to do their duty to the country by having more babies and willingly sacrificing their sons. Mythic figures are called upon to coerce women into supporting nationalist goals, while the law makers are changing the constitution and laws, so that women will have no choice but to comply:

In tandem with the cult of blood and soil, the new Serbian nationalists also summoned to life the symbolic mediaeval figure of mother Yugovich – the long suffering, brave, stoic mother of nine, offering her children up to death in the defence of the fatherland. Maternity is now to be seen as an obligation, not as a free option for women; the sexuality of women has to be controlled and reduced to procreation. (Zajović, December 1991)

Militaristic nationalism insists that Serbian women must have more babies so that the nation will be able to defend itself in war. One politician said, 'I call upon all Serbian women to give birth to one more son in order to carry out their national debt.' Following the war in Slovenia, another

politician said, 'For each soldier fallen in the war against Slovenia, Serbian women must give birth to 100 more sons' (Zajović, December 1991).

Abortion has been readily available to women in Serbia since 1951. In the new Constitution of 1974 abortion was guaranteed as a human right by Article 191 of 'Free Parenthood'. This article protected 'the human right to decide about the birth of one's own children' (Mladjenović and Litričin, 1993).

In April 1992, a new constitution was formed for the 'Third Yugoslavia'.⁹ It eliminated Article 191 on 'Free Parenthood'. The absence of this protection means that Serbian women's reproductive rights, such as access to contraceptives and abortions, are no longer guaranteed. Already, nationalists have drafted new legislation to restrict access to abortion. In the proposed legislation, after the tenth week of pregnancy a medical reason would be needed to get an abortion. Rape would not be an adequate reason. Currently, a woman undergoing an abortion must pay 80 dinars for the anaesthetic (the average salary in Belgrade during the summer of 1994 was 167 dinars a month). Because of the high cost of abortions illegal abortions are becoming more common.

Nationalists are calling for legal restrictions on abortions. In arguing for restrictions on abortions they compare the number of abortions to the number of soldiers killed in the war. Currently, the party of government holds to a socialist heritage which guarantees a woman's right to abortion. Because of Milošević's military aggression feminists oppose his government, but the alternative parties may be worse. All the opposition parties are nationalist and would restrict abortion immediately if they came to power. Lepa Mladjenović asks, 'What's a radical feminist here supposed to do?'

There is little education available on birth control and there is not a consistent adequate supply of contraceptives. The international sanctions against Serbia have prevented contraceptives from being imported. Now one pharmaceutical company in Serbia is manufacturing birth control pills, but the supply is intermittent. The hormone levels vary for different pills, and there is no consumer education on the difference. A woman is supposed to get a prescription for contraceptive pills, but pharmacists will often sell them without a prescription. The IUD is used, but without proper care. Some women have had IUDs in place for up to seven years even though they should be removed after three years. Contraceptives such as the diaphragm and sponge are not available. One woman said she had only seen a diaphragm once in her life.¹⁰ Although condoms are available men do not like them and often refuse to use them. Withdrawal is still frequently used as the only form of birth control. Pregnancy is a constant fear for women. As summarized by Stanislava Otasević, a physician at the Autonomous Women's Centre

Against Sexual Violence, 'No one is educated. Women are not consulted. No one speaks with them.'¹¹

TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN'S LIVES IN SERBIA

One of the authors of this paper, Zorica Mršević, observed how life has changed in the past four years.

I have been a witness to how easily what has been socially constructed can be destroyed. Within a few months practically everything was changed. All the rules of the game are now different. Institutions which we believed would exist forever don't exist anymore. All that I had invested myself in is worth nothing. We became miserable. Previously, we lived an easy life, not on a high standard, but somehow, everything was easy – going on holiday, getting a flat from the institution where you worked, buying new clothes, eating whatever you wanted, having fun, visiting restaurants, travelling abroad, getting free medical care. Now we spend practically all the money we earn only on food. Our clothes and shoes, as well as our health and good moods, come from a previous era. The winter of 1993/4 was the hardest in my life. We lived by eating only potatoes and beans and we had to spend our life savings to buy that. Our salaries were between 10 and 20 DM per month.

Slavica Stojanović was not a feminist before the war. Now she translates Virginia Woolf into Serbo-Croat, teaches courses on women's literature at the Women's Studies Centre, cofounded the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence and, in 1994, started a feminist press called '1994'. She was in crisis at the beginning of the war because she did not know what to do, but felt a strong sense of responsibility to Yugoslavia.

My grandmother lived under Austro-Hungarian rule and out of the experience of her youth she despised inter-ethnic conflicts which were provoked by rulers who had vested interests in creating animosity. My grandmother remembered the enthusiasm of the time when Yugoslavia was founded as a multi-ethnic country after World War I. She lived near the Italian border in the early years of fascism and openly opposed it. At the beginning of World War II she lived in Zagreb and was forced to leave because she was Serb. She came to live in Belgrade and her house was bombed in 1941 by the Germans and again in 1944 by the Americans. Until her death, a few years ago, at age 90, she called herself 'Yugoslav'. It was her political choice. I was raised with these ideas. When this war started I had to make a distinction between the values I wanted to retain from 'Yugoslavia' and the material/territorial idea of Yugoslavia.¹²

Slavica said that she 'doesn't care for borders'. Like Virginia Woolf, she says,

the whole world is my country. I want to work for values that are more open than nationalism. When Slovenia and Croatia wanted independence, I

supported unity, but that meant I supported the war. I wanted to support unity, but I needed to respect their choice for independence and I couldn't support crimes. I had political doubts about the motivations of some people who wanted separate states. Because populations in the republics are so mixed I knew that separating Yugoslavia would be very difficult and risky. I am not happy with the nationalistic states with their patterns of domination.

With tears Slavica described the pain she lived in at the beginning of the wars. 'For one year I woke up as if someone had grabbed me. I didn't know what to do. It was like I was having a heart attack.'¹³

Another woman said that prior to 1990 she published research papers, but growing nationalism, war propaganda and eventual war compelled her to change the focus of her work and life.

I felt lonely and frightened among men and my colleagues. I needed strongly to be surrounded by women. First, I joined the Women's Studies Research and Communication Centre because it was a form of scholarship that was closest to my previous work, but with a feminist approach. Soon after this, I realised that this was not enough, that violence against women is very widespread and I needed to do more than stay in my room with my books and my computer. That was a luxury that belongs to another time. More practical and less theoretical work was needed, so I joined the SOS Hotline and the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence. During this time I realised that I was a lesbian, so my life in the women's groups is not only a scholastic adventure, but the adventure of my life.¹⁴

FEMINISTS ORGANIZE AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The Group for Women Raped in War

In December 1992 women from the SOS Hotline founded the Group for Women Raped in War. Their aim was to support women raped in the war with basic needs, such as food, clothing, medicine, money and friendship. They wanted to create solidarity among survivors of sexual abuse in war so they could regain their autonomy and self-esteem.

The Group for Women Raped in War wanted to assist women raped in war through the procedures of medical institutions and refugee organizations. They looked for women in hospitals where survivors went to have an abortion or to await delivery of babies. Sometimes, they received referrals from doctors, but there was poor collaboration since the interests of the state institutions were different from those of the Group. Medical personnel in gynaecological wards treated women as 'guilty victims'. Survivors of war rape were treated the same way, unless they were Serbs – then the hospitals had a nationalist interest in their stories of victimization. Serb officials used the testimonies of the rapes of Serbian

women to support their claim that Croats and Muslims were the aggressors. Thus they used women's bodies and pain in support of nationalism. In May 1993, while volunteers from the SOS Hotline sat in the hospital with a depressed rape survivor, who had just had a painful second trimester abortion, the doctors were photocopying her story and preparing to take it to the European Parliament. The Group for Women Raped in War supported the women's decisions in whatever they chose: to go back to parents, to leave the country, to stay in Belgrade, to find work and, for some, to keep their babies or give them up for adoption.

The Group for Women Raped in War's political goal was to make visible the systematic and genocidal rape of women with Muslim and Croat names by Serb soldiers. These rapes were never covered by the media in Serbia and the Serbian public was not aware of the ethnic cleansing, concentration camps and systematic rapes organized and carried out by Serbs in Bosnia.

The Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence

The Group for Women Raped in War founded the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence. With the financial support of many organizations from Europe and the United States the Centre opened on International Human Rights Day, 10 December 1993. In their opening address they stated, 'We wish to stress once again that women's rights are human rights, that human rights are above national interests, and that the State must not kill its citizens' (Women's Lobby, 10 December 1993).

The Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence was created for all women who have survived rape and sexual abuse, whether from war zones or from neighbourhoods in Belgrade. The Centre set up a multiple approach to sexual violence. They analysed and responded to rape at the individual, social and political level. Their goal is to respond to the emotional needs of the rape survivor, and comprehend and condemn the use of sexual violence as a method to keep women powerless in society and as a political and military weapon of war and ethnic cleansing.

The Centre has an SOS Rape Hotline, individual counselling and in autumn 1994, the Centre organized support groups for survivors of sexual abuse. Women come to the Centre from several different populations and backgrounds. The Centre sees both women coming from war zones and local women who were sexually assaulted. Mothers of children who are being sexually abused have called for assistance and teenage and adult incest survivors call or visit the Centre to talk about their abuse. Young women (ages 16–20) from the Belgrade Maternity House frequently come to the Centre to find support. These women are waiting to deliver babies. Some of these pregnancies are the result of rape, but many

of the women become pregnant by boyfriends and are then rejected by their families because they are not married. Also, refugee women and children come to the Centre for humanitarian supplies and personal support.

The Autonomous Women's Centre is the only women's drop-in centre in Serbia that organizes women's counselling, works on women's rights campaigns, networks with different women's groups in the country, and has an ongoing public campaign to 'make sexual violence against women socially visible'. An additional aim of the Centre is to maintain communication with feminists and activists against violence against women in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Centre for Women's Studies Research and Communication

The Centre for Women's Studies Research and Communication was founded by activists interested in feminist theory. Some of the women were university professors who observed the invisibility of women in the social sciences and humanities. All of the women had observed the realities of women's lives and wanted to read and discuss works written by women that attempted to explain the world and the experiences of women. On 8 March 1992 the Centre for Women's Studies Research and Communication formed to teach and study feminist knowledge.

The Centre is an independent collective with no institutional affiliation, although several of the instructors are faculty members at the University of Belgrade. In their first year (1992/3) the Centre offered one class per week and in the second year (1993/4) there were two classes per week. During this time they worked solely on a volunteer basis. In the third year (1994/5) the Centre received some funding from outside Yugoslavia and increased their offering to four classes per week. More and more students are coming to study. The programme of classes for the past two years has consisted of: analysis of contemporary Serb and Croat women writers; feminist theory; history of philosophy; anthropology; sociology; history of feminist ideas; psychology of women; and women and law. The women's studies curriculum focuses on feminist theory. Many of the women from the Centre are also involved in anti-war groups or groups for victims of violence. Women's studies is the place they have created for theoretical discussion.

Arkadia – Lesbian and Gay Lobby

Lesbians and gay men from Belgrade started meeting as a group for the first time at the end of 1990. In the beginning they met in a coffee shop; as the group expanded they moved to people's kitchens and flats. They officially became Arkadia – Lesbian and Gay Lobby in December 1990.

The group sought to promote the visibility and rights of lesbians and gay men. In their first public statement they said:

Women, homosexuals and lesbians are an integral part of this society; still their human rights are violated daily, still they are discriminated against and humiliated daily, even though they are active in all the political parties which nevertheless perpetuate institutionalisation of the violence against their existence. (Arkadia and Women's Lobby, 16 August 1991)

Nationalism and war have deeply influenced the formation and policies of Arkadia, like all other organizations. The first public discussion on social visibility took place on 27 June 1991:

It was a sunny day and some people were coming directly from the river beaches to the meeting. We had four speakers, and the discussion was a very good one. But the news of the day was that the Yugoslav Army started to shoot in Slovenia – we were not at all aware at that moment that this was the day the war(s) began. For the next few months we were waiting [for] the end of the war, even though the killings were already spreading to Croatia and the news was very bad. (Arkadia and Women's Lobby, 1994)

The wars and nationalism eventually came to dominate everyone's lives and the organizations to which they belonged. Nationalism split Arkadia. Those favouring a non-nationalist, anti-militarist policy prevailed.

The summer [of 1992] we had an open discussion and lots of quarrelling; some of us were firmly insisting on a non-nationalist policy for the group. The people who were saying, 'I hate Gypsies and Albanians but I am gay and I want to be in this group' did not feel comfortable with us any more. We stopped informing them about the meetings. But we are still left with the unanswered question: what shall we do with lesbians and gay men who support the war? (Arkadia and Women's Lobby, 1994)

Members of Arkadia face discrimination, harassment and violence. The police harass members. Police came to the apartment of a male founder of Arkadia, took him to the police station and beat him for listening to excessively loud Croatian music. He was also asked questions about Arkadia.

For three years Arkadia could not find a place to meet – no institution wanted to be associated with gays and lesbians. Only after women's groups got rooms of their own was Arkadia able to meet in those spaces. At this time lesbians started holding lesbian-only meetings and a few are searching for funding to rent a flat and start a lesbian information centre.

Women's Law Advocacy Centre

Operating within the SOS Hotline and the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence was a women's law group, which became known

as Women's Rights are Human Rights. The women's daily experience with violence against women demonstrated the need for legal protection for women. On 1 September 1994 the women established the Women's Law Advocacy Centre. Their personal experience with victims of violence and sexual exploitation is the ground for their professional approach in creating a centre dedicated to the protection of women's legal rights.

The work of the Advocacy Centre covers four areas (1) direct legal support to women; (2) education; (3) development of strategies to combat legal institutional procedures and practices which discriminate against women; and (4) the training of law students.

In the autumn of 1994 they headed a campaign against the proposed abortion law which would restrict women's access to abortion. Due to their efforts the proposed law has been withdrawn from parliamentary action and returned to the Department of Health for redrafting.

The group has also led a campaign to have rape in marriage recognized as a crime. During summer 1994 they opposed provisions of a new criminal law that did not recognize rape in marriage. The men in parliament laughed at their proposal.

WOMEN IN BLACK'S NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE, 1994

By the end of 1993 Women in Black had been protesting in the streets for over two years. In that time they acquired a jaded view of peace plans and international interventions. In their New Year's Message they had only universal condemnation:

The sanctions imposed by the [United Nations] Security Council do not affect only those who have caused them: the militarist Serbian regime and its partners, the new elite of war-profiters, whose world-wide bank accounts are safe and sound. The so-called international community has moreover given political support to this regime by legalising the results of its conquests and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and elsewhere. . . . We mistrust a 'peace' based on 'deals' made by the nationalist-militaristic elites who have caused this war. We mistrust the so-called mediators who use peace slogans to fan war and ethnic hatred; they are part of the same old patriarchal militaristic machinery. We no longer harbour the illusion that the international community will not apply the logic of violence and the right of the stronger. (Women in Black, 27 December 1993)

'THREE YEARS OF WAR – AGAINST WAR': THE RESISTANCE CONTINUES

An ending cannot be written for this article because the story of feminist resistance in Serbia is far from over. As this article is completed the city of

Bihac is being destroyed in Bosnia. The feminist movement in Belgrade continues to grow – this year (1994) alone three new groups formed. The movement is being built by women who refuse to be bystanders to the destruction of people – whether they live in their own neighbourhoods or in what are now different countries. These women refuse to be victims, although some have been victimized. They decided to transform their powerlessness and despair into a feminist women's movement of resistance to nationalism, militarism and sexism:

It is the third year and we are still on the street. For three years, our women's presence has been saying to the Serbian regime – your policy is death, disaster and sorrow for those in whose name you are speaking, for those you chose to be against, and 'national interests' are nothing but a means of exerting power and creating destruction. With our protest, we, Women in Black, are making their violence visible. (Women in Black, 5 October 1994)

Through their organizing and activism the women resist being silenced and separated from those who have been defined as 'other':

Women will remember, women are telling each other stories of the reality we live in and we are witnesses of many crimes for which this regime is responsible. Women, our friends from all parts and states of the former Yugoslavia are still telling us about the suffering they went through and what is happening to them now. Nationalism didn't separate all of us, a stream of trust still exists between women of all names. (Women in Black, 5 October 1994)

NOTES

1. In 1989, the Serbian government removed the autonomous status of Kosovo and Vojvodina.
2. The history leading up to this conflict is long and complicated and beyond the scope of this article. For more detailed discussion see Meg Coulson (1993), Maja Korac (1993) and Bogdan Denitch (1994).
3. In 1994, the Centre for Anti-War Action in Belgrade published *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy – The Analysis of Elementary School Textbooks* (Rosandić and Pešić, 1994), which analyses messages to students about patriotism, national (ethnic) relations, prejudices, war, peace, and gender. The address for the Centre for Anti-War Action is: Kralja Petra 46, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.
4. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, July 1994.
5. The first SOS Hotline was founded in Zagreb, Croatia on 8 March 1988.
6. Following the war in Slovenia 37,000 Serbs left Slovenia and registered as refugees in Serbia. During the war in Croatia, tens of thousands of Serbs fled to areas of Croatia under nationalist Serb control, while 160,000 people (almost all Serbs) left Croatia and registered as refugees in Serbia. All figures are quoted from the US Committee for Refugees (September 1993), which relied on the Commissariat for Refugees, Republic of Serbia. In 1993, the

- United Nations Human Rights Commission (25 May 1993), basing its figures on Red Cross reports from each country, reported that within the territory of former Yugoslavia there were the following numbers of refugees: 985,000 in Croatia, 87,000 in Krajina, 469,000 in Serbia, 2,280,000 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 60,000 in Montenegro and 32,000 in Macedonia.
7. Personal communication from teenage boys to Donna Hughes, July 1994.
 8. Spoken at a workshop at Third Annual Meeting of Women in Black, Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Serbia, 6 August 1994.
 9. The 'first Yugoslavia' was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes formed after the First World War and the 'second Yugoslavia' was the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia formed after the Second World War.
 10. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, July 1994.
 11. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, July 1994.
 12. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, July 1994.
 13. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, August 1994.
 14. Personal communication to Donna Hughes, September 1994.

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