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# Feminist Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia

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### Feminist Resistance to War

Women were 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, 1). 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 programs 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, 3).

### The Mother's Protest-1991

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—which would put their sons on the "wrong" side of the war. Serb mothers did not want their sons fighting in Croatia, a land that they didn't perceive belonged to them anymore. The women used their role as mothers to express concern for their sons and 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, in 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, 8).

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" (Mother's Movement July 1991, 7). Repeatedly, throughout the summer, in letters to officials and public statements, the mothers called for an end to the war and a return of their sons.

At the end of August 1991, approximately a thousand 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 soldier's 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. Lepa Mladjenovic attended the protest and participated with mixed feelings.

"I was very excited. The first night the auditorium of the soldier's 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 Mladjenovic 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.

The Mother's Protests were the first public resistance to the wars. Since the political tradition of fifty years of communism had suppressed people's rebellious motivations, the Mother's Protest was important in breaking that tradition. Also, the Mother's Protest contained a general peace message. It was a good use of the patriarchal 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.

## Women in Black, Belgrade

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

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 realization 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, 23a).

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, 50).

Every week Women in Black 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 the grief for death of the loved ones. We wear black for the death of all the victims of war. We wear black because the 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, 50).

The feminists also shifted the philosophy and approach to protesting the war. The statements and writings became more overtly political and analytically feminist.

"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" (Zajovic December 1991).

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

"We say that the Serbian regime and its repressive structures (Federal Army and paramilitary formations) 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, 50).

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, 21). In 1992 Women in Black called for the naming of war crimes and the prosecution of perpetrators (Women in Black September 1992, 83).

The feminists in Belgrade have maintained the position that all survivors of rape be recognized, but stated 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 Serb's Republic) 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, 28 October 1992, 92a).

By the end of 1993 Women in Black had been protesting in the streets for two years. In that time they acquired a jaded view of peace plans and international interventions. As this point the Dayton Peace Accord which would bring peace in Bosnia was still two years away. In their New Year's Message of 1994 they had only universal condemnation for all parties.

"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-profiteers, whose world-wide bank accounts are safe and sound. The so-called international community has moreover given political support to this regime by legalizing 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 harbor 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, 15).

Women in Black continued to wear black and stand in the street until after an enforced peace was brought to Bosnia. During 1997, they supported and participated in the grassroots democracy movement in Serbia. The situation looked more hopeful for the first time in many years. But Slobodan Milošević was not about to be

maneuvered out of power by democracy. He refused to accept the results of the election and soon had control of the government again. When Serbia renewed the violence in Kosovo, Women in Black working with other pro-democracy, human rights and anti-violence groups organized protest rallies.

On 19 September 1998, the government banned the antiwar rally Against War. Women in Black issued a statement:

"...by banning this protest, the regime in Serbia proves its policy of isolation, xenophobia [sic] and confrontation with the world. With this repressive act the regime also shows its determination for war, hatred, destruction and violence against all who think they opposite, even against a indeed small group of citizens, who from 1991 until today raise their voice against all kinds of violence" (Women Black, et al, 19 September 1998).

Nine days later, threats to Women in Black and other groups that spoke out against the Serbian regime were issued in the Serbian Parliament. At this time, NATO had threatened to bomb Belgrade in order to force the Serbian regime to stop the police and military aggression in Kosovo. Vojislav Šešelj, previously a war criminal in Croatia and Bosnia and now the Deputy Prime Minister, responded with self-annihilating nationalism and threats to retaliate against peace activists, who he referred to as "Serbia's inner enemies."

"We should take the US threats very seriously but we must not be frightened. We will have an enormous number of victims and great material damages, but we don't have a spare fatherland. We must fight at all costs; no matter by whom we are attacked. Our determination to defend ourselves by all means should prove that if they want to attack us they should withdraw their supporters. ...[the US should] withdraw their

quislings, like members of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, Belgrade (Intellectual Circle and Women in Black, and not leave them as hostages. Maybe we can not reach every airplane, but we will grab those who are close to us" (Women in Black, 30 September 1998).

In response to these threats, the Women in Black issued their annual statement "Seven Years of Women in Black Against War: 9 October 1991 to 9 October 1998." This time the annual report was in the form of a confession of their guilt for seven years of activism for peace, freedom and democracy for all people in former Yugoslavia.

"I confess

to my longtime anti-war activity;

that I did not agree with the severe beating of people of other ethnicities and nationalities, faiths, race, sexual orientation;

that I was not present at the ceremonial act of throwing flowers on the tanks headed for Vukovar, 1991 and Prishtina, 1998;

that I fed women and children in the refugee camps, schools, churches, and mosques;

that I sent packages for women and men in the basements of occupied Sarajevo in 1993, 1994, and 1995;

that for the entire year

I crossed the walls of  
Balkan ethno-states,  
because solidarity is  
the politics which  
interests me;

that I understand  
democracy as support  
to anti-war  
activists/friends/sisters  
– Albanian women,  
Croat women, Roma  
women, stateless  
women;

that I first challenged  
the murderers from the  
state where I live and  
then those from other  
states, because I  
consider this to be  
responsible political  
behavior of a citizen;

that throughout all the  
seasons of the year I  
insisted that there be  
an end to the  
slaughter, destruction,  
ethnic cleansing,  
forced evacuation of  
people and rape;

that I took care of  
others while the  
patriots took care of  
themselves"

(Women in Black, 9  
October 1998)

[Continued Part 3](#)

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