

III. Notes of a Feminist Lesbian during Wartime

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ABSTRACT Being a lesbian during wartime strengthens interiorized homophobic fears, and the process of coming out becomes more difficult and many fears appear on the surface. The author wrote this article in order to express the dilemmas and questions she had during the war in the former Yugoslavia, which started in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991 and went on until 1996. The article poses a number of questions asked by a feminist lesbian living in Belgrade, Serbia, during the war. How was the war in the former Yugoslavia connected to the fears experienced by a lesbian? How did the war create lesbian solidarity and what did it mean for lesbians in the isolated regions?

KEY WORDS identity ♦ isolation ♦ Serbia ♦ war

INTRODUCTION

This is the article that took me the longest time to write. I've never had my entire life so delicately opened, flowing out like a living fluid, in order to identify a few issues, write them down and still feel the flux of the fluid. Who was I in the war? I was living during the war in the former Yugoslavia, not in my home town but in a neighbouring region, and I was living as a lesbian. I wanted to connect and write about these things, but it took me years to have the courage even to start. When I started to write, it was in English. Maybe because it gave me sufficient distance to think about myself. Maybe because when I decided to write in English I invited an imaginary feminist lesbian international community to be my audience and it felt safe. Wanting to write meant wanting to understand myself and the world around me. It meant working through my own homophobia, making transparent layers of fear, guilt, justice, desire and the will to understand it all.

When I reread this article I saw that I would have written it differently

now. In the year 2001 I am changed. Wartime made my understanding of the meaning of my lesbian existence in relation to the political situation difficult and deep-rooted. After going through this process, I realized that the two are not connected, the lesbian existence and war are two different issues as much as heterosexual existence and war are two different issues. What connected in me was my own fear of being a lesbian in a heterosexual world, with my fear of being Albanian in a Serbian regime, with my fear of being disabled in the abled world – these are fears of abandonment and isolation, fears of stigmatization and being made to feel guilt. This article shows how difficult this process is, and that is why I decided to publish it.

At one point I defined two dimensions of my particular interest: one, lesbians in the peace movement and another, lesbians in relation to the war. During the war some of us organized excellent lesbian discussions at the international meetings of Women in Black, held usually every August in Novi Sad, Vojvodina. There were always lesbians in the peace movement and there was always silence about us. We realized that we lesbians in the peace movement had to work through this matter ourselves first.

In this process of coming out there were a few feminist lesbians who came to Belgrade to support us in working with war issues as professionals, like Ingrid Foeken, Sylvia Borren and Anja Muelenbelt, all three from Holland, who and at the same time identified as lesbians and bisexuals clearly and we thank them for this. It was important for us to have at least some role models, because throughout the war years it was the other way around. We from the lesbian and women's groups would support lesbians from foreign countries to come out as lesbians. Some of them came urged by feelings of guilt about war and would therefore not feel easy about talking about themselves as women loving women in front of us.

I know there are many lesbians in war regions, and I know that many have left these regions because it was a matter of their survival. I wish to dedicate this article to all women who love women who are stranded in war zones, who choose to support their families and neighbours by being there, and who do not have the means to read articles like this or anything else which can inspire their lesbian lives. I also dedicate this article to my dyke-sister feminist lesbian, Igballe Rogova, founder of the women's rural group Motrat Qiriazhi, who worked all throughout the war years in Kosova with young girls and never denounced her lesbian self.

Finally, I want to mention that this article was written in 1997, even though I did not publish it then, and it was before the ethnic cleansing in Kosova and the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, therefore I haven't mentioned these events. But on the lesbian scene, three events have happened in the meantime.

First, many lesbians were active in Belgrade in bringing down the Milosevic regime in September and October 2000. The last month of protest-walking and demonstrations included many gays and lesbians as well.

Second, immediately after the downfall of Milosevic, the group Labris organized the Second Lesbian Week in Vojvodina. This historic event brought together 60 lesbians from different regions for more than 20 workshops over six days, from theoretical discussion, experience exchange, sport and drama. The most important achievement was that links were forged between lesbians from Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Serbia. The mood during the Lesbian Week fostered many ideas and new projects. This was a crucial moment and lesbians from Belgrade have since decided to register the group and rent a space for lesbians only.

This brings us to the third piece of news: in February 2001, the lesbian group Labris rented its own premises for the first time in history! So, there is a Labris Centre now in Belgrade and we are going to open Lesbian Line soon. We are also launching discussion in the media about lesbians and gay partnerships and are collaborating with new gay initiatives in the city. Maybe some of us are only now ready to talk about how we felt during the war, still searching for words from sister lesbians from Bosnia-Herzegovina, San Salvador, Byelorussia, Palestine, Kashmir, Sierra Leone. . . .

1997

War narrows the spaces for every human rights issue.

Since the war started in Croatia in 1991, there are men who walk down the streets in Belgrade, where I live, who have become killers and rapists. You get on a bus, go into a cafe or a shop, and some faces you see are those of war criminals, but you don't know which ones. Violence has increased and reality has become more male. Hanging out in town for some of us has changed, the bookstore windows display only Serbian titles, theatres as well. The air of oblivion with regard to the crimes across the border is unbreathable. What happens in neighbouring regions is no longer of any value or importance: Sarajevo, Zagreb, Osijek, Prizren . . . many citizens of Belgrade have agreed with the logic of nationalism: to bury the Other. They must not care what happens in these towns any more. Walking in the city is not the joy it was before. Men in uniforms or male invalids for whom you don't know if you should feel anger or pity. Women and lesbians are absent because any possible subject in the street matters. Nothing new in the world there, but in wartime emotions about your absence of public representation intensify.

The war in the former Yugoslavia started in summer 1991 and the social space for lesbians in Serbia, which never really existed, became almost

impossible. In the region where I live most of the women who love women are at the stage before they can say a word about their lesbian desire. The social conditions don't exist which would permit them to name their identity of lesbian or see the political implications of loving women. Many lesbians do not allow themselves to simply enjoy their love. In fact, they feel guilty about who they are. Many are self-destructive – in drug or alcohol use, in depression, self-isolation – continuing to wear a mask and hate themselves.

Still, there is a lesbian group, Labris, that was formed in 1995, and a gay and lesbian group, Arkadija, that was formed just a year before the war started. Without a space of their own, the lesbians from the group meet, organize, publish and talk.

Now, I want to point out some issues with which I was faced as a feminist lesbian living in Serbia, in a state whose government was responsible for starting the war against people in the homeland, and responsible for the nationalist politics that continued during the war.

HIERARCHY OF DISCRIMINATION

The war makes a hierarchy of survival needs. The right to be alive and the right to survive become the only urgency. This is a fact in countries at war and in the regions of war zones: there is no space for naming identities. One needs food and safe shelter. The war produces distrust. For lesbians who are hiding in their private homes, behind their masks, behind their names, the war, as another institutionalized ritual of hatred, is like a monster outside the closet waiting to intensify, gorge on their feelings of guilt. Lesbians do not have many options. Some of them join the nationalist machinery, others refuse to participate and either become apolitical or, if they can, they leave the country. Only a few feminist lesbians, only if they feel a minimum security, remain to try to understand the complexity of coming out as lesbian, as feminist and as anti-fascist in wartime.

In my case, I have a Serbian name and the Serbian regime runs the war. What support for lesbian rights will a lesbian expect from the institutions of that same regime, if nationalism is institutionalized, if violence is a legal mechanism to 'communicate', if 'the different' is seen as the enemy, if the 'homosexuals and masons are spies and a threat to the system'? We've heard this argument in the Serbian media as well as all over Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia.

Nevertheless, the war in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina moved some people to organize human rights groups for the first time in these states, as well as in Serbia. The peace movement, women's movement and human rights organizations, apart from responding to the urgent needs of the people who survived the war, also became the nuclei of future civil

society. Feminists expected that the human rights movement would be based on the policy of working against all kinds of discrimination, including sexism and homophobia, and that the principle of indivisibility of human rights would be respected, so that all human rights would be equal. But in the initial years of the war this was not the case. The human rights groups that were formed in our cities worked hard to deconstruct nationalism and support refugee rights, but still did not touch other social groups' rights. We therefore come to a point when we must recognize that war urges a hierarchy of needs, that the killers' regime sets up a hierarchy of violence and that human rights organizations which respond to this new terror also set up a hierarchy of human rights. Not many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working for human rights, and they also choose among countless violations of human rights committed every second.

In this impossible social context, in which you are forcefully nationally defined and not asked for any of your other identities, the lesbian group Labris in Belgrade was confronting acts of homophobia. In 1994, the group was thrown out of the space used for its meetings on grounds of alleged 'incompatible projects'; in 1995, several lesbian activists were beaten up on the street by young fascists yelling 'You lesbians, you are dirtying my street, clear off'. In 1996, police were sent to a lesbian studies lecture on 'Legal Aspects of the Lesbian Movement in Europe' with charges that 'orgies and indecent activities were taking place'. Despite all this, the group continued to meet regularly, published newsletters, many essays, gave interviews to the television and newspapers, distributed a questionnaire and organized many workshops to discuss lesbian existence.

LESBIAN RESPONSE TO THE WAR

Some lesbians remained 'in the closet' because 'this is not our war'. Just like Roma people who long ago forgot their country of origin, some lesbians do not feel they have a state of their own. If they have to hide their lesbian self, if their social face is false, if they are not allowed to recognize any of their lesbian dimensions in public, why should they care who wins the war, or which nationality they should identify with? They don't recognize themselves in the imagery of the war. They remain in the silence which as lesbians they know best.

Others became involved in nationalism in order to feel a social identity. The phenomenon of lesbians entering a nationalist mechanism is particular because lesbians, before becoming nationalists, already live with the silence, guilt, fear and self-hatred specific to women who love women. Therefore, belonging to the group that glorifies one's self and delegates

hatred to the Other gives them some needed identity support. Nationalist institutionalized hatred enables many lesbians to join ethnic 'ours' in order to survive; in order to belong and never again say who they really are; in order to feel that they exist, even if that means taking a pseudonym, many women who love women become nationalists in the heterosexual way. Many other women and men who were not nationalists prior to the war also engage in a similar process of joining in nationalist and religious rituals in order to be socially accepted. In this false reality live many women who love women in Serbia and Croatia, in Kosova, Rwanda, Kurdistan. A few joined men's killer squads. Even if we know how lonely they remained.

RESPONSIBILITY OF FEMINISTS

Feminist politics inspired many women to emerge from the desperation and pain that came with the first news of war crimes. In 1992, feminists in Belgrade (Serbia) and Zagreb (Croatia) started to establish groups in order to support women war survivors and to organize women against the war. The few feminists who identified as lesbians were safe if and when they were part of these initiatives. Lesbians in these groups also decided to work for peace and with women survivors of war. Lesbian rights remained in the background. The difference between human rights NGOs and feminist NGOs was that feminists insisted on ethics of difference regardless of the aim of an organization. So in Zagreb, from 1991 to 1996, the Centre for Women War Victims, then B.a.B.e. Women's Human Rights Group, the Women's Studies Centre and Women's Infoteka promoted lesbian issues, whenever they had the opportunity. While in Belgrade, Women in Black Against War, the Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence, SOS Hotline and the Centre for Women's Studies have always supported lesbians among them, privately as well as publicly. This meant, for example, both the Belgrade and Zagreb Women's Studies Centres (non-governmental initiatives) had lesbian studies as an obligatory part of their programme. It also meant that throughout the war, at every international meeting of the women's peace group from Belgrade, Women in Black Against War, there was a workshop about lesbians. Making space for lesbian desire and politics was a prerogative at least among some feminist peace activists.

SEPARATE REALITIES

I have outlined a few points about lesbians and feminists – for a feminist lesbian who is politically responsible, the war is a situation that splits her

into several pieces. This is a very difficult issue, and each out lesbian deals with the war in a different way. I can only express a few personal thoughts and images regarding the splitting I have experienced.

In our lesbian group it was difficult to talk about war. Some lesbians thought this was not the place to contaminate with war issues. They wanted at least in the lesbian group to talk about desire. With regard to the totalitarian state, it was forbidden to be a lesbian or to be a pacifist. Because Milosevic's regime decreed that it was against the government to be homosexual, and that Serbia was not at war. If I asked a cashier in a shop to write me out a receipt to the Anti-War Centre, she would look at me with strange fear, even more if I asked her to write it out to the lesbian group Labris. At that time in the peace movement, only the war and nationalism were issues of discussion – feminism and lesbianism were avoided. In Belgrade the first feminist group was the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence and there were 20 or more of us. At the beginning of the war, in 1991, everything separated us: nationalism, lesbianism, pacifism. I felt split: in each context I could turn only one side of my face, and everything else was unwanted or dangerous. Only in my flat was I able to believe myself. Lucky to have a room of my own.

And still I remember losing my mind in dilemmas in that same room. A few times I would make love and there would be a transistor radio on with the latest news from the frontline. The only news to listen to was broadcast from Prague, London or Paris. I would be in bed and not know: should I get up and leave my lover, or turn off the radio and continue the pleasure, or not? Is knowing what happened to the killed and tortured the only way to give respect to the dead? Is lesbian love-making in that moment inappropriate? And why? Then, I would write a solidarity letter to an unknown woman in Sarajevo, and you know she is under the siege and bullets daily, and think would she one day suffer the embarrassment of coming face to face with a lesbian? Why was it always so difficult to say that certain humanitarian aid came from lesbians? Some said it was not important – maybe, but not important to whom?

It went on like that for years, fragmented identities, desires, motivations . . . I tried to understand what I could do. I would remember an essay in *off our backs* from many years ago, back in the 1980s, where one lesbian writer from the USA who went for a year to work in Nicaragua came back and said, 'No I could not talk about my lesbianism in Nicaragua, there is a war going on there, they have some other priorities'. I replayed this sentence in my mind a thousand times; do I agree or not, and what would I say now? Every time I thought 'No it isn't right', I would move on and think maybe it was; people first of all need to be able to live. If I would start with 'Yes, it's right', I would then wonder if it was interiorized homophobia. Then one night in 1995 we had a Labris action in the old part of Belgrade, Dorcol, a few blocks away from my flat. Three

men stopped four of us while we were writing lesbian graffiti. They came and attacked us precisely because we were lesbians. Two of them were at the back with hockey sticks and one of them stood in front of me. He watched me, I watched him, and I thought 'This is a face that demands war. This is a face that kills. This is a face that has been produced as such in recent years, there are weapons of hatred behind him.' I had never seen him before. He pushed me to the wall, broke my glasses and shouted, 'You dirty lesbian, I can throw you in this door and kill you – no one would know. Clear off!' When I asked him who he was, he exclaimed, 'Don't you utter your dirty words. The mosque is the place for you.' Lesbians were dirtying his straight male street, just as Muslims were dirtying his straight Serb street. Gay men were being harassed in their parks, Roma people were being spat upon, women were forever the first victims of their husbands.

It took me some days to recover. After that, it was evident that war implies hatred directed against every difference, against Muslims in Belgrade, then against Roma, Albanians, lesbians – once they were Jews and Communists. And that opposing war means coming out with the logic of supporting all social differences at once. One of the aims of war and pro-fascist ideology is not only separation of people of different nationalities, but the separation of people's own identities as well. That is how they can control us better. They need to have only two sets to control: 'Us' and 'Them', to reduce the fullness of our social beings to one.

So this was the process that took place. I was split at the roots all throughout the war, and somewhere near the end of it, after this event in Dorcol, just around the corner from the mosque the killer mentioned, I went through the final steps of reinventing myself as a whole. Do I feel guilt about insisting on being a lesbian in wartime? Do I feel guilt as a citizen from Belgrade, where the headquarters of evil production are housed? What is a function of these feelings?

After the homophobic incident in Dorcol, some of us wrote a piece about the attack for our anti-war email conference in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, titled 'Zamir'. We got lots of support as lesbians and one of the first messages came from a man I had never met in my life. He was hiding from snipers trying to connect his computer, endlessly, 100 times a day in his flat in Sarajevo. He wrote to me 'We from Sarajevo send you support, take care of yourself, we know men like him are very dangerous'.

At the end of 1995 the war in Bosnia was ending, and different acts of hatred and solidarity were connecting with each other in me. As I worked with women who had survived the war all through these years, I was filled with the hate stories of women refugees who came to the centre where I work. Stories of women who were thrown out of their homes, in which there was usually somebody who told them to clear out. Only because they had Serb or Muslim, Croat or Albanian names. I was full of

stories of women who had suffered through 10, 20 years of male violence from their husbands. Images of concentration camps were vivid in me. And, I thought, I could draw a line from the beginning to the end of how male violence connects nationalism and homophobia, domestic violence, incest and the armed conflict. These images of violence were seething inside my body and my mind long enough until it became evident to me that the same logic underlay the war in Bosnia as the phobias against lesbians and gay men. No, it is not the same thing, each hatred has its own particular form, but underneath there is a common patriarchal code of hatred of the Other. Only because she is a woman, only because she is Roma. Violence without immediate cause. I was slowly connecting different fascistic processes of terror and how they cross over me. Until not only the theory of fascism told me, but my own body also made it clear that the face of the guy who attacked me could be the face of a killer in a war, killer in the family, batterer of his wife, rapist, lesbian-hater. And how this face is not necessarily always male and surely not caused by biology.

LESBIAN SOLIDARITY

Yes, all during the war in the former Yugoslavia lesbians were present in their solidarity. First, throughout the war, acts of lesbian support continually arrived at our addresses: letters, packages, gifts, coffee, chocolates with words of tenderness. Sometimes from lesbians we had never seen and perhaps may never see, sometimes from women we knew. There were books, journals and newspapers from lesbians in France, Spain, Italy and the USA that were sent to lesbians in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Letters of support. Enough to keep reminding some of us about our lesbian existence.

Then, many lesbians from other countries supported the women's groups even though they never identified their support as lesbian support. They came to our women's centres to volunteer, to witness our misery, to widen our work and our knowledge. We haven't yet begun to study why a higher percentage of lesbians become international volunteers than other women. But this was surely the case in our region.

Tanya Renne was one of the first to come. It was 1992, the year the news broke about genocide – we did not even know what that really meant. In those months the fear in Belgrade was spreading, people were saying that the borders would be closed down. That nobody would be able to get out. The news was full of killings, I remember, it was winter, we were lying in one bed near each other, two friends, lesbians, talking about what we should do if they closed the borders. In those days I was working with women survivors of male violence and war during the day, listening to the news about crimes in the evenings, and reading Joan Nestle and

lesbian cartoons and journals in the night. Joan Nestle and some lesbian journals wrote the truth about lesbian pleasure which seemed far away, possible and real. And in that bed, that night Tanya and I, we thought, How can we escape from here? How can we pass to the other side illegally? What shall I do? What shall she do? Then we used to remember all the stories we had ever heard of crossing borders – nothing new in wartime. I remembered how one Roma woman used to tell me how earlier, in Italy, she came there with a 'green passport', and when I asked her what that meant, she said, 'Ah, passing through the woods, sister!' We would remember any story of clever escapes. We had to invent a lesbian terrorist fantasy in order to overcome this fear. So we did. Tanya had a US passport and was free to live anywhere else, but she decided to write a book about sisterhood in Eastern Europe, and came to support us. She was in Belgrade, Zagreb (Croatia) and in Ljubljana (Slovenia) all throughout the first three years of war. Lesbians like her made life during wartime less fearful and more lesbian.

Another story took place in the same room. My friend Ria Convents, a feminist lesbian lawyer, used to come all the way from Belgium with her car full of stuff for women. One day in 1995 we were packing the boxes to make packages to send to women in Sarajevo. Ria and I spent hours organizing the items – this is a box for a woman who lives on the seventh floor and there is no electricity and heating, who is a biologist and has an old sick father . . . this box is for a woman who is an actor and has a young daughter and a husband . . . this one is for an older woman living alone with many neighbours. . . . What shall we put in which box? Who is the box for? Who are the neighbours? Where are the snipers in their town? How cold is it in the cellar? What might a woman like her wish to be surprised with? Placing inside beans, dried vegetables, the best nuts, expensive chocolates, the famous brands of cigarettes, coffee; carefully, with all the intelligence and patience of caring for the other we had acquired during our lesbians years of loving each other.

Some other lesbians gave their money, carried heavy luggage, some phoned to ask how we were doing, sent letters and cards with lesbian jokes – 'dykes to watch out for' – some wrote about our activities, some came to us to teach us different skills, in therapy, in working with trauma, in working with computers, in emailing, writing proposals. Some of them drove trucks. Yes, some lesbians drive big trucks all the way from Great Britain filled with food and clothes for refugee women and activists. All these years . . . Tanya Renne, Juditka Hatfaludi, Ria Convents, Ingrid Foeken, Laurence Hovde, Rachel Wareham, Julia Penelope, Liza Coven, Shian Jones, Ippy, Therez Bloechlinger, Béatrice Breitschmid and Judith Falusi, Charlotte Bunch, Cris Corrin, Rosa Logar, Masha Gessen, Antonia Burrows, Kathryn Turnipseed, Murph-Martha Ehman, Joanne, Stefanie, Monique, Nicolle, Jessica Hauff, Rebecca Johnson, Rebecca Casanova,

Rina Nissim, Julie Mertus, Haya Shalom, Maite Irazabal, Marta Brancas, Gaby, Nelly, Shelly Anderson, Fran Peavy, Tova Green, Sarah Hartley, Julia, Dagmar Schultz, Anna Pramstrahler, Antonia Ciavarella. . . .

If you asked me to, I could tell you a story of war and lesbians behind every one of those names. Like Laurence Hovde, who came here in 1994 for the peace meeting and never returned home to New York. Lesbians like her, like all those mentioned here and those I forgot to name, were essential for our lesbian survival, to remind us of what Audre Lorde said many years ago, we need to come out as lesbians as 'the summer soil needs rain'.

Lepa Mladjenovic is a feminist counsellor at the Autonomous Women's Centre, Belgrade, which is an NGO supporting women survivors of male violence. Apart from her daily work at this centre, in the last 10 years she has been active in a number of groups: *Women in Black Against War* – a women's peace group founded in 1991 to oppose the Milosevic regime, war, militarism and violence against women; *Labris* – the lesbian rights group that was founded in 1995, in order to support lesbians personally to overcome interiorized homophobia, as well as to work to eradicate homophobia in society; *Queer Studies*, the independent project promoting the study of gay and lesbian existence among the gay, lesbian and heterosexual population in Belgrade; *Women's Studies*, the non-governmental multi-educational centre for women; and *SOS Hotline for Battered Women*, the volunteer feminist group formed in 1990, which supports women survivors of male violence. Address: Autonomous Women's Centre, Zenski Centar, Tirsova 5a, Belgrade, Serbia. [email: awcasv@eunet.yu]

