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## - notes of a feminist lesbian during wartime

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### INTRODUCTION

*This is the essay that took me the longest time to write. I've never had all my life so delicately opened as a live fluid facing wartime death toll news: I was living the war in Yugoslavia - war in neighboring regions, fascist regime in my town ordering war in the neighborhood, and I was living myself a lesbian. I was making love in my room with back-up dilemmas of turned on or turned off little radio shouting battlefield news. I wanted to connect and write about these two, but it took me years to have courage to even start. When I started to write, it was on English language. Maybe because it gave me enough distance to think about myself. Maybe because when I decided to write it in English I made imaginary feminist lesbian international community as 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 will to understand it all.*

*When I reread this essay I saw that I would have written it differently now. In the year of 2001 I am changed. The wartime made the knowledge of the meaning of my lesbian existence in wartime difficult and deep. After going through this process it all came to its place, connected. The two issues fused in me through fear of war and fear of being a lesbian in heterosexual world. Wartimes creates all kinds of fears, those of anti war activists, those of being Albanian in Serbian regime, of being disabled in the abled world... fears of abandonment. This essay tells me how difficult is this process of recognizing homophobia in oneself, how difficult is melting its destructive particles in one's own body and heart during nationalist and fascist hatred of wartime.*

*This essay is as well about two dimensions of my interest: one, lesbians in peace movement and how visible we are. There were always lesbians in peace movement and there was always silence about us. We are silent about ourselves. What are our own dilemmas about it. And another dimension of this essey is about lesbians in the wartime. Where do their decisions to act come from? Some have to leave, many have to leave to survive alive. Many have to stay. And most of us then realize that home is not in the culture that hate us.*

*I know there are many lesbians in the regions of war, and I know that many have left these regions because it was a matter of their life. I wish to dedicate this essay to all women who love women who are stranded in the war zones, who choose to support their families and neighbors by being there, and who do not have means to read essays like this one or anything else which can inspire their lesbian bodies. I also dedicate this essay 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 women and girls and never denounced her lesbian self.*

**1997**

**War narrows the spaces for every human rights issue.**

**From the time the war started in Croatia in 1991, in Belgrade where I live some men who walk down the streets became killers and rapists. You enter the bus, the cafe or a shop, and some faces are those of war criminals, and you don't even know which one. Violence increased and reality became more male. Hanging out in town for some of us had changed, the bookstore windows showed only Serbian titles, theaters as well. The air of oblivion with regard to the crimes across the border was unbreathable. What happened in neighboring regions, in towns of just yesterday of their homeland today was 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 about the injustices in these towns any more. Walking in the city was not the same joy as before. Men in uniforms, or men invalids for whom you don't know if you feel angry or pity. Women and lesbians are absent as any possible subject in the street matters. Nothing new in the world, but in the wartime emotions of your absence in the public representation intensify.**

**The war in 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 in the stage before they can say a word about their lesbian desire. They don't have the social conditions which would permit them to name their identity of a lesbian or see the political implications of loving women. Many do not permit themselves to simply enjoy their love. In fact they feel guilty for who they are. Many are self destructive – in drug or alcohol use, in depression, self isolation, continuing to be masked and self hated.**

**Still - there is a lesbian group, Labris, that we formed in 1995, and a gay and lesbian group Arkadija formed just a year before the war, without a space of their own, but with the vision and passion for justice well known to few.**

**Now, I want to point out some issues with which I was faced as a feminist lesbian living in Serbia, state whose government was responsible for starting the war against people in the homeland, and responsible for the nationalist politics that continued 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 masked faces, behind their names, the war, as another institutionalized ritual of hatred, is like a monster outside of the closet waiting to intensify, gorge on their guilt feelings. Lesbians do not have many options. Some of them join the nationalist machinery, others refuse to participate and either become**

apolitical, or if they have class conditions, they leave the country. Only a few feminist lesbians, if they feel a minimal 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. So I had privileges to rely on. But what support for lesbian rights shall a lesbian expect from the institutions of the totalitarian 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 threat to the system"?

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 organisations, apart from responding to the urgent needs of the people who survived 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 the point to observe 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.

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 some lesbian activists were beaten up on the street by young fascists yelling 'You lesbians, you are dirtying my street, clear off'. In 1996, police was 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 met regularly, published four newsletters, many essays, gave interviews to the TV 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 will win the war, or which nationality they should identify? 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 a pseudo name, 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. Few joined men's killer squads. Even if we know how lonely they remained.

## **RESPONSIBILITY OF FEMINISTS**

Feminist politics has 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 as well decided to work for peace and with women survivors of war. Lesbian rights remained in the back. 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 we had a situation, from 1991 – 1996, that in Zagreb *Center for Women War Victims*, then *B.a.B.e. - Women's Human Rights Group*, *Women's Studies* and *Women's Infoteka* insisted on lesbian issues, if they had opportunity. In Belgrade, *Women in Black Against War*, *Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence*, *SOS Hotline* and *Center for Women's Studies* have always supported lesbians among them, privately as well as publicly. This meant, for example, that both *Women's Studies Centers* (non-governmental initiatives) mentioned above have *Lesbian Studies* as an obligatory part of their program. 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 must 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 in 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 joy and not to divide in regard to politics!

In the peace movement only the war and nationalism were issues of discussion - feminism and lesbianism were avoided. Many evenings after the hard work of counseling women survivors of war and violence I would walk home, occasionally cry and breathe and then drop in the *Anti war center* for exchange on latest news. Women activists were working until late at night there, with great passion and dedication. But no, please not now about lesbians, let's not spoil our cause, was unsaid among us.

In Belgrade, at the beginning of the war I was in the feminist group - the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence and there were twenty and more of us. With the first war news we found ourselves in surprise. Each one reacted differently and everything separated us: nationalism, war and pacifism. Each theme was so crucial for the identity feelings that we hardly could even talk about it. Was I Serbian only because I have a Serbian name, and do not even know any of the Serbian culture habits or anything similar? Was I Yugoslav, now that Yugoslavia fell apart, and showed to us who used to identify so before 1991, that national identity is a construction?

I felt split: in each context I could turn one side of my face only, and everything else was unwanted or dangerous. Only in my flat was I able to believe in myself. Lucky to have a room of my own.

And still I remember losing my mind in dilemmas in that same room. 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 were broadcasted from Prague, London, Paris. I would be in bed and not know: should I get up and leave the warm lover, turn off the radio and continue the pleasure, or not? Is knowing what happened to killed and tortured the only way to give respect to the dead? Is lesbian lovemaking in that moment inappropriate? And why? Then later, 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 be embarrassed one day when she see a lesbian in front of herself who wrote her letters? 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 eighties, where one lesbian writer from the U.S. 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 with it or not, and what would I say now? Every time I thought "No it isn't right", a lesbian should always be a lesbian, I would move on and think maybe it was right, people first of all need to be able to live. If I would start with "Yes, it's right" we should not talk about it, I would think, is this an interiorized homophobia. One night in 1995 we had a Labris action in the old part of Belgrade, Dorcol, few blocks away from my flat. Three men stopped four of us while we were writing lesbian graffiti. They came and attacked us precisely as lesbians. Two of them were in 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 eyeglasses and shouted "You dirty lesbian, I can throw you in this door and kill you - noone 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 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 Moslems in Belgrade, then against Roma, Albanians, lesbians - ones upon a time in other places Others were Jews and communists. It opened in my mind so clearly 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.

This was my process, I was split in the roots all throughout the wartime, 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. As a lesbian. Do I feel guilt about insisting in being a lesbian in the wartime? Do I feel guilt as a citizen from Belgrade, where the headquarters of war-evil production comes from? What is a function of these feelings? After this homophobic violence night some of us wrote an information about the attack on lesbians for our anti-war e-mail conference in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, named Zamir. We got lots of support as lesbians and one of the first came from one man I never met in my life: he was hiding from the snipers trying to connect his computer endlessly 100 times a day in his flat in Sarajevo where Serb killers were shooting at him and cutting him off electricity to two hours a day. 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 war all throughout these years I was filled with hate stories of women refugees who came to the Center 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 ten, twenty years of male violence from their husbands. Images of concentration camps were vivid in me. And I thought, I could draw the line of the beginning and the end of how male violence connects nationalism and homophobia, domestic violence, incest and the armed conflict. These images of violence were boiling in my body and my mind long enough until it became evident to me that the same logic underlay the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well 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 power domination and 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 Former Yugoslavia lesbians were in solidarity with our anti war movement.**

**First, throughout the wartime acts of lesbian support continually arrived to 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, 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 centers to volunteer, to witness our misery, to widen our work and our knowledge. We haven't yet studied 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 of the news about genocide – it was in such a surplise of our leisure living until 1991 that by 1992 some of us in Belgrade did not yet know fully 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 will 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, Tanya and I, 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, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lord and lesbian cartoons in the night. Joan Nestle and some lesbian poems wrote 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 on the other side illegally, what shall I do, what shall she do... we wanted to have scenario in reserve. Then we used to remember all the stories we ever heard of crossing borders... nothing new in wartime. I remembered how one Roma women 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 wise escaping.... We had to invent 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 war years. Lesbians like her made life during the wartime less fearful and more lesbian.

Another story takes place in the same room three years later. 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 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 neighboring friends, ... what shall we put in which box, knowing who is the box for, who are the neighbors, where are the snipers in their town, how could she use this food cooking it in the cellar, what might a woman like her be surprised with. Placing inside beans, dried vegetables, the best nuts, expensive chocolates, the famous brands of cigarettes, coffee..... carefully, with all 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 are we doing, sent letters and cards with lesbian humor, *dykes to watch out for*, some wrote about our activities, some came to us to teach us different skills, in therapy, working with trauma, working with computers, e-mailing, 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. In these six years... Tanya Renne, Juditka Hatfaludi, Ria Convents, Ingrid Foeken, Laurence Hovde, Rachel Wareham, Julia Penelope, Liza Coven, Shian Jones, Ippy, Therez Bloechlinger, Fabienne Hidreau, Béatrice Breitschmid & Judith Falusi, Charlotte Bunch, Chris 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, Katrin Kremmler, Julia, Dagmar Schultz, Anna Pramstrahler, Antonia Ciavarella...

If you ask me, I can tell you a story of war and lesbians behind every of this name. Like Laurence Hovde, who came from New York here in 1994 on the peace meeting and did not go back home anymore. Lesbians like she, like all those mentioned here and those I forgot to name were essential for our lesbian survival, to remind us of what Audre Lord said many years ago, We need to come out as lesbians as 'the summer soil needs rain'.

**Beograd, 1996 – 1997 - 2001**

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