

The Personal is the International
Building a Global Sisterhood in 1990s Belgrade

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Introduction

The reports on the meetings of the Network of Female Solidarity against War held at Novi Sad and Merida bear witness to the weaving of threads of a world-wide sisterhood, which will eventually form the groundwork of an international feminine politics. Within such a network, the feminist slogan: “The Personal is the Political” will be complemented by the slogan: “The Personal is the International.”¹

This proclamation opens the 1994 yearbook of *Žene u crnom protiv rata* (Women in Black against War), a feminist, pacifist, anti-nationalist organization founded in Belgrade in 1991 to protest the wars of Yugoslav secession. Since the early 1970s, the feminist catchphrase, “the personal is political,” served to articulate the political importance of the problems women faced in their personal lives and to connect these problems to women’s systemic oppression. For *Žene u crnom*, “the personal is the international” was a crucial addition, asserting that women’s struggles worldwide were fundamentally interconnected. In the context of the wars of Yugoslav secession (1991-1995), this meant that mass rapes, patriarchal nationalist regimes, and disproportionately female refugee populations concerned not only Balkan women, but women worldwide. *Žene u crnom* thus did not limit their activities to weekly protests against the Serbian nationalist regime in Belgrade’s *Trg Republike* (Republic Square). The organization rejected the violent and divisive nationalisms dismantling Yugoslavia by prioritizing continued cooperation with their former countrywomen despite new state borders. Further expanding their geographic scope, *Žene u crnom* fostered relationships with like-minded feminist activists from Western Europe and the United States.

In order to strengthen this international feminist network, in 1993, *Žene u crnom* began hosting the annual Network of Female Solidarity against War. The conferences brought together the Belgrade-based members of *Žene u crnom* with their Croatian, Bosnian, Western European, and American allies. Through three days of panel discussions, public protests, and parties in the

¹ Staša Zajović, ed., *Women for Peace* (Belgrade: Women in Black, 1994), 1.

Vojvodina region of northern Serbia, these conferences sought to build a “world-wide sisterhood” and “an international feminine politics” based in anti-militarism, anti-nationalism, and feminism. Thus “the personal is the international” became the basis of *Žene u crnom*’s conception of a global sisterhood and the groundwork for the organization’s feminist activism.

Even before the first meeting of the Network of Female Solidarity against War, *Žene u crnom*’s origins were international in character. The organization traces its roots to Jerusalem, where a group of Jewish women founded the first chapter of Women in Black in 1988 in response to the First Intifada.² Each week, these women staged a public vigil dressed in black to mourn all victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to protest the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The movement quickly spread throughout Israel and subsequently to Italy and Spain after the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990. When war erupted in 1991 in Yugoslavia, Staša Zajović led a small group of other longtime feminist activists to separate from the male-dominated mainstream peace movement in Belgrade to found their own chapter of Women in Black, *Žene u crnom*. Although they maintained relationships with other chapters of the international organization, *Žene u crnom* operated largely independently and developed the most clearly articulated platform of any Women in Black chapter. They espoused their feminist, anti-nationalist, anti-militarist politics in their 300-page yearbooks. Published in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and in English, these yearbooks included onlookers’ reactions to their protests, testimonies from refugees, correspondences with other feminist organizations, and transcripts from meetings of the Network of Female Solidarity.

² The First Intifada (1987-1993) was a Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian strategies of resistance included economic boycotts, refusing to pay taxes, and attacking the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) with Molotov cocktails. In response, the IDF deployed troops to the occupied territories. Over the seven years of the Intifada, more than two thousand people, mostly civilians, were killed.

Given the sophistication and international influence of their movement, *Žene u crnom* have attracted scholarly attention from a small cohort of social scientists interested in nongovernmental organizing. María Lis Baiocchi uses social movement theory to analyze why and how the members of *Žene u crnom* mobilized during the 1990s.³ Bojan Bilić also employs social movement theory, explaining how the organization’s collective identity sustains the movement.⁴ Meanwhile, Orli Fridman writes about *Žene u crnom* in the context of the broader anti-war activist scene in 1990s Serbia, and Cynthia Cockburn (a member of the London chapter of Women in Black) looks at the London and New York branches of the organization.⁵ Largely based on interviews with members of *Žene u crnom*, these sociological studies clearly describe the motivations, social backgrounds, and identities of the organization’s members.

Yet there exists no historical scholarship on *Žene u crnom*. This is likely due in part to the fact that the organization was founded just twenty-five years ago and remains active today. However, this omission owes also to what historian Maria Todorova has termed “balkanism,” a counterpart to Edward Said’s orientalism describing Western discourse about the region. “What has been emphasized about the Balkans,” argues Todorova, “is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world.”⁶ The Balkans is seen as a symbol of “a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian.”⁷ Although typically “scornfully ignored,” Todorova notes that the region enters the

³ María Lis Baiocchi, “Women in Black: Mobilization into Anti-Nationalist, Anti-Militarist, Feminist Activism in Serbia,” *CEU Political Science Journal* 4 (2009): 469-500.

⁴ Bojan Bilić, “Not in Our Name: Collective Identity of the Serbian Women in Black,” *Nationalities Papers* 40 (2012): 607-623.

⁵ Orli Fridman, “‘It Was Like Fighting a War with Our Own People’: Anti-War Activism in Serbia during the 1990s,” *Nationalities Papers* 39 (2011): 507-522; Cynthia Cockburn, “Against Imperialist Wars: Three Transnational Networks,” in *From Where We Stand: War, Women’s Activism & Feminist Analysis* (New York: Zed Books, 2007), 48-78.

⁶ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

world stage “only in times of terror and trouble.”⁸ From the Balkans Wars of 1912-1913, to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, to the bloody dismantlement of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the West has understood the Balkans as a site of barbaric violence on the periphery of Europe. Balkanist discourse is rife in the historiography of the wars of Yugoslav secession, largely “written and rewritten by journalists and political analysts” ignorant of the region’s history.⁹ These works are full of misguided accounts of age-old ethnic hatreds and brutally raped Bosnian Muslim women shamed and abandoned by their communities.¹⁰ By contrast, this thesis centers the agency of Yugoslav women and asserts their place within a longer history of Serbian, Yugoslav, and international women’s organizing. In doing so, this thesis demonstrates how *Žene u crnom* and their allies powerfully resisted militaristic, patriarchal nationalisms and influenced feminism on a global scale by reintroducing pacifism into the international feminist movement at the end of the twentieth century.

Although they have been written out of the history of international women’s organizing, women from the region of the former Yugoslavia have participated in this movement from the outset. Working to rectify women’s legal disadvantage and traditional subordination, women’s organizing in Serbia has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1906, several women’s groups united to form the *Srpski Ženski Savez* (Serbian Women’s Alliance), which joined both

⁸ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 277.

⁹ Norman M. Naimark, and Holly Case, ed., *Yugoslavia and Its Historians: Understanding the Balkan Wars of the 1990s* (California: Stanford University, 2003), xiii. This observation about the inadequate historical treatment of the wars of Yugoslav secession prompted Naimark and Case to compile this volume of historical articles; however, *Yugoslavia and Its Historians* contains no contributions concerning women’s history.

¹⁰ See, for example, Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1993). Although foreign commentators tended to make assumptions about the conservative character of Bosnian Muslims, there exists no evidence supporting the claim that raped Bosnian Muslim women were particularly stigmatized by their communities.

the International Women's League and the International Alliance for Women's Right to Vote.¹¹ When Serbia became part of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the First World War, women's groups began to unite across prewar political borders. The *Aliancija Feminističkih Društava u Državi S.H.S.* (the Alliance of Feminist Societies in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) included women throughout the Kingdom and joined the International Alliance for Women's Right to Vote.¹² In a country wracked by national tension, feminists' cooperation was remarkable.¹³ Alliances with women both within Yugoslavia and internationally, argues historian Thomas A. Emmert, "helped the Serb movement see itself as part of a much larger and more important force in the contemporary world."¹⁴

Unfortunately, Yugoslav feminism was rarely recognized as an "important force" on a global scale. Despite the fact that feminist organizations had existed in Serbia since the mid-nineteenth century, Western European and American women typically deemed their Yugoslav counterparts incapable of participating meaningfully in the international women's movement. For example, after visiting the Balkans in 1929, French feminist Camille Drevet concluded that Yugoslav women were so consumed with violent interethnic conflicts that they had "no international spirit."¹⁵ According to Drevet, these women made poor members of the International Women's League. Much historiography of the international women's movement has reproduced these balkanist assessments of Yugoslav feminism. Historian Leila J. Rupp, for

¹¹ Thomas A. Emmert, "Ženski Pokret: The Feminist Movement in Serbia in the 1920s," in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1999), 35.

¹² Ibid., 48. It is important to note that not all women's organizing in the Kingdom had an explicitly feminist orientation. The *Narodni Ženski Savez Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (the National Women's Alliance of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) represented Yugoslav women's groups both internationally and domestically and included many groups more concerned with humanitarian issues than advancing women's position in society.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁵ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 117.

example, asserts that women from the region “saw international women’s organizations as a means of asserting their national, rather than gender, identity.”¹⁶ Indeed, balkanist stereotypes about the backwardness and virulent nationalism of the region have prevented historians from understanding the significance of the early alliances Yugoslav feminists formed with women within their own country and internationally.

The Second World War marked an important turning point in Yugoslav women’s history, and the international contacts of Yugoslav women’s organizations began to shift away from liberal feminist organizations. Unlike other European countries that became communist only with the intervention of Stalin’s Red Army, Tito’s Partisans secured an independent victory against the Serbian nationalist *Četnici* and the Croatian fascist *Ustaše*. Partisan military success owed in no small part to the contributions of women, 100,000 of whom fought in the Partisan Army.¹⁷ For women, participation in the Partisan cause was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as historian Jelena Batinić argues, the communists employed a strategy of “neotraditionalism” that reimagined peasant customs of wives and daughters supporting their warrior men in order to mobilize women, thus serving to “institutionalize old concepts of gender difference and the accompanying hierarchies.”¹⁸ Yet communist ideology concerning women’s emancipation and gender equality opened up real opportunities for women’s advancement. Originally established to recruit women to the Partisan cause, the *Antifašistički Front Žena Jugoslavije* (The Antifascist Front of Women of Yugoslavia, hereafter the AFŽ) built on the legacy of interwar feminist activism to increase women’s literacy and participation in politics.¹⁹

¹⁶ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 117.

¹⁷ Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2015), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Barbara Jancar-Webster, “Women in the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement,” in Ramet, *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans*, 85.

Furthermore, the AFŽ developed important international ties, although not with the liberal women's organizations of the interwar era. Instead, the AFŽ cooperated with the antifascist Union of Italian Women and was active in the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) until Tito broke with Stalin in 1948.²⁰ Over time, the AFŽ increasingly focused on women's issues and became "a virtually autonomous organization" within Yugoslavia.²¹ The Communist Party of Yugoslavia thus disbanded the AFŽ in 1953, replacing it with a series of state women's organizations.

Although most Western historiography of the socialist bloc speaks of a "monolithic official women's movement" dominated by the state and only nominally contributing to "women's 'emancipation,'" it is important to note the real achievements of such organizations.²² For example, communist rule both in Yugoslavia and throughout most of the socialist bloc can be credited with an increase in female literacy, participation in the workforce, and access to reproductive healthcare.²³ State women's organizations were also active on the international scene. Of course, Yugoslavia is a bit of an outlier in this regard since the country left the Soviet bloc in 1948. Instead, in 1961 Yugoslavia became a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of countries (largely in the Third World) not formally allied with either main Cold War power bloc. While Yugoslav state women's organizations certainly worked with women abroad in connection with the Non-Aligned Movement, the topic has received almost no scholarly attention. It is likely, however, that Yugoslavia's prominent role in the Non-Aligned

²⁰ Chiara Bonfiglioli, "Revolutionary Networks: Women's Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945-1957)" (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2012).

²¹ Jancar-Webster, "Women in the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement," 81.

²² Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (New York: Verso, 1993), 182-183.

²³ Kristen Ghodsee, "Research note: The historiographical challenges of exploring Second World-Third World alliances in the international women's movement," *Global Social Policy* 14 (2014): 247.

Movement empowered Yugoslav women to feel they that they could be leaders in the international arena.²⁴

While state women's organizations in communist Yugoslavia must certainly be taken seriously, it is also true that the official discourse of gender equality masked a more complicated reality. The dissonance between official discourse and lived reality was discussed openly for the first time in 1978 at the pivotal *Drugarica Žena* (Comrade Woman) conference in Belgrade, attended by Yugoslav and Western women alike.²⁵ Although the Yugoslav attendees remained staunchly socialist, in cooperation with their Western counterparts, they began to expose the gap between the state rhetoric of gender equality and the reality of ubiquitous gendered violence and women's unequal participation in the workforce and political life. Since *Drugarica Žena* marked the founding of the first self-identified feminist groups in socialist Yugoslavia, *Žene u crnom* always pointed to the conference as the origin of their organization. Indeed, the SOS hotlines, women's shelters, lesbian groups, and academic centers founded in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana after *Drugarica Žena* constituted the milieu out of which *Žene u crnom* emerged in 1991. Furthermore, *Žene u crnom* would draw on the common heritage of the Zagreb and Belgrade feminist scenes to maintain relationships with Croatian feminists during the 1990s wars.

The lens this thesis uses to examine *Žene u crnom* expands from the local, to the regional, to the global. In doing so, this thesis argues that although Yugoslav women have been written out

²⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between the women's movement and the Non-Aligned Movement, see Devaki Jain, and Shubna Chacko, "The Journey of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Women's Movement," *Development in Practice* 19 (2009): 895-905. Jain and Chacko argue that the basic tenets of the Non-Aligned Movement, including solidarity, justice, equality, and peace, complemented the key values of the women's movement. Furthermore, according to Jain and Chacko, "while not denying the universalism of 'sisterhood,'" the Non-Aligned Movement respected women's "divergent histories and social locations" in order to articulate "opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but systemic" (ibid., 899).

²⁵ For a comprehensive oral history of this conference, see Chiara Bonfiglioli, "Remembering the Conference 'Drugarica Žena. Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?'/ 'Comrade Woman. The Women's Question: A New Approach? Thirty Years After'" (master's thesis, University of Utrecht, 2008).

of the history of the international women's movement, neither *Žene u crnom* nor late twentieth-century international feminism can be understood without reference to the other. Drawing on *Žene u crnom*'s own yearbooks, the first chapter will look at this organization in the context of 1990s Belgrade to examine how these activists refused to become dutiful nationalist mothers sacrificing their sons to defend the Serbian nation and instead asserted feminist, pacifist identities. The second chapter will consider these Belgrade feminists' relationships with women from other Yugoslav successor states. By prioritizing collaboration with their former countrywomen, *Žene u crnom* and their allies rejected the nationalist ideologies violently tearing apart Yugoslavia. These relationships, however, could be challenging, and *Žene u crnom* often struggled to cooperate with women who were not longtime feminist activists like themselves. They often found it easier to work with women who shared their ideology rather than a homeland. Chapter three will therefore look at the organization's ties with like-minded feminists from Western Europe and the United States. Together, these activists challenged not only the wars of Yugoslav secession, but also hegemonic global institutions including the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. *Žene u crnom* thus forged a global sisterhood that articulated a powerful opposition to nationalism, militarism, and patriarchy and reintroduced pacifism to the international feminist movement at the end of the twentieth century.

Chapter I: “Do Not Speak in Our Name, We Talk in Our Own Names”²⁶

With the collapse of socialism and the rise of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, gender ideologies underwent a radical transformation. Commenting on Serbian nationalism, historian Wendy Bracewell notes a “marked change in the concept of patriotic womanhood.”²⁷ She observes that “a woman’s task is no longer to build socialism through work, but to regenerate the nation through her role as mother.”²⁸ Of course, this emphasis on motherhood is not unique to Serbian nationalism. “In one recurring chain of associations,” asserts historian Geoff Eley of nineteenth century gendered nationalisms, “women were addressed as mothers of the nation, reproducing its biological future, nurturing the next generations, teaching the ‘mother tongue.’”²⁹ They were thus “reproducers rather than producers, prized and revered objects of protection, rather than agents in their own right.”³⁰ The members of *Žene u crnom*, by contrast, forcefully proclaimed themselves “agents in their own right.” “Do not speak in our name, we talk in our own names,” they demanded of Serbian nationalist leaders. This chapter will analyze *Žene u crnom* in the context of 1990s Belgrade, examining how these women refused to become “mothers of the nation” in line with Serbian nationalist ideology and instead fashioned themselves as feminist, pacifist activists.

In order to make sense of *Žene u crnom*’s activities during the 1990s, it is first necessary to understand the kinds of feminist activism these women engaged in before founding *Žene u crnom*. All of the original members of the organization were highly educated, longtime feminist activists from Belgrade, which in addition to Zagreb and Ljubljana had fostered a small but

²⁶ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 17.

²⁷ Wendy Bracewell, “Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19 (1996): 25.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Geoff Eley, “Culture, Nation and Gender,” in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Bloom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall (New York: Berg, 2000), 32.

³⁰ Ibid.

vibrant feminist activist scene since the late 1970s. By the time war erupted in 1991, these women were well accustomed to operating in opposition to the state. For example, *Žene u crnom* member Lepa Mladenović recalled that when the Belgrade Women and Society group declared itself feminist in 1986, Yugoslavia’s official women’s organization labeled the organization an “enemy of the state” and a “pro-Western element” filled with “protocapitalists.”³¹ Like other socialist countries, the Yugoslav state associated feminism with capitalism and bourgeois women’s concerns. Thus Women and Society conducted their work completely independently, without any state support.³² In addition to Women and Society, several members of *Žene u crnom* had worked with lesbian activist groups, in women’s shelters, and on Belgrade’s SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence. Mladenović, for example, was involved with all three.



Lepa Mladenović at a demonstration commemorating the siege of Sarajevo³³

³¹ Vera Litrichin and Lepa Mladjenovic, “Belgrade Feminists: Separation, Guilt, and Identity Crisis” in *Ana’s Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*, ed. Tanya Renne (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 179.

³² *Ibid.*, 180. Women and Society’s activities included conducting surveys addressing domestic violence and the division of household labor and organizing workshops and public discussions on women’s issues.

³³ Susan Tolmay, “Vienna +20: Feminist Movement and Solidarity Building in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Association for Women’s Rights in Development*, January 16, 2014, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/vienna-20-feminist-movement-and-solidarity-building-central-and-eastern->

In part because of these experiences, *Žene u crnom* came to analyze war as part of a continuum of male violence and understood militarism as a patriarchal construct. Noting an increase in domestic violence in Belgrade as soldiers began returning home from the warfront, they argued that “militarism and domestic violence are interconnected” and often carried signs bearing the slogan, “WHEN THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CEASES – THE WARS WILL STOP.”³⁴ The women who would later found *Žene u crnom* opposed military action in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia from the outset, and many initially participated in the mixed-gender pacifist movement. However, these women quickly found that the men they worked with “took it for granted that women should take care of others since that is our ‘natural’ role.”³⁵ Women outnumbered men in the peace movement, but “there was always a man who spoke in their name.”³⁶ This disappointing experience in the mainstream peace movement provided the immediate impetus for Staša Zajović’s decision to lead a small group of women to separate and form their own feminist pacifist organization.³⁷ Although *Žene u crnom* emphasized the equality of all their members, Zajović’s leadership and the respect she accorded would prove crucial to the cohesion of the organization.³⁸

Europe. The poster behind Mladenović references the siege of Sarajevo, reading: “*U Sarajevu je živela raja*” (“The people lived in Sarajevo”).

³⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 18. Emphasis in the original.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ It is important to note that there were a handful of men who collaborated with *Žene u crnom*. These were without exception gay men whom *Žene u crnom* helped evade army conscription. Referring to these men as “Different Men” because of their sexual orientation and antimilitarist politics, *Žene u crnom* were able to reconcile their inclusion in the organization.

³⁸ Bilić, “Not in Our Name,” 616.



Staša Zajović at a *Žene u crnom* protest³⁹

In choosing to organize as a women's peace movement, *Žene u crnom*'s members were careful to establish that they did not believe that caring for others is a woman's natural role or that women are inherently more peaceful than men. "Taking care of others," declared Zajović, "is now our political choice. That choice is a radical critique of a militarist-nationalist regime which generates death."⁴⁰ Likewise, at a conference organized by *Žene u crnom*, male pacifist Bojan Aleksov argued that "women's participation in the peace movement should be the result of a personal choice and not that of a 'natural' division of roles... peace is something that concerns all of us."⁴¹ The members of *Žene u crnom* thus asserted that their pacifism was not an inherently female predisposition, but rather an active political choice.

Defining pacifism in this way, however, meant that *Žene u crnom* could not ally with or account for the political agency of women in the former Yugoslavia who chose to draw on their social roles as mothers in order to protest against war.⁴² In 1991, Mothers for Peace organized

³⁹ Tatjana Gromača, "Staša Zajović, jedna od osnivačica i koordinatorica udruge 'Žene u crnom,' mirovne skupine koja se šesnaest godina bori protiv autokratskih režima u Srbiji," *Feral Tribune*, June 6, 2007, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.womenngo.org.rs/sajt/sajt/saopstenja/stasazajovic.htm>.

⁴⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 121.

⁴¹ Staša Zajović, ed., *Women for Peace* (Belgrade: Women in Black, 1995), 130.

⁴² Women who draw on their social roles as mothers to advocate for peace are not uncommon. The *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in Argentina is perhaps the most famous

women of various ethnonational backgrounds from across Yugoslavia to demand their sons' release from the *Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija* (Yugoslav People's Army, hereafter the JNA). Some members of *Žene u crnom* were initially sympathetic to this movement. For example, Mladenović claimed that "women were able to subvert the traditional role of mothers and use it for fighting against authority and for saving men."⁴³ However, she later revised her stance, concurring with historian Wendy Bracewell's assessment that it was "very difficult to divorce the language of motherhood from the rhetoric of nationalism."⁴⁴ Mladenović argued that "the nationalist ideology was much stronger than their peace protests," and so Serb mothers protested not out of a feminist pacifist spirit but rather because they "did not want their sons fighting in Croatia, a land that they didn't perceive belonged to them anymore."⁴⁵ *Žene u crnom*'s inability to embrace Mothers for Peace reflects a broader weakness of *Žene u crnom*'s activism: the failure to include women who supported Serbian nationalism. According to member Neda Bozinović, for example, nationalist women were acting to "support their own abuse."⁴⁶ Yet as sociologist Dubravka Žarkov argues, "women's interests do not necessarily exclude nationalist interests."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, *Žene u crnom* "decided that female subjectivity makes its presence felt only in opposition to ethnicity and, especially, nationalism," refusing to analyze "the ways that ethnicity, motherhood, and political subjectivity constituted one another."⁴⁸ *Žene u crnom*'s analysis of the wars of Yugoslav secession thus could not provide a compelling explanation for

contemporary example of this brand of activism. For a theoretical take on this issue, see Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

⁴³ Dubravka Žarkov, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 77.

⁴⁴ Bracewell, "Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism," 31.

⁴⁵ Lepa Mladjenović and Donna M. Hughes, "Feminine Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia" in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance*, ed. Marguerite Waller and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 260-261.

⁴⁶ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 71.

⁴⁷ Žarkov, *The Body of War*, 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

the motives of nationalist women, and indeed failed entirely to account for these women's political agency.

In addition to rejecting the traditional feminine role of “natural carers,” *Žene u crnom* also had to contest the way Serbian nationalism made sense of the relationship between women and history. Writing on the role of gender in nationalist versions of history, historian Silke Wenk argues,

Women present tradition – that which should be anchored in the national memory – and thus become representatives of national culture, a culture that claims to have always already existed, and is transmitted outside the official political realm. One could also say that women emerge as representatives of a ‘timeless national memory.’ In this sense, they stand not only for that which ‘the masculine’ must constitute itself against, but, at the same time, for a past that is supposed to motivate the actions of those tied to the national community as well.⁴⁹

Very conscious of the ways in which women were expected to represent a “timeless national memory” that Serbian nationalist leaders would exploit to garner support for the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, the members of *Žene u crnom* made writing their own history a priority. For example, Zajović reflected that while she did not reject her cultural heritage, “I do not want to accept it in the form they are offering it... I want to redefine or deconstruct the heritage in accordance with my sensibility and inner feelings.”⁵⁰

Žene u crnom's yearbooks thus sought to contribute to “the creation of an alternative feminine history” by writing a counter-history of the 1990s wars.⁵¹ Many of these yearbooks included accounts of the organization's own history. Strikingly, these histories always began in the 1970s, never attempting to locate *Žene u crnom* within a longer history of women's organizing in Serbia or Yugoslavia. For example, Mladenović began her history of *Žene u crnom*

⁴⁹ Silke Wenk, translated by Tom Lampert, “Gendered Representations of the Nation's Past and Future” in Ramet, *Gendered Nations*, 66.

⁵⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 72.

⁵¹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 163.

with a meeting at a Croatian sociological association in 1976, which she described as “the first presentation of contemporary feminist ideas.”⁵² Perhaps the most surprising omission from these histories is the AFŽ, which drastically improved women’s literacy and political participation throughout Yugoslavia during and immediately following the Second World War.⁵³ That *Žene u crnom* never mentioned the AFŽ likely owes in part to the organization’s disavowal of all war as patriarchal and members’ uneasy relationship with socialism, which they resented for prioritizing class over gender. However, the absence of the AFŽ from *Žene u crnom*’s yearbooks can also be attributed to the notable presence of the AFŽ in the Serbian nationalist media, which spoke of partisan women in articles about contemporary female soldiers as part of an effort to establish the “continuity of the history of Serb suffering and sacrifice.”⁵⁴

Since *Žene u crnom* so thoroughly disavowed nationalist ideology in a political climate where citizenship had become tied to ethnonational identity, it was often unclear on what grounds *Žene u crnom* made demands of the Serbian state. Frequently, the members of *Žene u crnom* highlighted their “disloyalty” to the Serbian regime.⁵⁵ They even distanced themselves from the major opposition for not acknowledging “that there can be no democratic changes without women’s participation in politics.”⁵⁶ *Žene u crnom* was not naïve about the ramifications of such a stance. Reflected Mladenović, “we know that to overthrow the present government, we have to vote for another one that will be against us.”⁵⁷ She continued, “we know that if we are to deny the concept of national identity, there is nothing else they’ll allow us to stand for in

⁵² Mladjenovic and Hughes, “Feminine Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia,” 255.

⁵³ As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to note that recent historiography of the Second World War has questioned the degree to which the AFŽ and women’s participation in the partisan cause improved the status of women in Yugoslavia. See Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans*.

⁵⁴ Žarkov, *The Body of War*, 210.

⁵⁵ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 88.

⁵⁶ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 5.

⁵⁷ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, “Belgrade Feminists,” 185.

exchange.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, according to sociologist Daša Duhaček, “by the very act of asking for the accountability of their government, they have demonstrated their citizenship... by assuming political responsibility they could not but speak *as citizens* of their state.”⁵⁹ Indeed, *Žene u crnom* felt that by virtue of being Serbian citizens, it was their responsibility to criticize and make demands of the Serbian state. However, their uncompromising rejection of Serbian nationalism and refusal to align with any major political grouping limited the organization’s ability to affect concrete political changes.

Despite the fact that neither the Serbian regime nor the mainstream political press acknowledged their activism, *Žene u crnom* maintained a highly visible presence in Belgrade’s public sphere. Each Wednesday, members protested the wars in *Trg Republike*, a busy square located in the heart of Belgrade. Modeling themselves on the original Jerusalem chapter of Women in Black, *Žene u crnom* stood silently and dressed entirely in black; even when transforming the local public sphere, the organization was always linked to the global arena. The structure of these protests sought to reclaim black and silence in order to transform traditional images of the mourning woman. Sociologist Bojan Bilić argues “black clothes used in the protest depart from the traditionally private, home restricted sphere which associates them with a socially expected role in expressing grief and mourning.”⁶⁰ Likewise, leader Staša Zajović explained that “standing every Wednesday in black and silence... pictures of women from my childhood would appear in my mind. Unlike their black clothes, mine were here to mourn not only loved ones but also, after all the victims of this war, those who have died in all wars.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, “Belgrade Feminists,” 185.

⁵⁹ Daša Duhaček, “The Making of Political Responsibility: Hannah Arendt and/in the Case of Serbia” in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Jasmina Lukić, Joanna Regulska, and Darja Zaviršek (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 215. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁰ Bilić, “Not in Our Name,” 612.

⁶¹ Staša Zajovic, “Nationalism and Serb Women” in Renne, *Ana’s Land*, 174.

Dressing in black “does not represent surrender to mourning, to sorrow; it is resistance against killing of towns and of people, against the violence in everyday life.”⁶²

There is a certain irony, however, in *Žene u crnom*’s choice to protest silently; rather than read as a radical feminist statement, silent protests could reinforce the conviction that only men should speak in the public sphere. In sharp contrast to *Žene u crnom*’s silent demonstrations, several popular punk rock artists from Yugoslavia came together in 1992 to form the antiwar band *Rimtutituki* (an anagram for “I put my dick in you”). While cruising the streets of Belgrade in the back of a large truck, these men played protest music aiming to make opposition to war the manifestation of heterosexual masculinity rather than an expression of effeminate weakness. Lyrics included “don’t go where everyone else is headed [to the war] because whoever sells out will become a damn cunt” and “fight less, fuck more.”⁶³ It is worth considering whether *Žene u crnom*’s protests may have had a greater impact had they adopted some of the bravado of *Rimtutituki*. Writing about the Haifa chapter of Women in Black, sociologists Orna Blumen and Sharon Halevi argue that “silence both counters the popular association of femininity with speech, and reinforces it as women realign themselves with traditional femininity (silent in public) by holding signs that speak for them.”⁶⁴ They continue, “silence also represents [Women in Black] as ineffectual political activists.”⁶⁵

However, the strong reactions from passersby that *Žene u crnom* chronicled in their yearbooks make it difficult to classify these women as “ineffectual political activists.” Since *Žene u crnom* were so critical of the Serbian regime, they were frequently identified as enemies

⁶² Zajovic, “Nationalism and Serb Women,” 174.

⁶³ “Sjećanje na čuveni Rimtutituki,” *Radio Sarajevo*, April 13, 2012, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://radiosarajevo.ba/novost/78836/sjecanje-na-cuveni-rimtutituki->. The original Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian lyrics quoted here are: “kuda svi nemoj i ti jer ko izda biće prokleta pizda” and “manje pucaj, više tucaj.”

⁶⁴ Orna Blumen and Sharon Halevi, “Staging Peace through a Gendered Demonstration: Women in Black in Haifa, Israel,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99 (2009): 979.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

of the state. In a nationalist climate that demonized ethnic “others,” this outsider status was particularly threatening. Reactions from passersby included: “you are traitors and (or) mercenaries,” “speak Serbian, write in the Cyrillic alphabet,” and “motherfuckers, go to Alija and Tudjman.”⁶⁶ In failing to support the war or adopt new nationalist practices like writing exclusively in Cyrillic, *Žene u crnom* had become excised from the national community and equated with Serbia’s wartime enemies. Other negative comments from passersby addressed the organization’s denunciation of nationalist womanhood. Very few of the organization’s members were mothers, and *Žene u crnom* rejected the notion that it was women’s patriotic duty to bear children. For many onlookers, this was unacceptable; one man shouted, “you don’t have children, you’re contaminated!”⁶⁷ Similarly, passersby frequently expressed anxiety about the ways that members transgressed heterosexual norms. “These must be dykes,” shouted one man.⁶⁸ Yet while the majority of reactions to their weekly vigils were negative, *Žene u crnom* did receive some positive encouragement. For example, one woman approached the group to say, “this indifference to (and silence about) the war is painful – I support you.”⁶⁹ Thus although few passersby understood how the organization intended to reappropriate black and silence, responses to their weekly protests illustrate that *Žene u crnom* did succeed in drawing attention to their opposition to war, the Serbian regime, and nationalist models of womanhood.

⁶⁶ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 12; Staša Zajović, ed., *Women for Peace* (Belgrade: *Žene u crnom*, 1997), 15; Staša Zajović, ed., *Women for Peace* (Belgrade: *Žene u crnom*, 1998), 8. The rise of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia prompted the division of the Serbo-Croatian language into Bosnian and Croatian, which both use the Latin alphabet, and Serbian, which uses the Cyrillic alphabet. *Žene u crnom* have always carried signs written in both alphabets. Alija and Tudjman refer to Alija Izetbegović and Franjo Tuđman, the wartime presidents of Bosnia and Croatia respectively.

⁶⁷ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1997), 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 14.



Onlookers consider a *Žene u crnom* protest in Belgrade's *Trg Republike*⁷⁰

Certainly, part of *Žene u crnom*'s difficulty communicating their message stemmed from the fact that the state-controlled mainstream media rarely gave them a voice. The importance of the media in the 1990s wars is well documented in the historiography of the wars of Yugoslav secession.⁷¹ Slobodan Milošević was able to rise to power and put Serbia on the warpath in large part by taking over the newspaper *Politika*, the weekly magazine *NIN*, and the state radio and television network RTS.⁷² Indeed, the state controlled all major media outlets. As Žarkov argues, the Serbian press “would claim motherhood in the production of Serbhood, rendering it not only vulnerable and victimized, but ultimately the very symbol of the plight of the nation.”⁷³ Excluded from the mainstream media, *Žene u crnom* had difficulty challenging this gendered nationalism. Instead, they noted that the negative reactions to their protests “reflect the political events and currents as they are presented in the mass media’s manipulation of the public opinion with great precision! These reactions almost completely correspond with the attitudes instigated by the

⁷⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 48.

⁷¹ See, for example, Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999).

⁷² Fridman, ““It was like fighting a war with our own people,”” 511.

⁷³ Žarkov, *The Body of War*, 31.

regime media.”⁷⁴ While *Žene u crnom* had ties with the alternative media in Belgrade, particularly the newspaper *Borba*, readership was small and comprised mostly of those already sympathetic to the organization’s politics.

Žene u crnom’s inability to change the policies of the Serbian regime despite their visible presence in Belgrade’s public sphere served as major sources of frustration for these activists. Although they successfully rejected a Serbian nationalist identity in favor of a feminist pacifist one, their uncompromising opposition to the Serbian government left them with few supporters in Belgrade. In need of allies, it is unsurprising that these women looked abroad for community, aligning themselves with feminist pacifists in other former Yugoslav republics, Western Europe, and the United State in an attempt to construct a “global sisterhood.”

⁷⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 4.

Chapter II: Sisterhood and Unity?

To open the second meeting of the Network of Female Solidarity against War in 1995, Zajović thanked “our friends from Croatia who expressed their utmost disobedience and disloyalty by coming to Trešnjevac.”⁷⁵ In travelling to Serbia, “they did not only reject state authority, but also those who wished to divide us.”⁷⁶ Indeed, nurturing relationships with women of various ethnonational backgrounds from across the former Yugoslavia was one of the most powerful ways that *Žene u crnom* and their allies defied nationalist ideology. Refusing to birth and then sacrifice sons to die as defenders of the nation, the members of *Žene u crnom* and their compatriots prioritized gender and pacifist identities over ethnic ones to protest the violent dismantlement of socialist Yugoslavia. *Žene u crnom* celebrated that “the war provoked most women to rebel” and “brought together women of different social backgrounds, affiliations and nationality.”⁷⁷ Significantly, *Žene u crnom* emerged from the very specific context of 1990s Belgrade, and its founding members were mostly elite, highly educated women. During the war, however, *Žene u crnom* partnered with former countrywomen very different from themselves, including women who had never participated in feminist organizing before the war, women living in refugee camps surrounding Belgrade, and women from Bosnian and Croatian war zones. In developing these relationships, *Žene u crnom* thus grappled with the difficulties of building a regional sisterhood in an area becoming increasingly defined by ethno-religious difference.

⁷⁵ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.



Women gathered at the fourth meeting of the Network of Female Solidarity against War⁷⁸

While the women *Žene u crnom* wrote letters to and attended feminist conferences with were certainly a diverse group, their shared Yugoslav background helped to bind them together. During the 1990s, nationalist politicians frequently demonized Yugoslavia, asserting their people had suffered unduly in the multiethnic state. They claimed that the concept of a Yugoslav identity and the country's motto of "brotherhood and unity" merely hid dormant nationalist identities. Challenging nationalist accounts of Yugoslav history, *Žene u crnom* member Neda Bozinović reflected at the 1994 meeting of the Network of Female Solidarity, "I did not think of brotherhood and unity as a slogan, as something that was imposed on us, something false – as it is claimed today."⁷⁹ Instead, this ideology was "something that many people felt deeply."⁸⁰ Indeed, many feminists interested in maintaining relationships with their former countrywomen

⁷⁸ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 35.

⁷⁹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 203.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

felt nostalgia (commonly referred to in both popular culture and academia as “Yugonostalgia”) for the period before the war when they had lived together peacefully in the same state. Political scientist Nicole Lindstrom has termed this brand of Yugonostalgia “restorative,” expressing a desire to resurrect an idealized Yugoslav past.⁸¹ Accordingly, pacifist feminists from the former Yugoslavia often used elements of their common heritage such as “brotherhood and unity” to provide a foundation for their continued cooperation despite new state borders and interethnic violence.

Although feminists’ shared Yugoslav past provided a strong foundation for their cooperation, *Žene u crnom* and their regional allies also expressed ambivalence regarding socialist Yugoslavia. In this way, they embodied Lindstrom’s “reflective Yugonostalgia,” which in contrast to “restorative Yugonostalgia” is “self-consciously ambivalent and critical” in its remembrance of the past.⁸² For example, in addition to appreciating advancements in female literacy and political participation during the socialist period, members of *Žene u crnom* lamented the prioritization of class over gender in Yugoslavia. These activists also explored the complications of the legacy of “brotherhood and unity.” Bozinović commented, “I have been living in fear that something will happen to Yugoslavia since the 1970’s, because since then nationalism has come to light.”⁸³ Indeed, while socialist Yugoslavia had been a federation of six republics since its founding, between 1967 and 1971 constitutional amendments shifted political power from the central government to these republics.⁸⁴ The project of building a Yugoslav national identity began to give way to the creation of separate national and ethnic identities.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Nicole Lindstrom, “Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Former Yugoslavia,” *East Central Europe* 32 (2005): 227.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁸³ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 44.

⁸⁴ Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1995), 25.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Although many genuinely cherished their Yugoslav identity, there were also cracks in the country's motto of "brotherhood and unity," which became irreparable ruptures over the course of the 1990s. Feminists thus had to reframe their relationships with women living in other successor states. For example, Croatian feminist Jasmina Lukić explained that her wartime connections with Belgrade feminists encouraged her to adopt a "post-Yugoslav identity, which is a cultural and not a national identity... it recognizes the common interests and shared experiences that cannot be contained within the newly established borders of the regional nation-states."⁸⁶ Indeed, feminists struggled to creatively frame their common Yugoslav past in a way that would justify their wartime alliances while acknowledging Yugoslavia's shortcomings and the realities of the 1990s wars.

While it could be challenging for feminists to predicate solidarity on their common Yugoslav heritage, the members of *Žene u crnom* shared a far more concrete history with their feminist counterparts in Zagreb. In addition to Ljubljana, both Zagreb and Belgrade had harbored feminist activist scenes since the late 1970s. Feminists in these cities formed strong networks with each other from the start, likely owing not only to their feminist beliefs but also to their similar social backgrounds as elite, highly educated women. Located outside the Soviet bloc, Yugoslav feminists were able to access Western feminist texts and travel abroad. Scholarly debates and feminist theory thus formed the core of their organizations.⁸⁷ In 1980, women in Zagreb and Belgrade founded Women and Society groups that publically articulated an explicitly feminist orientation.⁸⁸ Asserting that women remained disadvantaged in spite of socialist ideology regarding gender equality, these groups came into direct conflict with the Yugoslav

⁸⁶ Jasmina Lukić, "Protected by Friendship and Caring: Women and Peace in the Former Yugoslav Countries," *Signs* 36 (2011), 533.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 537.

⁸⁸ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, "Belgrade Feminists," 179.

state's Conference for the Social Activities of Women. As a result, feminist-identified Yugoslav women drew even closer together. In 1986, they founded the Network of Yugoslav Feminists, which met annually in Zagreb, Belgrade, or Ljubljana through 1991.⁸⁹ Thus when war broke out in 1991, Belgrade and Zagreb feminists were able to draw on their past relationships to work together to oppose the wars in Bosnia and Croatia.

Given this shared heritage, it is not surprising that many Croatian feminists shared *Žene u crnom*'s politics and supported their project of building a "global sisterhood." One of *Žene u crnom*'s most important allies was Zagreb's *Centar za žene žrtve rata* (Center for Women War Victims, hereafter CŽŽR), a nongovernmental organization that provided psychological and material help to rape survivors. Like *Žene u crnom*, CŽŽR believed wartime rape went hand-in-hand with military violence. In one publication, the organization proclaimed, "we would like to emphasize that rape is an integral part of every militarism and every war, and is the culmination of general violence in a society where power and critical decisions belong to men."⁹⁰ In addition to sharing *Žene u crnom*'s pacifist, feminist politics, CŽŽR also saw itself as part of an international network. The organization explained, "CŽŽR belongs to networks of peace groups and organizations in Croatia, all countries of the former Yugoslavia, and the whole world."⁹¹ Indeed, the vast majority of Croatian feminists remained committed to allying with Belgrade feminists even as the Serbian regime waged brutal warfare in Croatia. Wrote Zajović, "some feminists from Zagreb erected a wall between us: on the one side of that wall were we 'from the aggressor country'; on the other side, they 'from the attacked country.'"⁹² However, "only a very

⁸⁹ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, "Belgrade Feminists," 180.

⁹⁰ *Zbornik* (Zagreb: Centar za Žene Žrtve Rata, 1994), 45. The original text reads: "želimo naglasiti i da je silovanje sastavni dio svakog militarizma, svakog rata i kulminacija općeg nasilja u društvu u kojem dominantna moć i presudne odluke, ipak, pripadaju muškarcima."

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 47. The original text reads: "CŽŽR pripada mreži mirotnovnih grupa i organizacija u Hrvatskoj, svim zemljama bivše Jugoslavije i cijeloga svijeta."

⁹² Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 176.

small part of the feminists from Zagreb became ideological in this way. Most of them continued contact. In fact, we not only kept up contact despite all the obstacles imposed by two militarist regimes, but our contacts became stronger; our sisterhood and tenderness are our common value.”⁹³ Thus their shared history and political orientations not only held these women together, but allowed their relationships to become even closer and more intense throughout the 1990s wars.

Unlike the Zagreb feminists, the refugee women with whom *Žene u crnom* came into contact as a result of the wars were from radically different social and ideological backgrounds. Refugees from mostly rural areas of Yugoslavia flooded Belgrade as a result of the wars, settling in refugee camps surrounding the capital city. With most men fighting on the frontlines, these refugee populations were largely comprised of women and children, and *Žene u crnom* quickly became interested in their plight. Wishing to help women refugees through solidarity rather than charity, *Žene u crnom* emphasized that they were not acting “in accordance with the ‘natural’ role of ‘carers,’” but rather “as friends and sisters.”⁹⁴ Declaring themselves “sisters” not only allowed *Žene u crnom* to escape the role of “carers,” but also helped these activists to form relationships with refugees who were very unlikely to identify themselves as feminists. This, of course, shaped the kinds of activities *Žene u crnom* conducted at refugee camps. Early on in the war, *Žene u crnom* focused on “the production of handicraft and art objects,” which they billed as “part of a restoration of the feminine cultural heritage.”⁹⁵ However, living in female-dominated camps and interacting with feminist organizations often had a profound effect on refugees. Describing the empowerment of female refugees in Zagreb, CŽŽR wrote, “the majority of women come from very patriarchal surroundings where women sit at home, and the husband

⁹³ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 162.

⁹⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

worries about everything. In refugee camps, they are in a completely different situation.”⁹⁶ In Belgrade, *Žene u crnom* began collecting testimony from refugees and incorporated a section entitled “I Remember” in each of their yearbooks. Through this project, *Žene u crnom* furthered their goal of writing an alternative history of the 1990s wars and allowed refugees to narrate their own experiences to resist nationalist narratives instrumentalizing female suffering. Suspiciously, however, no published testimony expressed any nationalist or militarist sentiment, suggesting *Žene u crnom* were only interested in empowering certain kinds of stories to be told.

In addition to refugees, the 1990s wars brought *Žene u crnom* into contact with Bosnian Muslim women who would radicalize the organization’s opposition to the Serbian state. Although it was often impossible to secure Bosniak women passports in order to attend *Žene u crnom*’s international conferences, interacting with Bosnian Muslim women was a powerful experience for the members of *Žene u crnom*. Lepa Mladenović asked, “how can I speak to a friend in Sarajevo? Just because I have electricity and food and she has not makes the gap sometimes unbearable to overcome... If I publish an essay in which I express hatred of the war killers and rapists of all sides, and in which her suffering becomes the essay’s pulse and a value beyond telling, will that help at all?”⁹⁷ In a similar vein, member Violeta Đikanović recalled, “the most often heard comment was: ‘It’s so great to have you here from Belgrade.’ That astounds you.”⁹⁸ Since Bosnian Muslims were the most numerous victims of the 1990s wars, Đikanović reflected, “a terrible feeling of guilt would awaken within me, and that theory that guilt is an individual and not a collective thing would fall to the wayside as I stood before these

⁹⁶ *Zbornik*, 31. The original text reads: “Većina žena dolazi iz vrlo patrijarhalnih sredina gdje žene sjede u kući, a muž se brine o svemu. U izbjegličkim kampovima one su u potpuno drugačijoj situaciji.”

⁹⁷ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, “Belgrade Feminists,” 118.

⁹⁸ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 202.

people. The shelling was ordered by the regime in Belgrade.”⁹⁹ Demanding the Serbian regime take responsibility for its ethnic cleansing operations in eastern Bosnia became a priority for *Žene u crnom*. After the genocide at Srebrenica, the organization sent a letter of support to women from Tuzla seeking information from the Serbian regime and the United Nations about the men who disappeared from Srebrenica and Žepa.¹⁰⁰

Meeting feminists from Belgrade who condemned the Serbian nationalist regime was influential for Bosnian feminists as well. Like the refugees in camps outside Belgrade, Bosnian women tended to come from very different backgrounds than the members of *Žene u crnom*. In contrast to Croatia and Serbia, there was no center of feminist activity in the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, most Bosnian women only began forming women’s organizations with the onset of war. “This war has changed the awareness of the Bosnian women,” explained Ferida, a Bosniak woman.¹⁰¹ “They have awakened and become organised. They realised they had to take things into their own hands.”¹⁰² Contacts with *Žene u crnom* also introduced Bosniaks to Serbian women who opposed militarism and whose gender identity was more important than their ethnonational background. *Medica Zenica*, a women’s organization from central Bosnia, sent *Žene u crnom* a letter stating that “it is wonderful that women, members of the independent groups, are not with the militarist regime which has probably brought their country into its darkest historical period... It takes courage to stand up in public and oppose the regime. We express our respect for this courage of yours.”¹⁰³

As they formed relationships with Bosnian women, the members of *Žene u crnom* began learning to work with women who held different worldviews than their own. Many Bosnian

⁹⁹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 202.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 216.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 205.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 14.

women's organizations did not define themselves as feminist and instead used traditional gender roles as the basis for their organizing. Most famously, the survivors of the Srebrenica genocide used their status as the mothers and wives of murdered men to give their organizations legitimacy.¹⁰⁴ Wearing headscarves and refusing to remarry, these women "explicitly appealed to patriarchal tradition."¹⁰⁵ Yet as anthropologist Elissa Helms argues, "if the perpetrators had assumed that women from such a 'patriarchal society' would be helpless or silent, the women proved them very wrong."¹⁰⁶ *Žene u crnom* recognized these women's agency and came to respect their style of organizing. They agreed to send a press release from a group of women in Tuzla to alternative media outlets *Borba* and Radio-92 in Belgrade, which read, "we are not politicians or army commanders, but wives, mothers, sisters, daughters."¹⁰⁷ Even though *Žene u crnom* adamantly refused to organize as mothers or wives, they learned to ally with women who did.

More troubling to *Žene u crnom*, however, was the fact that many Bosnian women accepted Bosnian nationalism. Female suffering in war was easily reconciled with an emerging Bosnian nationalist narrative predicated on victimhood, for undoubtedly Bosnian Muslims were the most numerous victims of ethnic cleansing, rape, and other violence during the wars of Yugoslav secession. The Bosniak national narrative therefore claimed "innocence, distance from responsibility, and thus moral purity."¹⁰⁸ As such, one Bosnian feminist sent a letter to *Žene u crnom* reading, "I am sure that some individuals among us have done terrible things, but their crimes are not part of a program, nor are they so fanatical as the Serbs and Croats."¹⁰⁹ In

¹⁰⁴ Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2013), 71.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 217.

¹⁰⁸ Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 23.

recognition of the real appeal of a Bosnian nationalist identity to many women, in 1995 Zajović announced, “I think it is somehow very important for us to see that in our feminine communications we attribute the same value and legitimacy to women who have a national affiliation as those who don’t; that the sense of belonging or not belonging to a nation should not be an obstacle or barrier to our communication, but should enrich our exchange of ideas.”¹¹⁰ Yet *Žene u crnom* could only go so far. Owing to their staunch antimilitarist politics, the organization criticized a group of women from Tuzla who glorified the Bosnian state army.¹¹¹ Some Bosnian women’s assertions that wartime rape was primarily an issue of ethnicity rather than gender were also antithetical to *Žene u crnom*’s beliefs. Declaring rape an issue of gender rather than ethnicity, Zajović wrote that she was against “war rape of women of all nationalities.”¹¹² This constant struggle between feminist and nationalist ideologies meant that *Žene u crnom*’s anti-nationalist politics blinded them to the importance of ethnicity to wartime rape in the 1990s.

“If I had to point out one particular feature of women’s involvement in the peace process in the region,” wrote Croatian feminist Jasmina Lukić, “it would be the spirit of understanding and mutual cooperation that characterized it throughout all the years of conflict.”¹¹³ While it is certainly remarkable that women from the former Yugoslavia were able to build relationships and work together despite the nationalist wars devastating the region, this “spirit of understanding and mutual cooperation” had considerable weaknesses. Given their shared ideology and activist history, *Žene u crnom* had few problems working with feminists from Zagreb during the war. Working with refugees and Bosnian Muslim women, however, presented serious challenges stemming from these women’s different histories and ideological

¹¹⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 56.

¹¹¹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 210.

¹¹² Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 18.

¹¹³ Lukić, “Protected by Friendship and Caring,” 533.

backgrounds. Despite sympathizing deeply with their plight and adjusting their politics to incorporate Bosnian women who organized on the basis of their motherhood or widowhood, *Žene u crnom* had difficulty allying with Bosniak women who endorsed Bosnian nationalism, supported military action, or understood wartime rape to be an issue primarily of ethnicity rather than gender. For *Žene u crnom*, it was often easier to collaborate with women who shared their politics rather than a homeland. It is therefore unsurprising that the organization came to ally with like-minded feminists from Western Europe and the United States whose concern for gendered violence prompted them to begin traveling to the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Chapter III: “Our Sisters from the West”¹¹⁴

What does a newsman ask when he comes to a [refugee] camp? The answer is “Is there anyone here who has been raped and speaks English?”¹¹⁵

The above quip comes from *Žene u crnom*'s 1994 yearbook. As evidence began to surface that Serb forces were using sexual violence as a military weapon, American and Western European reporters descended on the former Yugoslavia in search of rape victims to interview. Indeed, raped Bosnian Muslim women had become a “media hit.”¹¹⁶ Some of *Žene u crnom*'s resentment about this media frenzy arose from the kinds of articles Western journalists typically produced, which included voyeuristic photographs, graphically detailed descriptions of rapes, and musings about the inherently violent character of the Balkans.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Western media coverage of the 1990s wars was rife with “balkanism,” a counterpart to orientalism describing Western discourse about the region. Furthermore, these feminist activists were disappointed that rape was the only topic about which most journalists were interested in speaking with *Žene u crnom*; they ignored the plight of female refugees, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. However, the organization soon deduced that these other issues lacked the political utility of wartime rape. Wrote Zajović, “the unusual interest in raped women did not intend their protection, but the achievement of various political aims.”¹¹⁸ In *Žene u crnom*'s analysis, these articles aimed to “create a psychological climate for the justification of a possible military intervention ‘in defense of innocent victims.’”¹¹⁹ In building connections with Western European and American feminists, *Žene u crnom* rejected this model of Western-Balkan relations and

¹¹⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 178.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Lance Morrow, “Unspeakable,” *Time Magazine*, February 22, 1993, 48-50 is perhaps the most famous example of this kind of journalism. Morrow's article references the “hideous moral ecology of the region” and includes a gigantic photograph of a teenaged rape survivor hunched over in her hospital bed having just undergone an abortion (*ibid.*, 50).

¹¹⁸ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 177.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

turned balkanism on its head. Rather than becoming the passive, backwards recipients of benevolent Western charity, *Žene u crnom* endeavored to build relationships with Western feminists based on solidarity and equality that would allow *Žene u crnom* to become leading members in a global sisterhood fighting militarism, nationalism, and patriarchy.

Since the eighteenth century, Western discourse on the Balkans has largely been characterized by “balkanism,” a term historian Maria Todorova coined to describe Western discourse that stereotypes the entire Balkan region as violent, backwards, and uncivilized. Although similar to Edward Said’s orientalism, Todorova asserts that balkanism is not merely a “structural variant” of orientalism.¹²⁰ Even though the Balkan Peninsula is located on Europe’s periphery, it is still undeniably part of Europe. Containing the border between Europe and Asia, Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and Christianity and Islam, the region holds a “transitory status” that makes balkanism “a discourse about an imputed ambiguity.”¹²¹ The Balkans thus serves not as an other for the West, but rather as an “incomplete self.”¹²² In their interactions with Western feminists, *Žene u crnom* had to contend with the legacy of this stereotyped vision of the Balkans.

Balkanism surfaces vividly in the history of interactions between Western women and women from the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Like the wars of Yugoslav secession, war provided the impetus for Western women to establish contact with Balkan women during the First World War. Scottish doctor Emslie Hutton, for example, kept a diary chronicling her wartime work in rural Serbia. Very much in line with balkanist discourse, Hutton described the women she met as delightfully uncivilized in her diary. She asserted, for instance, that Serbian

¹²⁰ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 25.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 32; *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 36.

women were extraordinarily happy because “they are near to Nature and know her secret.”¹²³ Of marriage, she wrote, “it never occurs to them to wonder whether they will be happy or whether they will be suited to each other... They wed because it is the natural course of events, settle down at once and produce a healthy child each year. Certainly, they all seem very contented.”¹²⁴ Even when Hutton moved from rural Serbia to Belgrade and began encountering educated women working as nurses, she continued to understand Serbian women to be somehow closer to nature than their British counterparts. Hutton testified that Belgrade nurses had large families and worked throughout their entire pregnancies “just like every other woman in the land.”¹²⁵ She observed in awe that women would breastfeed their babies at work. Concluded Hutton, “all this seemed to me a much more natural state of affairs than that which exists in England, where marriage is not only discouraged in the medical and teaching professions, but is considered an absolute disqualification for all the Government or municipal posts.”¹²⁶ Using the Balkans as an “incomplete self,” Hutton described the region as an idyllic throwback to simpler times in order to criticize modern life in Britain.

Not all Western feminists visiting the Balkans during this period shared Hutton’s rosy assessment of the women they encountered. Significantly, despite the fact that feminist organizations had existed in Serbia since the mid-nineteenth century, women’s organizations based in Western Europe did not deem Yugoslav women capable of participating meaningfully in the international women’s movement. As referenced in the introduction, French feminist Camille Drevet concluded in 1929 that Yugoslav women were so consumed with violent interethnic conflicts that they had “no international spirit” and thus made poor members of the

¹²³ Emslie Hutton, *With a Woman’s Unit in Serbia, Salonika and Sebastopol* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1928), 203.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

International Women's League.¹²⁷ Unfortunately, the historiography of the international women's movement has failed to move past these early twentieth-century balkanist evaluations of Yugoslav feminism.

Yugoslav women's international connections during the socialist period help explain why *Žene u crnom* could overcome the fetishization of women in Yugoslavia in their interactions with Western women during the 1990s and understand themselves as leading members of a global sisterhood. After Yugoslavia left the Soviet bloc in 1948, Yugoslav women's organizations had limited contact with Soviet-supported international women's organizations like the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). Instead, Yugoslavia adopted a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement, which it helped found in 1961. Although Yugoslav women certainly developed international contacts through the Non-Aligned Movement, these relationships have received little scholarly attention.¹²⁸ Historian Kristen Ghodsee, however, notes that at a 2011 academic conference discussing the United Nations Decade for Women, Indian economist Devaki Jain mentioned the Yugoslav feminist and communist party member, Vida Tomšič. She told the Western European and American attendees of the conference, "I know that Vida is not in your pantheon of goddesses... but she certainly is in mine."¹²⁹ It seems that involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement allowed Yugoslav feminists to understand themselves as global leaders. Significantly, membership in the Non-Aligned Movement meant not only that Yugoslav feminists came into contact with women living in the Third World, but also that these women could travel freely to Western Europe and the United States and that Western feminist texts

¹²⁷ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 117.

¹²⁸ For an account of a relationship between state women's organizations in socialist Europe and the Third World, see Kristen Ghodsee, "Research Note: The Historiographical Challenges of Exploring Second World-Third World Alliances in the International Women's Movement," *Global Social Policy* 14 (2014): 244-264. Here, Ghodsee illustrates how the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement advanced women's rights not only in Bulgaria, but also in Zambia through contacts with the Zambian United National Independence Party Women's League.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

could be read openly. Indeed, this access to Western feminism was crucial to shaping the politics of the women who would later found *Žene u crnom*. The Cold War thus emboldened rather than diminished Yugoslav feminism.

The second-wave feminist scene from which *Žene u crnom* emerged in 1991 had its roots in the 1978 *Drugarica Žena* (Comrade Woman) conference held in Belgrade. Attended by Yugoslav and Western feminists alike, the conference marked the founding of the non-governmental feminist movement in socialist Yugoslavia. The conference's principal aim was to expose the gap between the discrimination Yugoslav women faced in their everyday lives and the state's official ideology of gender equality.¹³⁰ There were marked tensions, however, between the Western and Yugoslav participants. While Western feminists launched a full-out attack on the socialist system, Yugoslav women generally hoped to both call out gender inequality and acknowledge the ways in which socialism had improved women's lives in Yugoslavia. As such, they framed their critiques in Marxist terms, describing patriarchy as an "anachronism" and "a remnant of bourgeois morality."¹³¹ The Western participants' lack of knowledge of Yugoslavia was another source of tension. Most Western women did not grasp the significance of the fact that Yugoslavia was located outside the Soviet bloc and few had any understanding of Yugoslavia's internal politics.¹³² The presence of these Western participants, however, gave the conference visibility and legitimacy, and the Yugoslav media thus decided to cover the event.¹³³ Furthermore, meeting Western feminists was a transformative experience for many Yugoslav participants. According to future *Žene u crnom* member Lepa Mladenović, meeting lesbian feminists like Christine Delphy "totally changed how I see myself in daily life

¹³⁰ Bonfiglioli, "Remembering the Conference 'Drugarica Žena. Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?'" 44.

¹³¹ Ibid., 56.

¹³² Ibid., 82.

¹³³ Ibid., 67.

and how I can see what I can do one day.”¹³⁴ Indeed, after the conference, feminists in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana started domestic violence telephone hotlines, women’s shelters, and lesbian groups. By inspiring this activism, *Drugarica Žena* began to lay the intellectual and organizational groundwork for the emergence of *Žene u crnom* in 1991.

When Western women began flooding the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the circumstances of their involvement were far different than they had been in 1978. Most Western European and American feminists only became interested in the region after seeing coverage of the war on television. Explained one woman from Denmark, “I live outside the war-affected region, but I feel very much involved in everything that is going on in the Balkans. In my opinion, television and the press have played a major role in this.”¹³⁵ The use of rape as a tool of war also sparked many Western feminists with the resources to travel to establish contact with *Žene u crnom*. Rebecca Johnson of London remembered the impact of reading news reports about wartime rape, explaining, “we were angry because of the rapes in Bosnia.”¹³⁶ In line with how balkanist discourse understands the Balkans as an “incomplete self,” Western feminists both identified with these white, European rape victims in Bosnia and viewed them as backwards and thus in need of Western aid.

Through their involvement with the sophisticated feminist activists of *Žene u crnom*, however, Western feminists were prompted to reframe their activism. According to Isabel of Zaragoza, listening to *Žene u crnom* rather than the Spanish media taught her that not everyone from the former Yugoslavia supported the 1990s wars and “that women have a different attitude to war and all forms of militarism.”¹³⁷ For Marie France, traveling from Brussels to Belgrade

¹³⁴ Bonfiglioli, “Remembering the Conference ‘Drugarica Žena. Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?’” 93.

¹³⁵ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 49.

¹³⁶ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 135.

¹³⁷ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 49.

showed her that Serbian women participated not only in humanitarian work, but also in political activism opposing the ruling nationalist regime.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, Italian feminist Rosa D'Amico recalled learning to practice solidarity rather than charity, developing relationships with Yugoslav women rather than providing humanitarian aid that “provokes new hatreds, economic use, an even bigger separation.”¹³⁹ Finally, Laurence Hovde of New York City explained that working with *Žene u crnom* made her stop understanding Yugoslav women as “‘victim,’ ‘refugee,’ ‘other’” and seeing their experiences “as very distant from mine.”¹⁴⁰ Instead, she learned “to listen intimately” and “to find the space in myself able of being a vulnerable witness.”¹⁴¹ Allowing Yugoslav women to lead the international feminist, pacifist coalition opposing the 1990s wars, Western feminists learned to regard their Belgrade counterparts as partners rather than as objects of charity.

These relationships with Western European and American feminists became extremely important to *Žene u crnom*, allowing them to structure their lives as members of a feminist global sisterhood rather than as women trapped in a nationalist, militarist regime. Indeed, meeting the Italian chapter of Women in Black inspired Zajović to found *Žene u crnom*.¹⁴² Relationships with feminists from abroad also provided relief from *Žene u crnom*'s frustrations with Western humanitarian aid “[looking] upon victims as passive objects and passive recipients of benefaction” and expecting Yugoslavs “to be grateful, humble, to elicit compassion and satisfy the ‘benefactor’s’ need to give ‘protection.’”¹⁴³ By contrast, Zajović explained, “our relationships with feminists and pacifists, our sisters from the West, are free of such paternalistic

¹³⁸ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 135.

¹³⁹ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 29.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1995), 147.

¹⁴³ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 178.

attitudes. Our exchange presupposes a differences related to the specific situation, yet all of us are fighting for the same goal: a greater power and autonomy for women.”¹⁴⁴ Finally, relationships with Western women often made members of *Žene u crnom* feel less isolated. Lepa Mladenović, for example, became particularly close with Tanya Renne, an American lesbian feminist and editor of *Ana’s Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*. Renne brought lesbian journals, Joan Nestle books, and “Dykes to Watch Out For” comic strips to Belgrade for Mladenović, which made lesbian culture seem “far away, possible and real” all at once.¹⁴⁵ Mladenović remembered, “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... Lesbians like her made life during wartime less fearful and more lesbian.”¹⁴⁶ Living under a nationalist regime that vilified any aberration from heterosexual womanhood, Mladenović’s global sisterhood allowed her to subvert the nationalist vision of women.

To be sure, *Žene u crnom*’s relationships with Western feminists had certain difficulties as well. In 1998, member Zorica Mršević reflected on some of these “ups and downs.”¹⁴⁷ Mršević complained that many Western European and American women came to Belgrade primarily “for themselves,” looking for an exotic adventure or to add a line to their résumés.¹⁴⁸ She also expressed frustration with women who wanted to “visit refugee camps like a zoo” or those who would “come to stay a short time and research everything, to explain what is our entire problem, because they know the solution better than we do.”¹⁴⁹ Yet on the other hand, Mršević also remembered fondly that Western women carried packages and letters to women

¹⁴⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 178.

¹⁴⁵ Lepa Mladjenović, “Notes of a Feminist Lesbian during Wartime,” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 8 (2001), 390.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 389-390.

¹⁴⁷ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1998), 248.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 251; *Ibid.*, 252.

living in ex-Yugoslav republics that Serbian women could not longer visit and validated *Žene u crnom*'s demands as "normal in the outside world."¹⁵⁰ Mršević concluded, "they helped us greatly but it does not mean that every foreigner was of help and that does not mean that I am obliged to love every single person coming across the border."¹⁵¹ Significantly, Mršević's essay was the only critical assessment of Western feminists that *Žene u crnom* published in their yearbooks. This likely owed in part to *Žene u crnom*'s reliance on Western women for fundraising and international visibility, but also to the genuinely positive feelings most members felt for their allies from abroad.

Žene u crnom's global sisterhood empowered the organization to question not only the Serbian state, but also powerful international institutions. The organization was extremely displeased with Western political leaders and institutions, which they believed perpetuated militarism and nationalism in the former Yugoslavia. In 1993, *Žene u crnom* opposed United Nations' sanctions against Serbia, declaring, "the sanctions imposed by the Security Council do not affect 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."¹⁵² The organization asserted these sanctions disproportionately disadvantaged women and children by decreasing funding for healthcare and education rather than curbing military spending. *Žene u crnom* also denounced UN peacekeeping missions, calling them militaristic "'peace-making' or 'peace-imposing' forces."¹⁵³ They lamented that "the raped women in Bosnia were to be 'protected by an efficient military intervention."¹⁵⁴ Additionally, *Žene u crnom* demanded that women have a larger say in the political negotiations seeking to end the Bosnian War, upset that "international

¹⁵⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1998), 250.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 15.

¹⁵³ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 234.

¹⁵⁴ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 175.

power-holders made decisions about war and peace without consulting those whose lives are affected by them.”¹⁵⁵ To *Žene u crnom*, it was unacceptable that “war criminals like General Mladić are recognized as legitimate representatives of an unrecognized state and allowed to participate in negotiations held at UN or EC [European Community] headquarters.”¹⁵⁶ All of this criticism did not mean, however, that *Žene u crnom* believed that the international community should not be involved in ending the Yugoslav wars. *Žene u crnom* asserted that an international war crimes tribunal was “indispensable for the establishment of truth and for the re-establishment of justice.”¹⁵⁷ According to the organization, “human rights are a universal category and NOT an internal affair of a particular state.”¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, *Žene u crnom*’s attacks on the UN had grave consequences. In 1996, they reported that “because of the clear anti-regime and anti-militarist position of Women in Black, UNHCR [the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] has repeatedly said it cannot authorize us through our feminist and anti-militarist network to distribute humanitarian aid to the refugees.”¹⁵⁹ *Žene u crnom* thus became the only nongovernmental organization to be banned from Belgrade’s refugee camps. In taking such a principled stance against influential Western institutions and leaders, *Žene u crnom* ultimately isolated itself from sources of power.

¹⁵⁵ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 175.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹⁵⁷ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 270.

¹⁵⁸ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1994), 9. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 134.



Žene u crnom demonstration concerning the prosecution of war crimes both domestically and internationally at the ICTY, located in The Hague¹⁶⁰

Although they could not alter UN policy by building relationships with Western women, *Žene u crnom*'s ties with feminists from abroad were crucial to their activism. In 1992, Mladenović wrote, “for those of us who are not Serbians yet, who are not Yugoslavs anymore and feel the lot of women’s rights with the fall of Communism, there is a lot of identity work to be done.”¹⁶¹ She asserted, “women-identified women have a strong basis to begin that work.”¹⁶² Despite their isolation from political power, *Žene u crnom* put forth a model of Western-Balkan relations based in solidarity and equality rather than charity. Turning balkanism on its head, they

¹⁶⁰ Zajović, *Women for Peace* (1996), 211. Signs read, from left to right: “One way ticket, *Karta jednom smeru za Hag*” (“One way ticket to the Hague”); “*Odgovorni za rat: podstrekači, planeri, naredbodavci, izvršioци. Svi u Hag.*” (“Those responsible for war: instigators, planners, commanders, executors. All of them to The Hague.”); “*Nema amnestije za ratne zločine*” (“There is no amnesty for war crimes”); “*Амнестија за све децетмеце*” (“Amnesty for all deserters”); “*Žene u crnom protiv rata*” (“Women in Black against war”); “*8. Sednica → Ušće → Vukovar → Srebrenica → Hag*” (“8. Sednica → Ušće → Vukovar → Srebrenica → The Hague”).

¹⁶¹ Litrichin and Mladjenovic, “Belgrade Feminists,” 119.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

became the leaders of a global sisterhood. Furthermore, through interacting with Western European and American feminists, the members of *Žene u crnom* were able to identify themselves not with Serbian nationalism, but rather with a global sisterhood that shared their anti-militarist, anti-nationalist, feminist beliefs.

Conclusions

1990s Belgrade may seem like an unlikely birthplace for a “global sisterhood.” Yet in the midst of the wars of Yugoslav secession, *Žene u crnom* founded a powerful “global sisterhood” predicated on anti-nationalist, anti-militarist, feminist politics. The continued survival of *Žene u crnom*’s “global sisterhood” points very clearly to its strength and significance. Most foreign interest in the former Yugoslavia waned after the conclusion of the 1990s wars. The United Nations withdrew its peacekeepers, war ravaged countries in the region stopped receiving humanitarian aid, and the international community abandoned Bosnia to govern the unstable political entity the Dayton Accords had created. By contrast, the regional and international relationships *Žene u crnom* fostered during the 1990s endured. Currently, *Žene u crnom* is working with feminist organizations from Western Europe and nine women’s organizations from the former Yugoslavia to carry out an initiative called *Ženski Sud* (Women’s Court). The project aims to retry war crimes from the 1990s on a feminist model of justice.¹⁶³ Rejecting the patriarchal, nationalist historiographies that dominate in the Yugoslav successor states, *Ženski Sud* hopes to narrate a history of the 1990s wars that centers women’s experiences and agency and that analyzes the interdependent relationship between militarism, nationalism, and patriarchy. *Ženski Sud* thus holds public meetings throughout the former Yugoslavia to gather women’s testimony about the violence they experienced during and as a result of the 1990s wars.¹⁶⁴

In order to understand the long-term vitality of *Žene u crnom* and the influence of their “global sisterhood,” it is critical to examine the organization’s activities on the local, regional, and international levels. In Belgrade, *Žene u crnom* opposed the Serbian regime by fashioning

¹⁶³ “Women’s Court – Feminist Approach to Justice,” accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.zenskisud.org/en/o-zenskom-sudu.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

themselves as feminist, pacifist activists and refusing membership in the community of the nation. Forcefully rejecting the violent nationalisms tearing Yugoslavia into separate nation-states, these feminists fostered relationships with women from other former Yugoslav republics through exchanging letters, sending packages, and organizing annual feminist anti-war conferences. *Žene u crnom* also worked with women from Western Europe and the United States. Although scholarship concerning relationships between Eastern European and Western feminists during the post-socialist period tends to focus on Western feminist hegemony or the racial, economic, and geographic “liminality” of Eastern European women, the members of *Žene u crnom* were hardly weak or disadvantaged with respect to their Western peers.¹⁶⁵ Given their long history of feminist activism, the highly educated women who founded *Žene u crnom* were comfortable assuming a leadership role in the “global sisterhood” they sought to create. This is perhaps best illustrated by the ways *Žene u crnom* reshaped their Western allies’ conceptions of gendered violence.

Rape was the central concern for the majority of the Western European and American feminists who began flooding the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the issue of sexual consent would become increasingly important to the international feminist movement after the Bosnian War. Learning about mass military rapes in Bosnia and Croatia prompted Western feminists to establish contact with *Žene u crnom*. They intended to predicate their relationships with Yugoslav feminists on their conviction that women worldwide are united by a shared

¹⁶⁵ Kristen Ghodsee, “Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe,” *Signs* 29 (2004): 727-753; Allaine Cerwonka, “Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism,” *Signs* 33 (2008): 809-832.

¹⁶⁶ For an analysis of some Western feminists’ single-minded focus on prosecuting rape as a crime against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, see Karen Engle, “Feminism and Its (Dis)contents: Criminalizing Wartime Rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *The International Journal of International Law* 99 (2005): 778-816.

vulnerability to sexual violence.¹⁶⁷ Before the outbreak of war, the future members of *Žene u crnom* would have been unlikely to object to this focus on rape. Since the 1970s, many of these women had worked on SOS hotlines and in shelters for women and children escaping domestic violence. The experience of war, however, expanded *Žene u crnom*'s understanding of gendered violence. These women came to understand that patriarchy spawns not only rape, but militarism as well. *Žene u crnom* therefore defined itself first and foremost as a pacifist organization. This late twentieth century take on the international pacifist feminism of the interwar period saw pacifism not as women's natural affinity for peace, but rather as feminists' radical, political choice.¹⁶⁸ Establishing connections between domestic violence, military rape, and war, this far-reaching analysis of gendered violence influenced the Western European and American feminists who travelled to Belgrade. *Žene u crnom* thus successfully reintroduced pacifism to late twentieth century international feminism and demonstrated the strength of an international feminist movement led by women outside the Western "First World."

¹⁶⁷ Žarkov, *The Body of War*, 148.

¹⁶⁸ For an example of a historiographical narrative charting the rise of pacifism in the international women's movement after the First World War and its decline following the Second World War, see Rupp, *Worlds of Women*.

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