

Final report

Visegrád Scholarship at the Blinken Open Society Archives (Budapest)

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Introduction

The research which I conducted at the Blinken Open Society Archives (Blinken OSA) built upon my doctoral dissertation – and later book – on the war-related feminist activism in Belgrade and Zagreb in the 1990s (Miškovska Kajevska, 2014, 2017), i.e. the discovery of an epistemological bias in the scholarship on Yugoslavia's disintegration. More precisely, the relevant 'general' scholarship predominantly concentrated on male politicians, military and religious leaders and intellectuals, or the mainstream media, while the discourses and activities of the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists have received virtually no attention (e.g., Dragović-Soso, 2002; Gagnon, 2004; Glenny, 1993; Jović, 2009; Malcolm, 1996; Popov, 1996; Thompson, 1999; Udovički and Ridgeway, 2000; Woodward, 1995). In consequence, mentions and analyses of their war-related activism were almost exclusively to be found in the 'specific' scholarship: contributions which either focused specifically on (feminist) women's NGOs or, much more often, mentioned these NGOs within a broader elaboration of the war rapes, the interaction between gender and ethnicity, gender and nationalism, and gender and war (e.g., Allen, 1996; Batinić, 2001; Benderly, 1997; Bilić, 2011; Cockburn, 2007; Helms, 2013; Kesić, 2002; MacKinnon, 2006; Mladenović and Litričin, 1993; Ramet, 1999; Žarkov, 2007). So, in the works which did not use a 'gender prism', the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists were commonly overlooked as legitimate sources of knowledge regarding war, nationalism, politics, human rights, and media propaganda. This exclusion took place despite the fact that many of those activists were established journalists, writers and scholars in social sciences and humanities, and/or provided psychosocial and humanitarian assistance to (raped) refugee women, advocated at various international forums the end of the wars and war rapes, demanded criminalisation of war rape, and conducted diverse forms of antiwar activism, including support to conscientious objectors – men, who did not want to fight.

Taking into account this bias in the scholarship, during my time at the Blinken OSA I looked at the (in)visibility of feminist activism in various non-academic reports on and analyses of, the sexual war violence. My initial idea was to address all locations of such mass violence in the 1990s: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo. However, it turned out that the overwhelming majority of available documents concerned Bosnia-Herzegovina only.¹ In hindsight, that is hardly surprising: The issue of war rape gained most attention during that war. After the first reports of large scale mass rape of civilian

¹ Hence my final presentation at the Blinken OSA – given on 28 May 2019 – was titled "Active, yet ignored? Exploring the visibility of the feminist engagement against war rape during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995)".

women by male soldiers in Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared in the Western media in the second half of 1992, numerous Western journalists, documentary makers, politicians, and members of inter- and supranational NGOs and commissions embarked on fact-finding missions. Their first stops often included the feminist NGOs in Belgrade and/or Zagreb. These feminists were repeatedly asked to explain Yugoslavia's violent dissolution, share their insights on wartime sexual violence, describe their work with war rape survivors, as well as enable a direct contact between those survivors and the foreign visitors. (The latter demands required a good, ethical gatekeeping because not all foreign visitors were sensitive to the precarious state of the traumatised survivors.)

Given the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists' engagement regarding war rape, and their contribution to the fact-finding missions, I considered it important to explore the extent to which they have been acknowledged in the textual, audio, and video documents which resulted from those missions. Was there a fair recognition of (feminist) women's knowledge and work, or a striking neglect, comparable to that in the 'general' scholarship on the (post-)Yugoslav wars? Whereas I was aware that I did not know for certain whether and which feminists had been consulted in the preparation of a certain document, I was confident that by using those sources, I could make a general claim on the visibility of the feminist engagement against war rape. The possibility that the names of the activists and their NGOs have not been mentioned due to anonymity requests did not seem very likely: The activists in question were both at home and abroad overtly and visibly outspoken on the issue of war rape and their related work.

By inquiring into the visibility of feminist activism, I did not aim to question the tremendous importance of focusing on sexual war violence and increasing the awareness about it, or to deny the urgency of raising funds to assist the survivors. I was further conscious that the reports and analyses, which I examined had not been necessarily produced with the goal of creating a historical record or with the knowledge that one day they might be used as such. Rather than that, they served to assess the situation, exercise political pressure, allocate funds for the survivors, facilitate the criminalisation of war rape, and examine the need for establishing a war crimes tribunal on the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, my starting point was that even for such purposes one was not to ignore those who had helped the survivors, especially given the context in which that assistance had taken place: A state (Croatia and Serbia alike) which largely failed to provide adequate and sufficient support to the raped women, despite its nominal concern for them and extensive misuse of their suffering for warmongering and nation-building aims.

An explicit public recognition of the work and the expertise of the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists is needed not only for the purpose of creating a more comprehensive historiography, but also for acknowledging women's agency. In other words, to only attend to women's experiences of suffering, without simultaneously giving examples of their perseverance, activism, and intellectual contribution, denotes a reproduction of the stereotypical depiction of women as passive victims and a silencing of the fact that they can be active agents, too.² Such portrayals distort the understanding of the complexities of human existence in war and peace alike, and disturb the potential for building a less violent and more equal society (Helms, 2013, 2015; Simić, 2012; Spasić, 2000; Žarkov, 2007).

² Whereas I speak of the suffering of the raped women and the work of the feminist activists, by no means do I want to create a dichotomy, i.e. suggest that raped women cannot be feminist activists (agents) and feminist activists cannot suffer (be victims).

List of consulted collections³

HU OSA 127 Records of the Network Women's Program

HU OSA 127-1-1 Publications; Boxes 1, 4 [This collection did not prove useful to me because it only contained information on non-war-related matters, such as activism against peacetime violence against women.]

HU OSA 205 Records of the Open Media Research Institute

HU OSA 205-4-80 Yugoslav Subject Files; Boxes 11, 12, 24, 25, 31, 43, 44,
HU OSA 205-4-90 Bosnia Herzegovina Subject Files; Boxes 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 27, 28
HU OSA 205-4-100 Croatian Subject Files; Boxes 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, 26
HU OSA 205-4-120 Serbian Subject Files; Boxes 3, 4, 9, 10, 16
HU OSA 205-4-121 Kosovo Subject files; Boxes 2, 3, 4

HU OSA 304 Records of the International Human Rights Law Institute Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia

HU OSA 304-0-1 Final Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994; Boxes 1, 2, 6
HU OSA 304-0-2 Interim and Supplementary Reports of the Special Rapporteur; Boxes 1, 2
HU OSA 304-0-3 Numbered Commission Document Files ("Bates File"); Boxes 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28
HU OSA 304-0-4 United Nations, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Court of Justice Documents; Boxes 7, 8
HU OSA 304-0-6 Materials on Ethnic Cleansing; Boxes 1, 2
HU OSA 304-0-12 Press Reports on War in Bosnia; Boxes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
HU OSA 304-0-13 Publications and Manuscripts; Boxes 1, 2, 3
HU OSA 304-0-16 Video Recordings Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia; Tapes 11, 12, 16, 19, 30, 33, 48, 63, 128, 163, 180, 200, 209
HU OSA 304-0-17 Sound Recordings Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia; Tapes 8, 23

HU OSA 318 Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights

HU OSA 318-0-5 Country Files [Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia, Yugoslavia]; Boxes 19-28, 35-45, 73-85, 135-140, 164-180

HU OSA 350 Records of the International Monitor Institute

HU OSA 350-1-1 Balkan Archive; Tapes 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 16, 21, 22, 31, 33, 38, 58, 62, 74, 84, 85, 92, 99, 106, 107, 109, 149, 151, 177, 191, 212, 219, 220, 224, 232, 261-265, 333, 373-378, 439, 475, 493, 495, 560, 624, 633, 653, 729, 731

In addition, I searched the Blinken OSA (film) library, using the key words: "Bosnia", "Croatia", "Kosovo", "Serbia", "Yugoslavia", "rape", and "war rape".

³ Some of the consulted collections covered other research interests of mine, such as the situation in Kosovo in the 1980s, and the (post-)Yugoslav women's and feminist activism related to issues other than war rape.

Findings

As I already suspected, there was not much information on the Belgrade and Zagreb feminist NGOs or, more broadly, on women's NGOs. I did expect, however, more information on war rape. It turned out that, compared to other war-related topics, that issue had been markedly less attended to, despite its prevalence in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the relevant landmark changes which happened in the 1990s. These changes included extensive media reporting on it, the recognition of women's rights as human rights in 1993, the first indictment in 1996 – by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – dealing specifically with sexual offences, the classification of war rape as both a war crime and a crime against humanity by the International Criminal Court in 1998, and the international mobilisation of (feminist) women's NGOs. As the final report of the 'Bassiouni Commission' (United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992)), stated:

[M]any women have received support from...women's organizations...In fact, for really the first time, there is a sort of women's solidarity movement, worldwide, but especially in the former Yugoslavia and states housing refugees. This solidarity movement brings a great deal of support for victims of rape and sexual assault.

(Bassiouni, 1994, Annex IX, n. 10, p. 62)

The limited attention I criticise refers to the quantity of documents related to war rape and/or feminist NGOs which I found in the collections. For example, in the relevant press clipping of the International Helsinki Federation there were only 23 articles (out of approximately 1,000 items) which addressed war rape and out of those 23 articles, only 2 explicitly mentioned the local women's NGOs which were engaged with that issue. Unlike the existence of separate sections on other issues, such as "NATO ultimatum" and "Massacre Sarajevo", there was not a specific thematic section on war rape. It was further striking that the Federation's press clipping on the Belgrade opposition only contained articles on political parties, without mentioning the diverse antiwar and feminist NGOs, which overtly and publicly opposed the politics of the ruling parties in Serbia. On a slightly different but related note, a conspicuous deletion of (feminist) women's activism was also present in a document by the New York-based Committee to Aid the Democratic Dissidents in Yugoslavia. Its overview of the opposition in Yugoslavia rightly included NGOs, next to political parties, but none of those NGOs were women's, although such organisations existed already then (CADDY Bulletin, 1990).

In the items, which did address the war rapes and/or the other forms of war violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina several ways of omission of local activist efforts could be spotted. There was often no explicit mention of any local NGOs. Only foreign, i.e. Western, organisations were mentioned. The same bias was to be found in interviews with and quotations from experts. Sometimes, there was a general reference to "humanitarian aid organisations" or "independent human rights groups" which nonetheless obscured the existence of local engagement. The video documents, even when they featured local activists, did not always provide (complete) information on who those people were and what exactly they did, and in the case of documentaries, their names and NGOs were often absent from the credits.

There were some positive examples, too. The already mentioned final report of the Bassiouni Commission is one of them, not only because of the recognition of the existence of international women's solidarity efforts, but also because of the explicit acknowledgement of the help which the Commission has received in compiling its report on the war crimes. This acknowledgement was made in the form of a list of the NGOs "which have assisted or collaborated with the Commission, or published material which the Commission consulted" (Bassiouni, 1994, Annex I.C, p. 2). Several feminist and

other women's NGOs from Belgrade and Zagreb were also mentioned. Another instance of good practice is the report "Meeting the Health Needs of Women Survivors of the Balkan conflict" (Pine and Mertus, 1993), where the two authors list the Zagreb feminist NGOs working with war rape survivors and include these NGOs' recommendations for international aid. Thereby, both the existence of these NGOs and their expertise are acknowledged. Lastly, in her newspaper article "War Rape Scars Balkan Women", Williams (1992), besides addressing the severity and prevalence of the war rapes, quotes and mentions by name Zagreb feminists and their NGOs, as well as notes the various ways in which these organisations engage against war rape and in support of its survivors.

Thanks to my research at the Blinken OSA, I can argue in an even more substantiated manner on the necessity of creating more comprehensive and, therefore, less problematic, partial and biased narratives. If war rape receives less attention than the other forms of suffering, such as the imprisonment, torture and killing of men, then the impression can be created that the women's suffering in war is less intense and less important than that of men, and that, in consequence, less resources should be mobilised to counteract it. If the existence of indigenous activism and expertise is overlooked, then one can conclude that there are no any significant domestic actors worth supporting and listening to. All interventions have to be made from abroad and no assistance is, thereby, needed from local partners. Finally, to disregard (feminist) women's activism in relation to war rape means to create a seriously distorted portrayal of the reality which does not offer space for women's agency and invalidates all human, financial and other resources which women invested – and still invest – in raising the awareness on it, advocating its criminalisation, and trying to alleviate its consequences.

Somewhat less disturbing are the documents containing incomplete information on the local activists. But, although the activists are not fully ignored, they are not, in fact, fully acknowledged either. This is exemplified by a news item on the war rapes which was broadcasted by ABC News on 6 September 1995. The interview with a women's activist from Bosnia-Herzegovina was accompanied by a caption stating "Samra Gluhic, Women's Support Group". So, whereas the person's full name was mentioned, the location of that women's support group remained unknown. Moreover, given the rather generic name which was provided for that women's group, it is unclear whether that name was correct. As a result, it is difficult to trace both the activist in question and the organisation she was involved with which facilitates their exclusion from the historiography of women's activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

My findings motivate me to even more fervently advocate the creation and preservation of organisational archives, especially those concerning NGOs which work with marginalised populations and/or topics. I became aware of the importance of publicly accessible organisational archives already in the course of my doctoral research.⁴ That analysis was based to a great extent on documents found in the homes of my respondents. Thanks to my personal connections with many of those feminist and/or antiwar activists, I had a quite unique access to press clipping from local and foreign media, as well as to documents produced by the NGOs where these women had been active in. Even the documentation housed in NGOs was not per definition accessible to outsiders. Had I only depended on publicly available sources, my analysis would have much less contributed to the historiography of the Belgrade and Zagreb war-related feminist activism, and much less challenged the common narrative on it. Put differently, if organisations do not share their documentation with archival institutions or otherwise preserve that documentation and make it publicly accessible, there is a great chance that the (historical) information contained in those records will eventually get lost, not in the least because of the gradual destruction of the paper, photographs, faxes printed on thermal paper, and audio and VHS tapes.

⁴ See the section on methodology in Miškovska Kajevska (2014, 2017), as well as the interview which I gave to the Croatian website VoxFeminae in 2015: <https://voxfeminae.net/pravednost/kako-sacuvati-knjiznice-i-arhive-feministickih-organizacija/>

In closing, I would like to state that all those insights have inspired me to not only encourage others to share their archives, but to personally put my money where my mouth is and share with the Blinken OSA my collection of press items on the Belgrade and Zagreb feminist activism. I am also prompted to think further about the ways in which the information on important – albeit not necessarily widely recognised – instances of activism can be preserved and made publicly accessible, especially in countries where the official archives might not have the resources and/or the interest to do so, or might be even hostile towards the contents, as in the case of LGBT+, pro-choice, and post-conflict reconciliation activism. Finally, I feel motivated, too, to reflect more upon the ways in which progressive archival institutions with a human rights component, as the Blinken OSA, can be more proactive in collecting documentation on human rights breaches and the related activist efforts, such as the sexual violence in the (post-)Yugoslav wars and the corresponding feminist mobilisation.

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