

STAŠA ZAJOVIC



The war and women in Serbia:

Patriarchy, language, and national myth

The militarisation of former Yugoslavia has meant the imposition of military values, symbols, and militaristic language; a cult of necrophilia (expressed in slogans such as "the frontiers of Serbia are where Serbs are buried"); and the acceptance of political and moral totalitarianism. Along with these ideological shifts has come a rigid separation of masculine and feminine roles — in short, woman as mother and man as warrior — and the political marginalisation of women. Belgrade feminist STAŠA ZAJOVIC comments on how language, ideology, and power have been used to control women and reinforce nationalist mythology.

Th h t h

security") terms. The structures of militarised power now insist that the birthrate must grow so that the nation might defend itself in military conflict with other people.

And women are to be blamed for any shortfall in this sacred mission: "I call upon all Serbian women to give birth to one more son in order to carry out their national debt" stated one politician. Another, Rada Trajkovic of the Association of Kosovo Serbs, was even more explicit in viewing mothers' sons as cannon fodder: "For each soldier fallen in the war against Slovenia [June 1991] Serbian women must give birth to 100 more sons".

Political pimps

The manipulation of women by the military establishment began some time ago, but the clearest examples are found in the rallies held by the "Women's Movement for Yugoslavia" (linked to the pro-military parties, and formed in 1990 I F b 1991 h f

tenegro in October 1991; "We raise the voice of protest against the private war which those in charge are making from their offices. They have sent their sons out of the country and on to the tennis courts, while our sons carry on being carried by force to the front and to their graves. We demand that these demented leaders, politicians, and members of the military resign immediately in order to save this country."

Women as soldiers

An increase in the numbers of women in the army is no indicator of sexual equality, least of all where there has been no corresponding democratisation of society. There are women in all the militias and national armies now active in former Yugoslavia, appropriating the most brutal patriarchal values.

Women members of the Serbian militias in Croatia do not occupy important positions in the military hierarchy. The frontline is for the men; the knidze or f

of death, vitality in place of destruction. Stana Pavic, an elderly refugee from a Serbian village in Croatia, told me that "we women ... should have united like them [the military] — we could have made a peace accord in no time at all."

The mothers' movement

With the end of the war in Slovenia in early July 1991, human rights — above all, the right to life — lay in ruins throughout Yugoslavia. In such a situation, women burst on to the political scene, demanding the right to live. On 2 July, a parliamentary session in Belgrade was interrupted by several hundred parents, mostly conscripts' mothers. This was the first civil society initiative against the war in the federal capital, and the first to protest against the abuse of women's reproductive work by the state, nation, army, and party. "Men are the controllers of the war and of our sons. We do not give them permission to push our sons forward to kill o noth "

Ideological shifts has come a rigid separation of masculine and feminine roles — in short, woman as mother and man as warrior — and the political marginalisation of women. Belgrade feminist STASA ZAJCIVIC comments on how language, ideology, and power have been used to control women and reinforce nationalist mythology.

Throughout the postwar period, concern over women's social condition in Serbia and Yugoslavia has been reduced to an obsession with keeping up the working-class birthrate.

As nationalism replaced class struggle as the basis of political discourse in Serbia, this obsession with reproduction was transferred to the nation. With the 1987 "anti-bureaucratic revolution" [led by Slobodan Milosevic] a strange sort of sisterhood began to show itself on the streets. Huge crowds throughout the country shouted "we want arms" — in a sort of collective trance, united in hate and the desire for vengeance for Serbia's "offended nationhood".

In tandem with the cult of blood and soil, the new Serbian nationalists also summoned to life the symbolic mediaeval figure of *mother Jugovich* — the long-suffering, brave, stoic mother of nine, offering her children up to death in the defense of the fatherland. Maternity is now to be seen as an obligation, not as a free option for women; the sexuality of women has to be controlled and reduced to procreation.

Kosova: the demographic counter-revolution

Serbia's demographic slump has been described as "one of the greatest tragedies of the Serbian people" in particular in light of the "demographic counter-revolution" — the perceived threat posed by the Albanian women of Kosova province, who have the highest fecundity rate in Europe.

Serbian repression in Kosova has as one of its objectives a reversal of this demographic gap. This has been seen in increasingly militarist (or "national

explicit in viewing mothers' sons as cannon fodder: "For each soldier fallen in the war against Slovenia [June 1991] Serbian women must give birth to 100 more sons".

Political pimps

The manipulation of women by the military establishment began some time ago; but the clearest examples are found in the rallies held by the "Women's Movement for Yugoslavia" (linked to the pro-military parties, and formed in 1990. In February 1991 the women of this movement publicly lent their support to the JNA, saying that they considered it the only force capable of saving the country. The women have been used; the military hierarchy carried out the function of "political pimp", putting women on the street to give their approval to ends which are contrary to women's own interests.

Before the massive wave of mobilisation for civil war, there were warnings in some parts of the country — such as Montenegro, known for its martial traditions — that men should be prepared to give up their lives for the fatherland and that anything less would be a blow to their masculine dignity. Men were expected to follow national tradition, whereby "in war not one Montenegrin man can be protected by a woman".

One parliamentarian stated that "we in Montenegro believe that a man who is fighting at the front and allows himself to be hauled back home by a woman should commit suicide at once." This perception that women were preventing men from fulfilling their national duty was reinforced in radio broadcasts from the Dubrovnik front, in which a high proportion of Montenegrins were involved. Soldiers would send greetings to their fathers, brothers, and male friends, but not to their wives or girlfriends.

Rejecting manipulation

Happily, the number of men who wish to free themselves from this macho war culture is growing, and more are not ashamed of being protected by their mothers, wives, and sisters. A committee of women was formed in Mont-

Women as soldiers

An increase in the numbers of women in the army is no indicator of sexual equality, least of all where there has been no corresponding democratisation of society. There are women in all the militias and national armies now active in former Yugoslavia, appropriating the most brutal patriarchal values.

Women members of the Serbian militias in Croatia do not occupy important positions in the military hierarchy. The frontline is for the men; the *kuclze* or female militia, in the words of one member "occupy the administrative jobs, communication services, health, stores. We are simply replacing the boys who have gone into combat. But we too have passed the military entrance exam and we can help the boys at any moment."

A small number of Croatian and Serbian women fighters have gone to the front and have been rapidly converted into mythical figures, confirming what patriarchal history teaches us: that women enter history only when they have taken on masculine roles. The media celebrate these women as heroines when they kill the enemy; when women fighters from the other side are captured they are denounced as "monstrous women" and the like.

The first female battalion of the war was established in Glina, a Serbian-majority town in Croatia annexed to the Serbian autonomous region in December 1991. Members took the oath "we will fight against all of the Serbs' enemies under the protection of God" and heard male officers declare sentiments like "if our mothers should not have been heroines, they would not have given birth to such valiant children."

Patriotic women also fight on the "home front", of course. In Belgrade, women knit socks and gather winter clothing to keep the boys at the front warm. The pro-government media fawn on every evidence of maternal mobilisation, at the same time ridiculing the work of women in the anti-war committees and centres.

We feel it is clear that the majority of women are on the side of peace. They are convinced that they can offer the historical female alternative; non-violence in place of violence, life in place

tion, women burst on to the political scene, demanding the right to live. On 2 July, a parliamentary session in Belgrade was interrupted by several hundred parents, mostly conscripts' mothers. This was the first civil society initiative against the war in the federal capital, and the first to protest against the abuse of women's reproductive work by the state, nation, army, and party. "Men are the controllers of the war and of our sons. We do not give them permission to push our sons forward to kill one another."

As a result, the very role — reproduction — which marginalises women in their private lives has had the effect of converting them into active participants in the political life of the nation. So the patriarchal divide between the personal and the political is weakened; the personal has become the political in this war. The mothers' movement has contained all the ingredients for a militarist's nightmare!

On the other hand, the mothers' movement has been subject to different types of manipulation by political structures. A part of the mothers' movement has been used — both in Serbia and Croatia — for patriotic propaganda. It is easy to exploit the sentiments of mothers whose sons' lives are in danger. The soldiers' mothers at times feel confused, internalising the struggle between the "patriotic" sentiment which underlies official propaganda and the desire to save their own sons.

Yugoslav women have been linked together in a feminist network since 1987; they have managed to maintain solidarity and plan joint activities ever since, rejecting the conditions that support policies of divide and rule. Over the past four months normal communication has been almost impossible, with the cutting of telephone lines, post, and transport between the republics. In spite of such practical obstacles, feminists — Serbians, Albanians, Croatians, Slovenians, Hungarians, and Montenegrins — are united in organising against the war. Joint and simultaneous protests, such as the weekly "Women in Black" demonstrations, are a product of this unity of purpose.

Translated to Spanish by the author; translated from Spanish by Juliet Howard