

"Woman" in the Service of National Identity

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*by Julie Mertus**

INTRODUCTION¹

Close your eyes and imagine a woman from ex-Yugoslavia.² What does she look like? Is she haggard, hollow-eyed, despondent, babushka-clad with baby in tow, lugging water, dodging bullets in the streets of Sarejevo, weeping uncontrollably over the death of her son/husband/father/child, consoled by a kindly old gentleman?

We all know what the women of ex-Yugoslavia look like because CNN tells us so.

Yet women hold prominent posts in nearly every nongovernmental organization in the ex-Yugoslavia — from peace organizations, to human rights groups, to pro-intervention groups. Although this phenomenon holds true around the world, the presence of women in ex-Yugoslavia is particularly pronounced. After all, so many of the men are fighting, dead, subsisting in concentration camps and/or drunk, dazed and confused.

Where are the pictures of the women of the ex-Yugoslavia as lawyers, doctors, academics, journalists, leaders?³ When in the ex-Yugoslavia, I run

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1. This introduction is drawn in part from Julie Mertus, *Woman Warriors*, THE VILLAGE VOICE, Oct. 5, 1993, at 20.

2. "Yugoslav" and "Yugoslavia" refer to the self-proclaimed Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the union of Serbia (including the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo) and Montenegro. Although claiming successor status to the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has not been officially recognized as a successor state. Still, the current Yugoslavian state's declaration that it wishes to be recognized as a successor state implies that it is willing to accede to international agreements to which the former Yugoslavia was a party. For a general statement on the duties of successor states, see RESTATEMENT OF THE FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES § 208 (1986).

3. A major exception is an article about women soldiers by Chuck Sudetic, *In Sarajevo, War Also Means Battles of the Sexes*, N.Y. TIMES, June 6, 1993, §1, at 12.

into women activists at every turn. Why can't journalists seem to find them?

Maybe journalists are just lazy; perhaps they simply regurgitate what the state feeds them. Maybe they try to write stories about women activists, but their editors instead plaster stories of women victims across their front pages to increase circulation. Headlines screaming "Rape/Death Camps" sell papers;⁴ headlines announcing "Women Organize for Themselves" are thought to turn readers away. Journalists soon learn the formula to creating a "good story:" exploit differences, ignore similarities, and sensationalize the plight of victims.

Regardless of the ultimate intentions of journalists and editors, their myopic focus on victims ultimately harms women.⁵ By excluding images of women as activists, the media conspires with other power brokers who seek to use real and imagined "Woman" to suit their own needs. In particular, journalists play into the hand of nationalists who eagerly use this mythical Woman to build and empower their own nation. In the context of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia, this essay examines the use of women by nation builders and the crucial role of the media in the process.

I. A WORD ON TERMINOLOGY AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THIS DISCUSSION

Any discussion of nation building should recognize that there are many nations and no single privileged narrative of either "nation" or "nationalism."⁶ A discussion of the process of defining nation and nationalisms must be left to a longer text, but suffice it to say, "nationalism is neither inherently reactionary nor inherently progressive."⁷ Rather, like gender:

4. See, e.g., MS., July/Aug. 1993 (announcing Catherine MacKinnon's story on "Rape/Death Camps" with a blaring headline encompassing the entire front cover, gasping "Exclusive," and using red lettering for the word "Death," designed apparently to look like blood).

5. For a discussion of the making and impact of local propaganda, see Petar Luković, *Media and War: Yugoslavia, The Mirror of Hatred*, in YUGOSLAVIA: COLLAPSE, WAR, CRIMES 73 (Sonja Biserko ed., 1993) (limited edition book published by the Centre for Anti-War Action & Association of Independent Intellectuals "Belgrade Circle") (copy on file with author).

6. See *Introduction: Narrating the Nation*, in NATION AND NARRATION 1 (Homi K. Bhabha ed., 1990).

7. ANDREW PARKER ET AL., *Introduction to NATIONALISMS AND SEXUALITIES* 5 (1992). In an earlier paper, I argued that:

Nationalist discourse is incompatible with feminist visions of equality, since "nationhood" is an artificially created means to an end, and that "end" is gaining power over the imagined "Other." Those with least power already are asked to sacrifice their identity to the state imagination, for furtherance of the national interest. Nationalist struggles thus are antithetical to empowerment of diverse groups, not merely because they demand conformity and create a faux homogeneity, but because their very foundation is built on the backs of the disempowered.

[N]ationality is a relational term whose identity derives from its inherence in a system of differences. In the same way that 'man' and 'woman' define themselves reciprocally (though never symmetrically), national identity is determined not on the basis of its own intrinsic properties but as a function of what it (presumably) is not.⁸

"Nationalism can only be analyzed concretely, on the basis of a specific historical, social and political situation."⁹ Nevertheless, while recognizing that no essential attributes of nationalism exist across all cultures and over all time, general characteristics of nation building can be identified.

In a circular fashion, commentators frequently point to a composite of fundamental aspects of national identity which purportedly define the nation itself. The trick lies in determining which aspects of identity are fundamental. For Anthony Smith, a "nation is a named human population, sharing historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members."¹⁰ Ernest Gellner recognizes a somewhat different combination of aspects of identity which can combine to tie a community of people into a nation: language, religion, history, territory, cultural practices, values, historical myths and loyalties.¹¹ On the other hand, Benedict Anderson steers clear of listing attributes of national identity, defining the nation instead as "an imagined political community" which is "inherently limited and sovereign."¹² To Anderson, "the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" — in his words: a "fraternity."¹³

Noticeably absent in these and other commonly proposed definitions of nation is the recognition that all of the proposed aspects of national identity are gendered¹⁴ — i.e., that there is a gender component to everything from

Julie Mertus, *Nationalism and the Use of Women's Bodies* (presented at Columbia University Feminist Legal Theory Conference (March 1993) (available from author). I now, however, acknowledge that in practice feminisms can also be power hungry, exploitative and imperialistic. Moreover, I realize that the important distinction is between chosen and prescribed engendered national identities, not between bad nationalism and good feminisms.

8. Julie Mertus, *Nationalism and the Use of Women's Bodies*, *supra* note 7.

9. Vesna Pešić, *Nationalism, War and Disintegration of Communist Federations: The Yugoslav Case*, in YUGOSLAVIA: COLLAPSE, WAR, CRIMES, *supra* note 5, at 37.

10. ANTHONY D. SMITH, *NATIONAL IDENTITY* 14 (1991).

11. ERNEST GELLNER, *NATIONS AND NATIONALISM* 7 (1983).

12. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM* 6 (1991).

13. *Id.* at 7.

14. See Anne McClintock, "No Longer in A Future Heaven": *Women and Nationalism in South Africa*, *TRANSITION* 51, 104 (1991) ("All nationalisms are gendered").

the creation and perpetuation of shared myths¹⁵ to the establishment of common boundaries, to Anderson's imagined fraternity. Furthermore, wholly apart from lists of attributes, gender itself plays a crucial role in the defining of a nation. Women, for example, provide the blood-line that determines citizenship in many nations. In the national folklore of most nations women are the procreators, the symbol of the motherland, the political victims, and not the political actors.¹⁶

This essay examines the role that representations of women play in a particular kind of engendered nationalisms — engendered nationalisms imposed in haste and by force. It does not deal with engendered nationalisms as lived cultural identities, nor as identities that unfold gradually over time.¹⁷ And, to the extent that identities can be "chosen" by the Powerless¹⁸ (for example, as survival mechanisms),¹⁹ this essay does not address chosen identities, but those prescribed from above by the Powerful. In other words, this essay is concerned about "state nationalism," not so-called "nationalism from below."²⁰

15. For example, when Anthony Smith recognizes that the "myths and memories" of the "dominant ethnic" help create the "presumed boundaries" of the nation, he fails to note both that the process is a gendered one and that the myths may also contain a substantive gender component. SMITH, *supra* note 10, at 14.

16. See, e.g., Geraldine Heng & Jandas Devan, *State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore*, in NATIONALISMS AND SEXUALITIES, *supra* note 7, at 349.

17. Some have also argued that nationalism is an "incurable phenomena," a "universal characteristic of social life." See Pešić, *supra* note 9, at 53; Michael Walzer, *The New Tribalism*, DISSENT, Spring 1992, at 164.

18. I adopt Vaclav Havel's term. See generally VACLAV HAVEL ET AL., *THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS: CITIZENS AGAINST THE STATE IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE* (1985).

19. Use of the term "choice" is always problematic when those in power manipulate the conditions under which decisions are made to such an extent that no range of choices is truly "free." However, use of the word "choice" is important as it recognizes when people are not only the subject but also the agent of their lives, thus granting them the dignity of rising out of the "victim" status.

For example, in constructing their path of resistance to virulent Serbian nationalism which feeds on oppression of all non-Serbs but particularly that of Albanians, the Albanians of Kosovo have cultivated a unique Kosovar Albanian identity which serves both as a mechanism for survival and a force that unites them against a greater power. This identity, which places a premium on "dignity," "solidarity," "self-education," the cultivation of safe "private spaces," and "self control," resembles yet is distinct from that of Albanians living elsewhere. At the same time, the identity of Kosovian Albanians differs from that of others who are oppressed elsewhere in the Balkans, such as the Muslims of Bosnia. Unlike the instant, deadly force used against Muslims in Bosnia, the suffocating tactics employed against the Kosovian Albanians have given them time to choose tools for resistance and to create a society rooted in a strategy for resisting oppression. See JULIE MERTUS & VLATKA MIHALIC, *OPEN WOUNDS: HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN KOSOVO* (1994). (These observations come from a larger work in progress by the author.)

20. See Andjelka Milić, *Women and Nationalism in the Former Yugoslavia*, in GENDER POLITICS AND POST-COMMUNISM: REFLECTIONS FROM EASTERN EUROPE AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION 109, 110 (Nanette Funk & Magda Mueller eds., 1993) [hereinafter Funk &

The women of Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Slovenia, Macedonia . . . Mars . . . could decide on their own components of national identity. They could call themselves whatever they want — the "nation of women," the "nation of Bosnian women," the "nation of Balkan women," the "nation of Yugoslav women" (defined in whatever terms they choose), etc. They can act consciously in defining themselves or, through their actions and reactions, they can unfold their list of attributes of national identity gradually, as a form of resistance. No matter what approach women take, they, like other disempowered groups, will not be seen by those in power to present a legitimate alternative national identity. For example, as Julie Mostov has noted,

A person of Serbian "descent" who rejects the national identity crafted by the leaders of the Serbian community and wishes to participate in politics as an individual or through a civic party or broad coalition, does not present an alternative Serbian or civic identity. She is merely a traitor to the nation, characterized in the media as a self-hater or collaborator with the enemy.²¹

Many people in the former Yugoslavia — men and women alike — have indeed rejected their government's vision of their national identity.²² Some have held steadfast to a vision of a Yugoslavian national identity, others have put forth another alternative national identity (such as a multi-ethnic Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian identity) and still others have rejected the notion of national identity altogether.²³ Feminist and anti-war groups

Mueller]. In the context of Yugoslavia, Milić defines "nationalism from below" as "patriotism, which spontaneously emerged as resistance to foreign fascist occupation, but also as a result of the working majority's discontent with their previous social status in society." *Id.* In contrast, "state nationalism" is a phenomena "which bore down with all its might on the vacated social, ideological, and political arena." *Id.*

21. Julie Mostov, *Democracy and the Politics of National Identity*, in YUGOSLAVIA: COLLAPSE, WAR, CRIMES, *supra* note 5, at 13, 21. Mostov notes that "members of the peace movement in Serbia are good examples." *Id.*

22. For a discussion of such groups in Croatia, see JULIE MERTUS & RACHAEL PINE, *MEETING THE HEALTH NEEDS OF WOMEN SURVIVORS OF THE BALKAN CONFLICT* (1993) (report available through The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, 120 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005). A short list of such groups in Serbia includes the following: Women in Black, the Belgrade Women's Center, Arkadia (gay and lesbian group), SOS Rape Crisis Center for Women, SOS Rape Crisis Center for Girls, the Humanitarian Law Fund (independent human rights law group), Civic Forum, Belgrade Circle, the Belgrade Anti-War Center. (Source: authors' own work with such organizations). See also Jill Benderly, *Bosnia: No Place to Hide — No Place to Run: The Balkanization of Women's Bodies*, ON THE ISSUES, Summer 1993, at 40, 42 (listing women's groups active on the issue of rape in war); C. Carr, *Battle Scars: Feminism and Nationalism Clash in the Balkans*, THE VILLAGE VOICE, July 13, 1993, at 25 (discussing nationalist conflicts among women's groups in the Balkans.)

23. Observation from author's contacts with women from throughout the former Yugoslavia.

in particular have made an effort "not to slip into [the] trap of historical inclusion" in nationalism.²⁴ While not discounting these extremely important forms of rebellion and resistance, this essay focuses solely on the Powerful's use of women in the building of national identity.

II. BUILDING NATIONAL IDENTITIES: GENERAL ELEMENTS

A primary task of nationalists is building the national identity. If a society were homogeneous — sharing a common language, culture, history and tradition — the task would be easy. But no society is perfectly homogeneous. Thus, a sorting process must occur to establish who is inside and who is outside the nation. This task of convincing people that they "naturally" lie inside or outside a nation becomes a particularly difficult one when discrete, homogeneous groupings are not easily identifiable — due to intermarriage and changing boundaries, for example.

Given their multi-ethnic composition²⁵ and history of changing borders, the quest for nationhood by communities of the former Yugoslavia "requires both an integrative process of 'nation-building' and an authenticating process establishing the 'natural' or ancient roots of the national community."²⁶

Where history exists already, national leaders exploit and manipulate its telling; where history doesn't suffice, nation builders turn to myth and outright lies. As Yael Tamir has noted, there is a "compulsive tendency to 'go back' to the ancestral origins of new nations, clinging to even the faintest evidence of historical continuity and supporting blatantly false claims in order to 'prove' that the nation's roots lie in the distant past . . ."²⁷

24. Daša Duhaček, *Women's Time in the Former Yugoslavia*, in Funk & Mueller, *supra* note 20, at 131, 135. Duhaček notes that "[i]f successful, they would meet one of Kristeva's criteria for the second generation of feminists, namely, 'the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time.'" *Id.* (quoting Julia Kristeva, *Women's Time*, in THE KRISTEVA READER 195 (Toril Moi ed., 1986)).

25. Only Slovenia has a practically homogeneous population. Before the war, governmental statistics found that non-Croats accounted for 23% of the population in Croatia; non-Serbs 36% of the population in Serbia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Muslims accounted for 43.7%, Serbs 31.3%, and Croats 17.3% of the population. Pešić, *supra* note 9, at 39 n.3.

26. Mostov, *supra* note 21, at 33. Mostov makes this observation with regard to Eastern Europe in general.

27. Yael Tamir, *The Right to National Self-Determination*, 58 SOC. RES., 565, 572 (Fall 1991, No. 3). See also Hedva Ben-Israel, *Nationalism in Historical Perspective*, 45 J. INT'L AFF. 391 (Winter 1992) ("Such concepts as the shame of assimilation, the glory of national sacrifice, the continuity of heroic lives and the everlasting value of 'authentic' cultural treasures are the stock-in-trade of nationalist vocabulary . . . the folklore is mined, the archives are raided and feelings are stirred — to build up the emotional ecstasy and ethnic cohesiveness . . .").

In war time, national folklorism gains added importance. Ivan Čolović has observed that in sending their people off to war, leaders achieve "a collective symbolic integration" by the strategy of "war-propaganda mythologism (myth-making)."²⁸ He explains:

This time, the trick is to present the war as something eternal, that is, to transfer the conflict from the sphere of politics, economics, and history to the otherworldly sphere of myth. For the Serbs, the war in Croatia is but another episode in the eternal battle against their mythical enemies.²⁹

Integral to the fantasy of forced national unity, in war or peace, is the process of essentializing difference:

In [the nation], differences are assimilated, destroyed, or assigned to ghettos, to enclaves demarcated by boundaries so sharp that they enable the nation to acknowledge the apparently singular and clearly fenced-off differences within itself, while simultaneously reaffirming the privileged homogeneity of the rest, as well as the difference between itself and what lies over its frontiers.³⁰

The underbelly of nationalisms imposed from above achieves identification by creating and crushing an "oppositional other"³¹ — an essentialized "Other" defined by its very difference to oneself.

It is through this process of creating an Other, Edward Said observes, that one comes to think of oneself as "not-foreign."³² When the line between the members of the nation and the Other is in fact a blurry one (such as when there are mixed marriages, desegregated communities, varied migration patterns, and common languages and traditions — as in Bosnia, for example), nation builders take extra pain to create threatening differences. In this case, the "Other" becomes "The Enemy."

While all leaders in the former Yugoslavia have employed this process,³³ Serbian President Slobodan Milošević is a particularly brilliant

28. Ivan Čolović, *The Propaganda of War: Its Strategies*, in YUGOSLAVIA: COLLAPSE, WAR, CRIMES, *supra* note 5, at 115, 117.

29. *Id.*

30. Khachig Tololyan, *The Nation-State and Its Others*, DIASPORA, Spring 1991, at 6.

31. See JOAN COCKS, *THE OPPOSITIONAL IMAGINATION* (1989).

32. EDWARD W. SAID, *ORIENTALISM* 54 (1978).

33. Although less skillfully, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman responded with his own selective presentations of myth and history. Several commentators have remarked that Yugoslavia switched gears from communism to nationalism with remarkable speed. Anđjelka Milić explains this phenomenon as follows:

Although unexpected, the switch to nationalism by former communist parties seems logical because the distance between the communist collectivist ideology, based on such concepts as "the working class," "the class interest," and "the class enemy," and the nationalist collective ideology, based on such concepts as