

Zitierhinweis

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Ana Miškovska Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War. Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s*, New York, Milton Park: Routledge 2017, 186 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-69768-3, Hardback £ 105.00, E-book £ 35.99

The monograph *Feminist Activism at War* is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, which was defended at the University of Amsterdam in 2014 and received the 2015 Gender and Politics PhD Prize of the European Consortium for Political Research, leading to its publication. The result is indeed a praise-worthy volume due to its methodological rigour, comparative perspective, and innovative insights into a sensitive topic of research, namely the relationship between feminist activism and nationalism during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The book compares 'the positionings, i.e. discourses and activities, of the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists which were related to the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia (the NATO bombing of Serbia and the war in Kosovo)' (2). Feminist activists took a variety of standpoints in the course of the multiple interrelated conflicts that characterised the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation. This volume has the merit of carefully reconstructing a wide array of contested decisions and debates, as well as the various shifts in feminist stances that occurred with the unfolding of the conflict.

The author did not shy away from engaging with existing dynamics of knowledge production; not only she tackled a field already extensively covered by the feminist literature on the Yugoslav wars, but she also dealt with the 'extensive presence of recurring information, which has been uncritically referenced from the same few older works without being checked against information from new research' (3).

To verify the soundness of existing interpretations, Miškovska Kajevska engaged in extensive data collection, sifting through archival documentation and conducting 48 interviews with prominent and less prominent figures involved in the feminist movements of the 1990s in Belgrade and Zagreb (with a few external respondents from other former Yugoslav settings). Due to the emotionally-laden character of the issues at stake, the author shared interview transcripts for authorisation and adopted a complex anonymisation system to respect the privacy of her narrators. This results in an increased focus on processes of political identification, which succeeds in highlighting the intersections of 'the biographical and the structural/historical' — as the author defines them — while at the same time avoiding the personalisation of specific views and opinions.

The main argument of the book, in fact, is that political positionings were not fixed, but shifted in relation to the unfolding conflict as well as in relation to other factors of social and political differentiation, such as prewar symbolic capital, class belonging, and feminist NGOs' struggle for legitimacy and resources vis-à-vis the international community. The main political division among self-ascribed antinationalist feminists and so-called 'nationalist' feminists in both Belgrade and Zagreb is something that has been taken for granted in the existing local and international literature, strongly biased in favour of the antinationalist stance. The author cautions against such normative labelling, striving to provide the space for the women's voices who were represented as 'nationalist' in the course of the war and in its aftermath.

The book is divided into six chapters. After the first introductory chapter on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the research, the second

chapter gives an historical overview of feminist war-related activism in the 1990s. The chapter describes the different feminist groups in great detail, including less known organisations, and explores issues of overlapping agendas and membership as well as political divides that gave rise to new feminist formations. This chapter represents a lucid account of the creation of feminist NGOs in 1990s Zagreb and Belgrade. It also pays attention to the legacy of pre-existing 1980s feminist activism, emphasising the connections between the last decade of the socialist regime and the early years after the break-up of Yugoslavia. The vast transnational literature on feminist activism during the Yugoslav wars is analysed in chapter three of the monograph, which critically questions its limitations, categorisations and biases. The first problematic issue is the predominance of the antinationalist perspective, and the missing voices of so-called 'nationalist' feminists. Other limitations in the scholarship include the lack of analysis of post-1995 developments (especially concerning the NATO bombing of 1999), and the silence related to divides between 'nationalist' and antinationalist feminists in Serbia, as opposed to similar, widely-researched divides in Croatia. The author points at mechanisms of overgeneralisation, oversimplification, and geographical homogenisation, which gloss over the differences and specificities of feminist dynamics in Zagreb and Belgrade.

In the following chapter, nine historical episodes are sketched that are considered paradigmatic for 'intra-feminist dynamics': from the Third Yugoslav Feminist Gathering of 1990, which proved contentious due to alleged nationalist divides, to various meetings that had occurred in the course of the war in the region and abroad. The chapter highlights the struggle for legiti-

macy between local 'nationalist' and antinationalist feminists vis-à-vis international donors and feminist activists from abroad, who were also caught in some of these divides. This was especially prevalent when it came to discussion of wartime sexual violence, as in the notorious case of U.S. feminist Catherine MacKinnon. The author also investigates the evolution of the relations between Zagreb's and Belgrade's antinationalist feminists, which were not devoid of misunderstanding despite the fact that their respective groups formally shared a common antiwar standpoint. The chapter furthermore provides a rebalancing of sources by paying attention to the under-researched development of feminist alliances and divides in Belgrade, especially as a result of the NATO bombing and the Kosovo war.

The reader is then presented with the ways in which 'nationalist' and antinationalist feminists in Belgrade and Zagreb reflected upon the period of the 1990s from the perspective of 2009—when the majority of interviews were carried out. The author unveils feminist narrators' ambivalences and silences, for instance concerning the case of the Zagrebian antinationalist feminist who spent two months on the battleground in Croatia in the early stages of the war. While the significance of an intra-feminist divide over nationalism was acknowledged in Zagreb, tensions between 'nationalist' and antinationalist feminists were glossed over by Belgradian narrators—showing once again the specificity of each context. Finally, the concluding chapter reflects upon the findings of the volume and its significance for studies of feminism, nationalism, and conflict. Miškovksa Kajevska argues that the different patterns of political identification in the two cities are ultimately due to 'the power of violence to constitute new meanings', as well as to

'pre-war variations in capital among the feminists in each city and the accompanying struggle for legitimacy' (178). Stressing the emotional character of issues of nationalism and war, the author advocates ethical awareness in the process of data collection, and also the possibility of 'Slow Science', in order to foster processes of critical interaction with one's research subjects.

The book's sober and critical approach towards the pre-existing literature and the collected empirical data highlights the

importance of self-scrutiny and reflexivity when dealing with processes of naming and labelling, which are always relational and have the power to shape reality in times of political polarisation. *Feminist Activism at War* is an extremely useful compendium, not only for those readers interested in post-Yugoslav gender and feminist history, but also for those striving to understand the complexity of political identification in conflict and postconflict settings.

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