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War, Nationalism, and Rape: Women Respond by Opening a Centre Against Sexual Violence in Belgrade, Serbia

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REPORT

WAR, NATIONALISM, AND RAPE Women Respond by Opening a Centre Against Sexual Violence in Belgrade, Serbia

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On 10 December 1993, International Human Rights Day, The Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence opened in Belgrade, Serbia.¹ Plans for the Centre started in 1992 when women from the Belgrade SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence formed The Group for Women Raped in War. Funding from Würde für Frauen und Kinder in Switzerland enabled them to purchase a flat which serves as a gathering place for meetings, counselling sessions, and the distribution of humanitarian aid.

The founders of the Centre conceptualised and are carrying out their work as a form of political resistance to sexism, nationalism, and militarism. The women at the Centre want to organise and respond to rape on all levels, from the emotional level of each woman, to the political level of rape in war as a tool for ethnic cleansing. For the women of the Centre, although rape can take many forms and purposes, it is primarily a product of sexism.

Probably the most outstanding characteristic of the act of rape is that it is almost exclusively committed by men against women. For this reason we consider rape a political act: an act committed by one group or class of people against another. We do not see it as an individual problem, but as a problem shared by all women.²

The political position of the Centre is non-nationalist and to be of and for women of all

nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. The goal of the women at the Centre is to appreciate that nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation are differences among women, but not to allow those differences to divide them. The staff is a mix of these different identities and includes refugees from Sarajevo, Bosnia. Many of the staff are also active in the antiwar group Women In Black which has been protesting in the Federal Square every week for over 2 years.

Although originally planned and organised for women raped in war, the Centre's mission quickly broadened to include all women who are raped or sexually abused, whether from war zones or local neighbourhoods. During its first 6 months the Centre saw 65 women survivors of rape or attempted rape.³ They found war rape survivors in hospitals where they went for abortions or to delivery babies. They have helped refugees from Bosnia, a few of whom have joined the staff of the Centre. They routinely see women from the maternity ward of the Belgrade orphanage, where pregnant, single women rejected by their families go to give birth. Almost one-half of these women become pregnant from rape or were in relationships with violent men. They receive calls for help from women whose daughters are being sexually abused in the family. They are also in contact with a shelter in Bologna for women trafficked to Italy for use in prostitution. They help the women return home safely.

During the summer of 1994 a team of four certified rape counsellors from the United States went to Belgrade to provide technical assistance to the Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence.⁴ For 2 weeks we talked, ate, and lived with the women of the Centre. We presented workshops on the following topics: organisation and administration of rape crisis centres, feminist perspective on healing, communication and reflective listening skills, battering, incest, rape trauma syndrome, groups for children, teenage and adult survivors of sexual assault/abuse, sexual assault prevention for teenagers, women's health, prostitution, and sexual exploitation. In addition to group workshops individual meetings and counselling sessions were held at the request of women from the Centre. Women from the cities of Nis and Kraljevo in Kosovo and Skopje, Macedonia, and from the organizations SOS Hotline, The Centre for Girls, The Centre for Anti-War Action, The Centre for Women's Studies Research and Communication, Women In Black, Arkadia (a lesbian and gay advocacy group), and Hi Neighbour (a program for refugees) also attended the presentations and workshops.

As the only women's centre in the city, many women turn to the Centre in search of other types of assistance. The devastation of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia has left many women destitute. Some of the women are refugees, others are local women impoverished by the failing economy. The impact of the international sanctions against Serbia for its aggression in former Yugoslavia often falls heaviest on the women and children. While we were there one ton of food and basic necessities were deliv-

ered to the Centre. Women immediately started arriving to pick them up.

Additional projects of the Centre include, but are not limited to, providing self-employment materials, such as wool for knitting, to women in refugee camps; arranging for the care and adoption of a small number of children orphaned by the war; providing material and emotional support to women living in cities under siege, such as Sarajevo, and distributing medicine to refugees and survivors of violence.

Since the Centre opened, its work has expanded into many projects as they attempt to meet the needs of women and children. In the future they hope to be able to return their focus to sexual violence.

ENDNOTES

1. The address of The Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence is Tirsova 5a, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, Yugoslavia. Telephone: 38 111 645 328. Fax: 38 111 645 798.
2. *Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence* (1993/1994, Belgrade). This document outlines the need for, the mission, political approach, organization, and initiatives of the Centre. A copy is on file with the authors.
3. Stojanović, Slavica, and Mladjenović, Lepa (1994, May/June). *Working in the time of war: Between politics and humanitarian work — Our first six months*. Belgrade: The Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence. A copy is on file with the authors.
4. The team members were Donna Hughes, University of Bradford, UK; Kathleen Foster, State College, PA; Kathryn Geller Myers, Pine Grove, PA; and Patricia Harrington, State College, PA. All members are certified rape counselors and have experience staffing hotlines and counseling survivors of sexual assault/abuse and battering.