

Women in War

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AAUW Educational Foundation Symposium,
International Perspectives: Global voices for Gender Equity
Washington D.C. USA

November 16th, 2002

If you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country... in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolfe: Three Guineas (1938), Oxford University Press, 2000, p.313

I would like to present a few considerations on the role of women in wars in recent history and today, comment on their systematic misrepresentation in order to put forward the idea that systematically collecting women's narratives in contemporary conflicts may be an essential part of long-term peace-keeping strategies. The daily distortion of facts by media causes permanent damage to the fragile cause of women's rights in the developing world.

I will start with a brief history of the stereotypes of women and war in European representations and confront them with the reality they do not depict, then follow up with some lesser known aspects of women's fate during World War II, especially during the Siege of Leningrad and the Holocaust and see how they are relevant in analyzing contemporary situations. I shall dwell on my own field work in wartime Sarajevo and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, especially where RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) is present.

This paper is based on research I am conducting at the EHESS and a book on Women and War to be published in Paris by Flammarion. I have to add that my research in anthropology is based on direct humanitarian aid: from 1993 onwards I was involved in Sarajevo, starting an NGO called 'Enfants de Bosnie' where I worked directly and consistently during the siege with women living in a suburb of Sarajevo called Dobrinja. After the war and in more recent years, I started another NGO, FemAid and I work with RAWA the only feminist group in Afghanistan. So if the historical part of this paper is based on theory and research, the rest comes from direct experience, revisited by a more academic perspective.

From stereotype to reality

Throughout history, the role of women in wars has been sized down to fit a few dominant stereotypes, created by dominant politics to fit into a self-justifying historical construction, in which some aspects have been recurring for centuries, indeed millennia.

On one side stands the valiant male warrior, on the other hovers the child as absolute martyr, women being portrayed as being little more than overgrown casualties made infantile in their helplessness. The most senseless violence in history has been undertaken under the generally fraudulent excuse of defending women and children from supposed attack.

This means that woman is doubly the victim of a dual mode of domination: by the enemy but also by the soldier who is meant to defend her. Throughout wars, women have to be subjected to untold suffering which must remain silent, inflicted upon them by males running the war. Domestic rape in Serbia, for instance, was exceptionally high during the war, as if soldiers needed to act out their violence at home watching news about war on TV was frequently sufficient motivation to unleash some spectators' anger on their wives.¹ However frequent this occurrence in every war zone, it is deemed unpatriotic to protest about such seemingly trivial matters: a

¹ See the excellent MA Thesis by Mia Sidran: Underlying social causes for Domestic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Univ. Sarajevo, 2002

submissive female body is the warrior's just reward on his triumphal return home, however savage, however drunk and crazed by killing.² No police has ever been known to sympathise with such rape cases in war zones. Another virtually ignored feature in this wartime domestic sector is the growing numbers of violent incidents by enraged young men against their own mothers.³

Sadly, no sense of solidarity amongst women emerged across ex-Yugoslavia, with the modest exception of intellectual feminist groups such as Women in Black in Belgrade, BaBe in Zagreb and Zene Zenema in Sarajevo. For legal reasons entrenched in custom women stand by their husbands and their sons first and foremost.⁴ The opposite is not necessarily true, especially if these selfsame women have been raped by enemy soldiers and are therefore perceived as having dishonoured the whole group.

On rare occasions, there emerges some kind of authorized female heroine, who puts up a valiant fight against some male force, but who is obligatorily vanquished: think of Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, Budicca, queen of the ancient Britons or Joan of Arc. Virginal Joan of Arc figures are acceptable, being in the mould of those chaste goddesses such as Diana or Pallas-Athene, born, as you will remember from her father's skull. Of course, there are many instances of women as warriors, from the Biblical Deborah onwards, and that includes female gladiators in Ancient Rome, medieval queens replacing their husbands, Japanese 'bushi' fighters, counterparts to the samurai but these valiant ladies are usually left out of text-book history. French resistants are nowadays allowed into official history books, but not those women who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto or in Auschwitz for reasons we shall return to later.

Generally, all these admittedly heroic women have been perceived as amusing, more decorative versions of their male counterparts. Their specificity as women, the special qualities they might have applied to their way of dealing with war generally have not been considered. In many ways, the female warriors in contemporary films, mangas and video-games take up this stereotype. From *Barbarella* to *Matrix*, even in Madonna's latest video-clip, a hybrid human being is presented, some kind of male fighter with aggressively female anatomical details, phallic females in fact, fighting the way men do, but without the gore, as deliberate blood letting is a male privilege, as opposed to the cyclical, non-controlled female bleeding.⁵ Nevertheless, women who fight wars without violence are never shown, even though they are the veritable heroines, as we will see.

In these representations, fighters both male and female are there to defend the absolute mother, represented as some kind of entirely brainless queen bee whose sole task is to procreate and limit herself to carrying out her biological destiny. At her most respected, she is the mother of a male god (Horus or Christ) and as such she can

² This is not limited to Serbia and appears to take place in many war zones, including Afghanistan - a subject which would warrant further research world-wide.

³ Martha Walsh: *Aftermath: The Impact of Conflict on Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Center for Development and Evaluation, Working Paper No. 302. Washington: USA Agency for International Development, 2001, pp. 9, quoted by Mia Sidran, op. cit.p.4

⁴ Because marriage in most parts of the world entails abandonment of community of birth and total identification with the husband's clan who henceforth 'owns' any children she might produce. In the most of the West, the transfer of ownership of women's sexuality is symbolized by the change of surname and the giving up of the 'maiden' name.

⁵ This stereotype originates in Ancient China and Japan, especially with the medieval 'bushi' women who belonged to a fighters' clan, but nevertheless were subservient to their men. They were armed with a naginata, which enabled them to fight at a distance and use their agility rather than brute force. Indeed it could be argued that much of traditional martial arts is based on manipulating physical skills which are not primarily characteristic of male physiology, strength and blood-letting. Could one therefore extrapolate that these much-hallowed martial arts (Tai-Chi, Kung-Fu especially) may have some kind of female, if not obviously feminine, origin? I leave this potentially controversial subject for others to research.

reign in heaven. The mother figure has been adopted, since the French revolution to represent the 19th century republic fertile in potential canon fodder - the culmination of which was reached by Vichy France with the national motto 'Travail, famille, patrie'. Indeed the growth of nationalism and nation states has been to drive assorted parental figures - motherlands (including the Mother of the Nation figure in Serbia and Croatia) and fatherlands - at each other's throats in the purported defence of their national brood. The ensuing militarization is always accompanied by a reduction of women's status to biological function and increased gender violence. Since World War One, a generic Mother-as-Victim has been used as a symbol of the grieving nation, the statutory robust counterpart to her fallen male companion, lying at her feet. Ever since, commemorative war monuments tend to portray this kind of figure, the Soviet Union is filled with muscular versions of Mater Dolorosa: having lost her brood, she is left to mourn for all eternity because she is denied access to any function outside motherhood.

One of the dangers of these stereotypes is that women themselves have been led to believe in them, which goes a long way in explaining how reactionary politics get voted in by women. If women have been conditioned to think as themselves as purely biological enterprises which are socially useful, they may well vote for a government that reassures them in this function: this is how Hitler got into power. 90% of women in what became Nazi Germany voted him in as chancellor in 1933. The educated, modernist determined woman emerging in the 1920s in the Weimar Republic was made to appear primarily threatening to other women, especially those in less urban surroundings. The German activist Rosa Luxemburg summarized all the evils of Jewishness for Hitler.

As a result, instead of divisions based on a class structure, Nazi society was cleft into a male Vs. a female world, joined only in procreating Aryan warriors and battery-wombs for the Thousand Year Reich. By the same token, Jewish women were biologically targeted by the Nazi regime as it was their fertility, their capacity to reproduce more Jews that it sought to destroy.

This division of society on sexual lines inevitably leads to war, especially if it is based on some quasi-religious ethic. It is on the increase today, especially in Muslim countries caught into an Islamization process, where gender violence has become legally sanctioned. Hence the danger of the elections that have just taken place in Morocco and Turkey and will in all probability lead to the total take-over of civil society by the most reactionary fundamentalist forces, gradually replacing any civil institutions by religious law, the Sharia. Reactionary politicians have used their proximity to the West to present feminism - even in the sense of what we deem basic women's rights - as one of the guises of evil modernity designed to undermine traditional society - and therefore the reality of the rural women voters. The AKP (Justice and Development)'s main measure for women in Istanbul since the November 3rd elections has been to reinstate the veil, prohibited by previous staunchly secular governments, with devious reference to Western democratic multiculturalism.⁶ It may not be politically correct nowadays to criticize openly what is presented as a right to traditional religious values⁷, but surely this posture of apparent respect helps fundamentalists worm their way into power. I am aware of how difficult it is to voice any criticism of the Muslim world and not appear to be condoning US politics in the region in the context of a growing and most deplorable Islamophobia. One does not necessarily entail the other, and I think our seemingly polite, albeit embarrassed, PC si-

⁶ Namely AKP's deputy premier Abdullah Gul wondering with grandiloquent candor about why Turkish girls are allowed to wear a headscarf to university in Washington London Paris and Berlin and not in Istanbul - see W. Horsley, BBC New, November 4th 2002 /news. bbc. co. uk/1/hi/world/europe/2223787.stm

⁷ This is especially the case in France where any cultural manifestation that is anti-Eurocentric (and therefore anti-USA, anti-Israel borderlining anti-Semitism) is deemed "tout à fait génial"....

lence is completely irresponsible and detrimental to women abused on a daily basis by Fundamentalists.⁸

Urban wars and the home front

Behind these stereotypes stands a reality that has frequently been misrepresented.

For a start the business of war itself has generally been presented as being men's veritable business. This is certainly true on the battle-field, but that is not where the main brunt of wars is felt. The principal confrontations take place in cities and are targeted against civilian populations. We are moving towards an increasingly recurring situation where you have well-armed, well-fed soldiers on one side confronting starving, unarmed civilians.

Besieged cities have come, just by their names to represent whole epochs, entire wars. The very mention of Beyrouth, Sarajevo, Grozny and today Kabul conjures up the essence of war and destruction.

In siege situations, cities are generally held by women as men are on the battle-front, even though it is never officially stated. It is my conviction that wars are actually won not on the battle-field but by women holding the fort in the meantime. Certainly if the Germans had captured Stalingrad, the outcome of World War II would have been different. But ultimately, what would have happened if women had not survived in the siege in Stalingrad, in Leningrad or indeed Sarajevo. Today in Grozny, the Russian army and local guerilla groups are certainly fighting, but it is the women trapped in the city, trying to bring up their children and build even an imaginary future for them that keep life going.

It is this unique quality of survival that truly deserves further examination. This is generally known as the 'home front' a vastly underestimated subject, generally reduced to a few anecdotes about making-do with minimum provisions: those of my generation were brought up with stories of our mothers or women of their generation in wartime Europe painting seams on each other's legs in lieu of stockings or making soup with potato peel, and then going to work in the munitions factories to replace the men. Little did we know that it was precisely these creative imaginative efforts that really helped the whole civilian population to survive, far more than the shells these women produced.

Learning from women's experiences in World War II

I would like to bring up two examples of detrimental misrepresentation both taken from World War II to see how they enlighten us on what is going on today: the Nazi death camps and the Siege of Leningrad. Despite the frequent comparisons bandied about in assorted political propaganda, nothing can truly be compared to the Nazi genocidal programme during the Holocaust. And however bad things were in Sarajevo, few modern war conditions compare with the unspeakable ordeal the people of Leningrad went through. Although things do not appear to improve much on our planets, some things are not quite as bad as they were: public executions are no longer the norm in every European city square, although public hangings, stoning and shooting are not unknown in some parts of the world.⁹ Some minimal humanitarian aid is sent to just about to every war zone, even if local corruption stops it from actually getting to where it's needed - starvation is always the result of politics. Having said that, no historic event is sacred, and there are many lessons to be drawn

⁸ For an admirable critique of the dangers of Western postmodernism thinking, see Haideh Moghissi: *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Oxford University Press, Karachi 2000

⁹ These include North Korea, Rwanda, Uganda, Saudi Arabia, China, Thailand, Afghanistan (under the present so-called 'moderate' Islamic government). There is an ongoing debate in the USA about the possibility of public executions - shown on a special TV channel, which seems to appeal to a significant number of potential viewers.

from past experiences and relevant constructive comparisons to be made, especially in the much undocumented field of women's survival strategies in extreme conditions.

Women and the Holocaust

Until recently,¹⁰ most perspectives on the Holocaust have been gender-neutral, the male experience being deemed the generic one. Yet even though men and women ultimately ended up in front of firing squads and in gas chambers, the way they were systematically tortured until they were murdered is directly linked to the fact that they were women. It is strange how history takes their sacrifice for granted. Janusz Korczak who ran the orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto has been frequently lauded for having chosen to march into the gas chamber with the orphans he had in his care, even though the Nazis had offered to spare him. Yet countless unremembered young mothers who could have been selected to survive as slave labourers went to the gas chambers clutching their babies rather than abandoning them. Mothers are rarely perceived as war heroes.

In a way that is unique in history, the Nazis were after the biological existence of Jewish women, in a way which mirrors in a negative manner the way they treated Aryan women. Rape, enforced sterility, abortions, killing of babies, sexual abuse of the most horrific kind became part of a system, indeed a standardised eugenic practice. It has been very difficult for women to talk about these experiences, especially as after the war, even in Israel survivors were often accused of having traded sex for survival with Nazis. As one of them wrote "The Anne Franks who survived rape don't write their stories"¹¹. Nowadays, some writers have tried to document the experiences of women raped in Bosnia and Kosovo, women who bear the guilt of having, albeit unwittingly, been the instrument of their families dishonour and for this reason have been totally rejected by their husbands - and sometimes encouraged to commit suicide. This is the case for so many women who have experience rape in developing countries at war, especially those where the Sharia is the legal system - but until their narratives are collected locally, by local history or sociology students rather than foreign researchers, these women will be victims not only of rape but a silence enforced by socially enforced guilt. It is only by systematically reporting on these crimes in the places where they take place that raped women can hope to recover their dignity and their reintegration into society.

There were heroines in Nazi concentration camps extraordinary women like the Belgian Mala Zimetbaum who escaped from Auschwitz with her Polish lover only to be caught and hung - slapping the Nazi officer as the noose was put round her neck. Yet, Zimetbaum is practically unknown outside specialized circles, unlike French resistants such as Marie-Paule Vaillant-Couturier or Lucie Aubrac. The reason lies perhaps in the fact that the very notion of Jewish resistance goes against the trope about the statutory passivity that supposedly led six million passive persons to slaughter like sheep. Furthermore, openly acknowledging Jewish resistance highlights the fact they were refused help by the Allies and other resistants in Europe (France and Poland especially)- something the West has still to own up.¹²The legendary French resistance has a lot to be ashamed about, but such considerations are still taboo in France.

¹⁰ The great pioneer of feminist research on the Holocaust has been Joan Ringelheim, Director of the Department of Oral Research Institute of United States Holocaust Museum, Washington.

¹¹ Judiith Isaacson: *Seed of Sarah, Memoirs of a Survivor*, Urbana university of Illinois Press, 1990, pp. 144-5

¹² In Israel, unlike everywhere else, the Holocaust is mainly commemorated through the Jewish resistants: but this is also done to help build and consolidate the Zionist ethic. See Ronit Lentin: *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah*, Berghahn Books, New York 2000

Even less has been said about the unique strategies of resistance women showed in the Nazi death camps. The key to survival was the re-creation of surrogate families when they had been separated from their own. The Nazis endeavoured to remove every scrap of humanity from their victims: by shaving heads and bodies, tattooing a number on their arm, giving out prisoners outfits or random clothes, the trappings of civilization were forcibly removed. A modicum of cleanliness and health became a moral issue and a true act of resistance, women helped each other to sustain their dignity; mutual solidarity meant the sharing of meagre resources within the recomposed family unit - something which was not frequent on the male side. Group solidarity and maintaining self-respect are the ultimate form of resistance in extreme conditions - and yet they have never been given adequate recognition.

Care and Cleanliness as a mode of resistance

During the siege of Sarajevo, women took the greatest care about their appearance, wearing high heels and make-up whenever possible to defy the Serb snipers keeping deadly watch on them – indeed I was criticized more than once for looking so ‘unlady-like’ jeans and sneakers! That’s when I decide in to include in the convoys I organized via the ‘Enfants de Bosnie’ NGO sanitary towels and make-up, toiletries, underwear because I realized that in wartime, these were instruments of resistance, not just superfluous items. There again, humanitarian aid has to be rethought in truly practical terms in order to be of constructive use.

Everywhere women try to ‘keep up appearances’ and this is a form of resistance which has truly long-term effects, even though it is not recognized. Keeping children from being totally filthy, - cleaning the space where they sleep are sometimes colossal feats even today. In December 2001, I visited the notorious Jalozei Afghan camp in Pakistan. Despite the money that was supposedly poured in, women lived in the most appalling conditions imaginable, in tiny makeshift tents with little access to water or food. The possibilities of personalizing the space or keeping a home were truly minimal, but in front of some tents, a couple of bricks marked the entrance to a space that had been deliberately differentiated from the wild outside. A scrap of fabric might decorate the mattress - and what appear to be details to us represent major steps in trying to create a minimal haven for a family, some simulation of a home to help them survive with a measure of dignity. And this indeed constitutes a true act of defiance against a process of dehumanization.

Women in the Siege of Leningrad and other siege situations

Another example of striking under-representation is the siege of Leningrad, known as the longest European siege in History as it lasted some 900 days.

The Soviet city was threatened on all sides by the Nazis and their Finnish allies, but just as bad was hunger. The city was officially run by an envoy of Stalin in charge of the food distribution. Indeed resources had been bungled so that the city found itself, at the beginning of the siege with two weeks provisions for the entire population. Naturally Soviet historians have never dwelt on the incompetence and mismanagement by the male and female nomenklatura, sheer corruption that ended up with death by starvation for most of the population. On some days, six thousand corpses per day littered the frozen streets and acts of cannibalism did take place. That was the appalling winter of 1942, when the rations were reduced to 125 grams of bread per day. These were the days before humanitarian aid. Women’s memoirs are full of war-time recipes, where scraps of leather were used as meat and wall paper chewed because the glue had a potato starch base and lipsticks eaten. Although things were bad in Sarajevo, people were not reduced to that extremity. In all war conditions tobacco, coffee, alcohol are the most precious and most expensive of goods and the ubiquitous dealers and black marketers always make sure that a privileged class manages to eat well whilst others starve.

Leningrad was truly a city of women. Women had replaced men in factories, but also dug trenches and fortifications. This was less of a surprise than in the rest of Europe, because through Communism women had accessed a number of hitherto male working places, from road building to the echelons of the NKVD and the Soviet establishment.¹³ This was also to be the case of Sarajevo, something which considerably helped the quality of survival within the city. Doctors and teachers were frequently women's professions and these professional women managed to save countless lives in besieged Leningrad and later Sarajevo.¹⁴

The day to day strategies of survival are described in the women's writings in Leningrad and needs to be documented in future histories of war. By spelling out some of these facts, naming people the writers manage to give their global horrific fate a measure of individuality and also to detach themselves sufficiently to observe and remember. Oral memory, from fairy tales to sagas, tribal and family histories are what women the world over transmit to their children and their grand children, all the more so in war conditions.

Women's narratives during World War II often read like diaries. The household group, the family unit are the most important, so for instance birthdays are remembered, celebrated in unforgettable ways that sustain all those who partake in them. The wildly imaginative cooking and sewing take on an extended social purpose, because all this goes towards the survival of the group as a whole through love and caring, thereby indenting the monotonous passage of time with rituals and celebrations. The same thing happened in Sarajevo, and grand-mothers were reinstated into positions of power as they knew how to make do without electricity and also knew about plants and ancient ways of cooking and healing, using the experience of the previous war. Indeed grand-mothers are the unsung heroes of many wars!

To summarize, in these siege situations, women had reinvented time according to peacetime criteria in order to preserve values and prepare the period that will follow war. Just as in the wartime Jewish ghettos in Poland and in the camp of Theresienstadt, some kind of schooling was continued for children, educational and cultural activities organised for children and adults in the name of humanity and civilisation to be salvaged at all costs in the midst of inhuman war conditions.

I have found similar priorities in Afghan refugee camps where RAWA is present. It could be said that refugee camps have much in common with besieged cities as they represent largely female communities, victims of war, surrounded by a hostile environment having to survive in sometimes desperate circumstances. RAWA has put together all kinds of activities from women, from literacy classes to sewing studios which have allowed women to regain their dignity.

In another refugee camp, a transit camp for refugees I visited in September 2002 in Sarajevo, UNHCR had put up a canteen for its inmates, cooking in fact was prohibited. This has had the effect of totally destabilizing the women there, mostly peasants, who have nothing to do and have been deprived of their nurturing role central to their sense of self.¹⁵

¹³ It is only very recently that some such research has been undertaken (Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina: *Writing the Siege of Leningrad*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Future wars in post-Communist countries today taken over by reactionary regimes will not have this advantage: the future of all of ex-Yugoslavia certainly looks bleak in this respect: it is unlikely that girls will be able to afford long studies in countries where hard-earned women's rights are being challenged on a daily basis and universities have been privatized.

¹⁵ This only logical explanation is that this may be in keeping with some unwritten policy (not untypical of UNHCR practice) to discourage people from staying on - even if they have nowhere to go as their homes are now in the Serb entity

Censorship of women's wartime narratives

In the Soviet Era, thousands upon thousands of books were printed on the subject, in some periods one a day, but none specifically about women.

A number of wartime memoirs were indeed published individually by women, but they rarely stress their experience as women, even though the specific aspects of their experience unwittingly emerge from the writing, especially the strong ties of solidarity and mutual help. There are a number of aspects in common with Holocaust writings, namely that the male experience is held to be the paradigm of all suffering. As in concentration camps, men's memoirs seem to concentrate on the individual experience whereas women's on the more collective.

One may wonder why these women's tales have been so long shunned. For a start the notion of a 'home front' has been met with condescension: nothing is deemed so serious as the male business of war. Furthermore, in the case of Leningrad, many of these writings did contain implicit criticism of the Soviet system as incarnated by Stalin and administration: most of the intelligenzia had seen abuses of the nomenklatura, women on the higher echelons parading in furs, defending their privileges tooth and nail. Some of these memoirs were published much later or not at all as indeed women such as Lydia Ginzburg or Olga Freidenberg - novelist Boris Pasternak's cousin - seem to be as much afraid of repression coming from Stalin and the NKVD: as intellectual Jewish women they had already been through the purges of 1937 which had eliminated a great number of Jewish idealists many of whom, as purist Communists, had fought for Lenin's ideals. These women had known discrimination on three fronts, as intellectuals they were suspected of belonging to the dreaded middle-classes, as Jews they were suspect in a primarily anti-semitic age, as thinking women in the midst of a war they were practically considered as traitors. They were aware that their narratives contrasted strongly with the propaganda produced by establishment men and women who had only praise for Stalin's management of the siege. Indeed, Leningrad's archives were massively censored in the Fifties for this reason and countless documents have disappeared. If French resistance heroines have been celebrated, it is because this well-publicized acclaim has helped France to obscure the more unsavoury part of their history, namely the massive and well-oiled collaboration with Nazi Germany.

And today, what has happened to women's dissident voices? There are all kinds of reasons for which history is immediately re-written to suit politics. In the Balkans, the international peace-making strategies have just about forbidden any mention of the Serb aggression in order to apparently stop future animosity. But how long is systematic censorship likely to contain a truly explosive situation. The once heroic women of Sarajevo are scrambling today for survival. With the break-down of the Communist regime and uncontrolled rodeo-capitalism in the context of an Islamic-friendly government, women's lives and experiences have been completely devalued in Bosnia and indeed all over ex-Yugoslavia. Women who soldiered on without eating or adequate medication throughout the war, started developing galloping cancers after the war. Indeed if their narratives were published, they would cause public embarrassment of the most constructive kind.

And if the women of Afghanistan were encouraged to describe their trials and tribulations over the past 25 years, a more critical perspective would certainly emerge. It is certain that the economic causes of these wars would have been much more widely denounced, taking the lead from RAWA who has never ceased to criticize politics in Afghanistan and their world-wide implications. Energy interests and control of narcotics production and distribution are at the back of all the wars in the region and many other parts of the world (including the so-called 'war against terrorism' be it American or Russian, and the concomitant Fundamentalist renewal). They have never benefited civilian populations of the producing regions where hu-

man rights are going steadily downhill, especially for women. These wars are conducted for the sole benefit of war lords and the global superpowers who run our planet like megacorporations. Women in Afghanistan, Iran, the former Russian republics in the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, Yemen, Irak, North Africa, Turkey, the Balkans, most of Latin America to name just a few, know they have everything to loose but who, at the world's Board of Directors will take their stifled protests into account ?

Home front Amazons during the siege of Sarajevo

Until now, I have drawn parallels between World War II situations and contemporary wars. There are some aspects of the siege of Sarajevo which are unique. One of the most interesting aspects is the feminization of urban space. My humanitarian activities and subsequent research took place in Dobrinja, a suburb 12 km away from the city centre and directly on the front line, a tiny space two km by two km, but surrounded by snipers on each side. Here the Civil Defence – a structure put in place by the Communist regime - was entirely run by women, whilst military commanders looked after military issues. These formidable women most of whom were highly educated looked after food distribution, health issues, education, entertainment, the city generally. They had children of their own, but had decided to stay on in the city with their families.

Cities are transformed during a war, urban values are turned inside out: flats with large bay windows looking towards the countryside, which are the most valuable normally are deemed the most dangerous in a war, where airless hovels in courtyards are become real-estate nuggets. Everything has to be rethought in terms of security and accessibility, and at the same time, the sniper's point of view has to be perpetually born in mind.

The Civil Defence managed to control things in an exceptional manner. The result was a spotless area where every resource was used and recycled. Barricades were built with refrigerator doors and shattered cars, gardens were protected by now defunct radiators, experimental hot-houses were erected on sheltered balconies. In brief, the most inventive methods were used to help life continue: schooling was organized in basements and garages and the level achieved in what was the most dangerous part of Sarajevo was higher than anywhere else in the city. In fact, women had transformed city space into some kind of domestic space, the whole of Dobrinja had turned into a collective home for all its population.¹⁶

Sadly none of this has been documented outside my own research. I have been trying to set up a research until within the University of Sarajevo, but this is proving very difficult because of the local indifference to the war and especially women's issues - even with women themselves today. Everyone is busy trying to survive in a ruthless society and I have even heard some people reminisce in a sentimental way about the wartime solidarity they have lost.

RAWA

Through out this paper, you have been hearing about RAWA, this most extraordinary group of Afghan women who have been fighting various forms of oppression in their country for the best part of 25 years in the name of a democratic secular society which they appear to be the only ones to actively defend.

¹⁶ Which is why I subtitled by initial research 'the Amazons of the Kuca' the amazons of the home

see C. Mann: La resistance des femmes durant le si ge de Sarajevo: les Amazones de la kuca, DEA, EHESS, Paris 2000.

I have tried to put their work in a historical context to show that their success is the product of understanding the society and the situations they act upon.

This independent group of determined women have put in place programmes aimed primarily at helping impoverished women in Afghanistan, a total war zone, especially in Taliban times. Education is a priority for RAWA, and despite the apparent changes in government, literacy classes for women are still all too essential. So-called 'liberated' Afghanistan, put in place by the United States just like their Taliban predecessors, is anything but democratic as we have sadly come to realize.

RAWA helps run a refugee camp in the Peshawar area: they have gradually infiltrated all the aspects of the organisation of this camp, whilst appearing to leave the official male structure intact. The result is a unique refugee camp where women can not only walk about unveiled (practically unheard of in this tribal Pathan region) but access education, work, proper health care - as well as seeing the local imam for any problem requiring exorcism if they chose to do so. RAWA leaves them the option and does not dictate them their choices.

Revolutionary feminism in a society like Afghanistan - and anywhere else on the subcontinent - is about teaching women to read, write and gradually develop a critical perspective, which is why RAWA is ultimately perceived as being so controversial, even and especially by the (not so) new government (including the rare women who gravitate round it), where Sharia is the legal system, as in Taliban times. RAWA's is an inordinately difficult task in a society steeped in patriarchal hatred where women are routinely stoned to death. Indeed those who oppose women's rights are well aware of the potential consequences of even the mildest feminist reform for themselves.

Here as in other cases - Berlin in the 30s, Leningrad in the 40s and 50s, Sarajevo or Kabul today, the threat as well as the promise is recurrent, and takes the guise of a pacifist educated woman who challenges the established order and refuses to limit her life to biological circumstance (even though she may well have children of her own) but wants to share her new found freedom with her sisters and her daughters.

For further details about RAWA, please turn to their website www.rawa.org as well as mine www.femaid.org, where you will also find information about projects we are working on together.

Conclusion: archiving women's wartime narratives

In my experience, women are victims of peace as they are of war. They are immediately forgotten in the post-war and their experience is shelved. It seems to me essential to help train future historians and sociologists in war zones to record experiences of women, an important step which could change the way society has been thinking about war. It is of the greatest importance that records be kept about the different forms of women's victimization but also survival strategies and resistance. Their recognition would entail a far greater participation of women in Defence Ministries world wide and set up valid peace education programmes.

Resistance comes in many guises: there are flamboyant acts of valour which save whole groups of people or courageously denounce injustice¹⁷. Then come the more modest acts of defiance, so easily forgotten. Through caring and nurturing, women throughout wars have kept their families, real or surrogate aim at a positive future and helped them prepare for a post-war existence, whilst coping courageously with desperate situations. Nettle soup, jelly from boiled leather tongs, champagne from fermented rice, straw hats with paper flowers, homes from mud and refuse, a salvaged shawl for a door, a doll made of twigs, all these and many more constitute true acts of resistance which have far more long-term effects than the daily killings in senseless wars.

A two-fold action is necessary. First of all, it must be possible to set up research units in every university where 'Women in War' would be a recognized subject - just like Gay or Multicultural Studies today. Secondly, universities in war zones could train - with international academic collaborators - students of history, anthropology and sociology, to interview and record women's experiences in their own zone, in their own language in order to create an archive. These archives would then be systematically pooled and their access made available worldwide by Internet.

All wishing to discuss this with me further, please contact me at cmann@femaid.org

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¹⁷ Young girls (Palestinian or Chechen terrorists) who have been indoctrinated to kill themselves and a large group of others as human bombs do not fit into this category.