Bombs Away!
Feminists Theorize NATO

BY ANNE McGRATH

Ce papier examine les débats féministes sur les femmes et la guerre sous l'angle des réactions aux bombardements ordonnés par la NATO dans l'ex-Yougoslavie.

Recent events in Kosovo have highlighted the fact that women are not united in their approach to issues of war and peace. With reference to this conflict, I intend to outline some of the issues concerning the gender differences in support for war, including the impact of war on women and women's roles in war. A discussion of women's actions for peace, and the divided reaction to the recent conflict in Kosovo illustrate some of the feminist debates about women and war. Feminist reactions to the NATO-led bombing of sections of the former Yugoslavia in April 1999 underscores the variety of approaches feminists take to issues of war and peace.

My own interest in this topic lies in the ambivalence I felt about the war in its initial stages and the decision-making I went through to arrive at a position. Although my political stance has always been to oppose war in general there have been instances of armed revolutionary struggle where I was supportive of the need to take up arms against an oppressive and authoritarian regime. My opposition to war has almost always been rooted in my political positions and not, I believe, in my biological makeup. In the case of Kosovo, a number of issues converged to make it difficult to immediately see what was happening. While I don't claim to know now what is going on, I have worked through some of the overlay of issues to sort out a reaction to the current conflict. In the 1980s, when the peace movement in Canada and around the world was particularly active, I was part of some of the major marches and rallies organized against nuclear arms buildup. However, while many of my colleagues in the peace movement lost sleep over their fear of nuclear war, I was always more frightened of the threat of fascism. To this day, I worry more about fascism and the ever-present encroachment of neoconser-vatism than other possible calamities and upheavals. So, the sight of Serbian forces engaging in what appeared to be a genocidal campaign against ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo elicited a response from me that was initially quite supportive of the notion of using heavy military intervention to stop genocide. However, as the first days passed and I watched with horror the actions of the NATO forces and reflected on the NATO record in the world, I had second thoughts. I soon concluded, although not easily, that this exercise was more about the survival and future of NATO and U.S. opposition and undermining of the United Nations than about a desire to protect a defenceless and oppressed people from genocide. Feminist discussions on the Policy, Advocacy, Research List Serve (PAR-L) reflect much of this process and also the differences that exist among feminists about women and war.

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Feminist differences about women's relationship to violence and armed conflict are rooted in the disparate feminist theoretical perspectives. Several feminist scholars have attempted to delineate the different feminisms into such categories as liberal, radical, and socialist feminism (Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail). Many have broadened and extended the categories to include cultural, postmodernist, post-structuralist, standpoint, psychoanalytic, and so forth (Jaggar; Elliot; Mandell). Although I love theory and find it fascinating to read about the various feminist theoretical positions such discussions may not be particularly useful in this context. I have never met a non-academic feminist who defined herself as a post-structuralist feminist. At the same time, I reject the notion of unmodified feminism (Ruddick 1989, 1998; McKinnon) because feminism does not exist in a vacuum and feminists are not always purely interested in gender to the exclusion of all other considerations. In her article "Woman of Peace" Sara Ruddick points out that:

> Most people who are feminists under any general definition of the term also have other, some-

times more primary, political allegiances and identities that "modify" or "hyphenate" their feminism. There are capitalist and socialist feminists, for example, and feminists who would never separate their feminist from their national or ethnic or religious identity. (1998: 214-215)

Particular feminist positions about war and peace are shaped by these modifications. Race, class, gender, and political belief all intersect to shape the political standpoint of most feminists. Therefore, it is no more possible to uncategorically state a feminist position on a particular conflict than it is to state a women's position.

This does not mean, however, that there is not widespread recognition among feminists about the impact of war and the preparation for war on women. The shift in this century to civilian populations as the main victims of war has horrific implications for women. Women experience war as direct casualties, as war refugees, as victims of wartime sexual violence, and as victims of wartime domestic violence. They experience loss of family, loss of work, loss of community, loss of social structure, environmental destruction, and the impact of military spending (Turpin). Events in the former Yugoslavia have drawn worldwide attention to the issue of genocidal rape and feminist attempts to have rape specifically identified as a crime of war subject to prosecution in war crimes tribunals. Both rape and forced impregnation have been used by all parties in the ethnic conflicts over the past decade

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as part of a campaign of what is euphemistically known as "ethnic cleansing." Rape has been used as a weapon of war by all parties both historically and in contemporary conflicts. The terrorizing effect of rape on civilian and military women and the propertied aspect of violating the enemy's women and thereby acting against the property of the enemy men has been part of all armed conflicts (Copelon). There are clear links between the crime of rape in war and the everyday violence against women in general. Rhonda Copelon states,

> Emphasis on the gender dimension of rape in war is critical not only to surfacing women as full subjects of sexual violence in war, but also to recognizing the atrocity of rape in the time called peace. (75)

A particularly graphic impact of war on women has been evident in the current conflict in Kosovo. As the refugees streamed over the border it could not escape attention that the vast majority, as always, were women and children. Over 80 per cent of the world's refugees are women and children, a fact that is sometimes difficult to see with great clarity since countries such as Canada tend to accept more men than women as refugees (Morris). The images of war in Kosovo showed clearly the faces of women and children. What was less apparent was the fate of refugee women in overcrowded camps where sanitation is always questionable and mostly deplorable, food is scarce and highly commodified, and the location of facilities and resources require dangerous movement that leaves women open to attack within the camps.

A look at the roles of women in war must also take account of the various ways that women have participated in war as supporters. As the guardians of culture, and the biological and ideological reproducers of culture, women play important roles in support of military action. Women's work in production of munitions and other aspects of the war effort can be attributed not only to the expansion of women's ability to operate in the public sphere but also from a genuine desire to support the war effort and be fighters for the cause. Ilene Rose Feinman explores the rhetorical ground shared by feminist anti-militarists and right wing opponents of women's participation in the armed forces. She believes that, "the language of social conservatives and the language of feminist anti-militarists can, and has, dangerously converged over assigning the

martial to the male" (135). Many revolutionary resistance movements have benefited from women's aspirations for equality and hopes for new societies that include women as full actors.

When women organize as women to oppose war there are a variety of reasons given. Women's peace activism is most commonly linked, by both feminists and non-feminists, to maternalism. There are examples of women's peace organizing in both the mixed peace movements and also in gender-specific organizations and actions. The women's peace camps in Greenham Common and Seneca Falls are examples of peace actions that tried to incorporate certain aspects of feminist organizing and elucidate the notion of women, as women, struggling for peace. The concept of women's particular aspirations for peace was clearly linked to women's roles as mothers. Depending on the speaker, this was either a biological argument or a social constructionist argument but the links to motherhood were ubiquitous. The links between motherhood, parenting, and war always run head on into the usual discussions about women's roles as mothers and what this means for feminists theorizing about women and war. Sara Ruddick's description of women of peace is careful to point out, "In outlining the "figure of a *woman* of peace I make no quantitative, much less competitive comparisons between women's and men's peacefulness" (1998: 214). If women's roles as mothers are the defining feature of our propensity toward peace then we are too easily reduced to the same sexist stereotypes that exclude us from the public realm and deny us our capacity and right to operate as fully functioning human beings. The discourse around women's mothering roles and how this is constructed, both in support of war and in opposition to war, makes it clear that our capacity to bear children cannot be the defining aspect of women's relationship to war and peace.

Feminist debates about militarization and war focus on the question of how to mobilize women effectively to support peace and oppose war. The questions concerning why women are more likely to be supportive of peace tend to be glossed over. I believe that this is a mistake. If, in our desire to be active in support of peace, we ignore or even acquiesce to notions of women's innately peaceful nature, we are in danger of subverting our own goals. Because there is so much social support for an unconscious acceptance of women's natural support for peace and the links to motherhood, it is necessary for feminist peace activists to be conscious and explicit about these issues. Nancy Scheper Hughes describes ways that maternal thinking is used to both support and oppose war. The resignation of women who lose their children prematurely can produce an accommodation to violence and conflict. She argues that women's maternal role created no special predisposition to peace:

> ... it's simply not the case that men make wars and women make peace, or that mothering "naturally" opposes militarism. If that were so, mothers would raise sons to resist wars, and women would refuse to bury their war dead. But the experience of mothering can instead promote an accommodation of premature and violent death. Women have just as often used the moral claims of motherhood to launch campaigns to support war as they have to support peace. Motherhood is, of course, as social and as fluid a category as fatherhood. Only by intentional design, rather than by any natural predisposition, do women devote the thinking and practices of motherhood to peacekeeping and world repair rather than to war making and world destruction. (232-233)

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In the heat of an action for peace, and the honest desire to have an impact on public opinion, it is sometimes easy to allow the variety of perceptions that attribute women's peace activity to maternalism. There is often a desire to leave the effectiveness of women's peace action undiluted by clarifying statements about motivations that may not link clearly and decisively to motherhood (Feinman). Women's actions for peace do not usually play a role in disrupting the usual perceptions of gender. However, the act of speaking out in public space can be seen as a stepping out of traditional space for women (Peterson and Runyan).

In the case of the conflict in Kosovo, there was little danger of feminist actions being misconstrued. Indeed, the dearth of women's voices in the debate, at least in this part of the world, was marked. In a CBC Alberta province wide radio phone in show on Tuesday, April 13th, 1999 about the desirability of Canada sending in ground troops not one single woman called in. The cacophony of male voices was deafening. There is little doubt that feminists have a difficult time in determining any kind of unified position on this war. While it may be rare for there to ever be a unified feminist position on any issue, there is usually a fairly clear-cut opinion on major

issues. For instance, on the issue of equality rights guarantees in the constitution the only real disagreement is usually with respect to how much weight or importance should be given to legal and constitutional measures and the real or possible consequences of legal and constitutional reforms.

The media descriptions of genocide or "ethnic cleansing" horrified most Canadians. Feminists were no exceptions and the early tentative postings on PAR-L confirmed that the major issue was related to how to help the Kosovar refugees. There was initially no discussion of the NATO bombings or any questioning of the justification for the attacks. This was, I believe, because there was an underlying sense that this may indeed be a "just war," or a case where the use of military force was necessary and desirable. Sara Ruddick (1998) talks about the notion of a just war and possible feminist responses. She suggests that it is possible to promote peace and refuse to be drawn into any discussions about just wars. However, it seems that one of the reasons women were so obviously organized, as women, in opposition to the Gulf War and to the arms build up during the 1980s has to do with the absolute belief that the actions of military aggressors were without any justification. There was a strongly held belief among the women organizing for peace that the promotion and practice of war was totally unconscionable. In the case of Kosovo there was been no such clear cut and widely accepted belief.

The notion of just wars makes the case that there are particular circumstances under which it is acceptable for a war to be waged. Some of the pre-conditions for determining that a war is just include:

1) Just cause: just wars are defensive and not offensive. War is intended to protect the innocent.

2) Legitimate authority: wars can only be undertaken by those with the legislative, legal authority to declare war. In Canada this would be the House of Commons.

3) Right intention: the intention of war must be the restoration of rights to the injured party. The total destruction of the enemy is not the goal.

4) Last resort: there should be no other option but war. All other peaceful means should be exhausted.

5) Probability of success: the restoration of rights to the injured parties must be probable. The negative consequences of war must not outweigh the desired good.

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6) Just conduct: wars are intended to be fought between soldiers and civilians should not be targets. There are some restrictions on the types of weapons.

7) Proportionality: the good to be achieved must always outweigh the harm. The losing nation should not be completely vanquished in the terms of surrender (Fahey).

Despite the fact that the NATO led bombings in Kosovo do not in any way fit the descriptive criteria for a just war as outlined by Fahey and reiterated by Sara Ruddick (1998) the impression in the early stages was that this was a just war. Feminists were not alone in the perception that this might be a just war and the pressure from all quarters to paint this as an opportunity to reverse the mistakes that were made in previous genocidal conflicts and act decisively was strong. It is clear that when placed against the guidelines for what might be considered a just war that this bombing campaign did not come close to meeting the bar. Ruddick (1998) is clear that there are circumstances that would lead anti-militarist feminists to support particular war activities. She points to the existence of these criteria and suggests that criteria like these are part of the decision making that goes into such an evaluation of potential support.

Even as the world was horrified to hear of the media manipulation that created support for the war against Iraq, Marjaleena Repo points out that the shock wore off and another public relations firm was employed to turn world opinion against the Serbs. She quotes James Harff, director of the public relations firm Ruder Finn, who bragged of their success on French television in April 1993:

> Our challenge was to reverse this attitude and we succeeded masterfully. At the beginning of July 1992, New York *Newsday* came out with the article on Serb camps. We jumped at the opportunity immediately. We outwitted three big Jewish organizations.... That was a tremendous coup. When the Jewish organizations entered the game on the side of the [Muslim] Bosnians we could promptly equate the Serbs with the Nazis in the public mind. Nobody understood what was happening in Yugoslavia.... By a single move, we were able to present a simple story of good guys and bad guys which would hereafter play itself. We won by targeting the Jewish audience. Almost immediately there was a clear change of language in the press, with the use of words with high emotional content such as ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, etc, which evoke images of Nazi Germany and the gas chambers of Auschwitz. (Repo 2-3)

Repo goes on to recount other examples of the efforts of journalists and others to demonize the Serbian population and heighten support for what she characterizes as an unjust war against a sovereign nation. It is the contention of Repo, and others critical of the notion that this war was in any way humanitarian or just, that people of good will were duped into believing that this was a just war that fits the recognized criteria of just wars. Feminist debate on PAR-L indicates that this was the case in the early stages. Many feminists were hesitant to declare positions on this war as quickly as happened in the case of the Gulf War and other U.S. led interventions. The use of the terms genocide and ethnic cleansing were very effective in silencing opposition from the usual quarters. The very fact that every single political party in the House of Commons, in the absence of any parliamentary debate, was ready to declare support for Canadian participation, indicates the strength of the momentum to believe that this was, indeed, a just war. However, articles posted by both Judy Rebick and Colleen Burke challenged the media led campaign against the Serbs and pointed out the hypocrisy and the misinformation being fed to the public about the motivations and the necessity of this military campaign. A news release posted by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) on March 30th also challenged the official news and the Canadian government rhetoric and encouraged women to oppose the war. NAC President Joan Grant-Cummings points out that,

> History has proven how the impact of war on women and children is nothing short of devastating. The use of military weaponry will not only desecrate the country but will seriously damage the health of its people, resulting in high numbers of human casualties, first and foremost of women and children. (NAC)

She encourages Canada to pull out of NATO and pursue peaceful resolution through the United Nations. These three articles argue for women to take a position against the war. None of them refer in any way to women's maternal instincts or roles as an argument and, indeed, do not even leave an impression that this is a possibility.

Ironically, a key dissenter to the war was Barbara Amiel, a prominent right-wing opponent of feminism. Her position has been consistently in opposition to the military intervention in Kosovo. In her April 12th co-lumn in *Maclean's* magazine the headline reads, "Bombing Yugoslavia is wrong, wrong, wrong" (11). She states, "the NATO policy towards Ko-sovo embraces wilfull ignorance and tragedy" (11). Her argument is that the bombing of Kosovo creates victims on all sides and that this is the opposite of humane action to alleviate suffering. Amiel's opposition to the attack might also give pause to feminists who question the political standpoint of spokespersons like Amiel who represent the virulence of the anti-feminist backlash. Sometimes we wonder at the unlikely allies that emerge in particular struggles and have to struggle to be clear about our own political perspectives. We sometimes arrive at similar conclusions to our opponents. This does not mean that we should respond in a knee-jerk oppositional manner but rather that we focus on our own decision-making processes and explicitly state the bases for our reasoning.

In spite of the absence of feminist voices in the early stages of this war the first opinion polls to be released confirmed the recognized trend that women are more likely than men to oppose war. An April 10th article in the *Calgary Herald* reported on the results of a survey of 514 adults conducted by COMPAS Inc. on April 7th and 8th . The survey indicated overwhelming public support for the NATO intervention and strong support for the potential decision to accelerate the action and send in ground troops. The polling participants were unclear in their motivations for support. There seemed to be little consideration among supporters about whether this was or wasn't a just war. However, the survey does highlight the tendency for women and men to take different positions with respect to issues of war and peace. The article states,

> The survey showed a huge gender split in the strength of support for military intervention. Almost half of males strongly supported intervention, compared to fewer than a third of women. (Oneil A1)

The article does not speculate about the causes for this gender split. Feminist speculation, however, is critical to the strategic decisions we take about our role in the world.

The divisions among feminists about the impact of maternalism on our political positions is reflected in many parts of contemporary feminist organizing. Ann Snitow refers to these divisions as the "feminist divide." She describes these differences on a continuum of perspectives on the debate between equality and difference.

Equality feminists, often associated with liberal feminism, advocate sameness and the idea that men and women are equal. Eliminating barriers to full participation would pave the way to an equal world.

The difference feminists suggest that men and women are different in fundamental ways and that women's liberation is to be realized through a valorization of women's uniqueness. This side of the divide is usually associated with radical feminist philosophy. Snitow is quick to point out that this divide is not as clear and discrete as all that. Her emphasis on the commonalities feminists share and the fluidity of the positions women take, is important in the context of the debate about women's perspectives on peace:

> ... this decision can never feel solid or final. No one gets to stay firmly on her side; no one gets to rest in a reliably clear position. Mothers who believe their daughters should roam as free as men find themselves giving those daughters taxi fare, telling them not to talk to strangers, filling them with the lore of danger. Activists who want women to be very naughty (as the women in a little zap group we call No More Nice Girls want women to be) nonetheless warn them there's a price to pay for daring to defy men in public space. Even when a woman chooses which shoes she'll wear today—is it to be the running shoes, the flats, the spikes?—she's deciding where to place herself for the moment on the current possible spectrum of images of woman. Whatever our habitual positions on the divide, in daily life we travel back and forth, or, to change metaphors, we scramble for whatever toehold we can. (64)

This tension is perhaps most obviously experienced in the feminist discussions about women and war. Those of us who most vehemently reject the notions of maternalism do still acknowledge the central role that mothering plays in the lives of most women. The main difference lies in where and how we place the experience of mothering.

In the *Platform for Action* signed by 189 governments at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Official Declaration acknowledges the leading role that women have taken in the peace movement. It makes no comment on the reasons for women's role in peace building. The statement coming out of the NGO Forum, on the other hand, speaks of active peace and makes clear links between public violence, private violence, and war. The NGO Declaration calls on world governments to:

> ... reject militarism in all its forms and create a culture of peace and human rights. They must redirect the 800 billion dollars annual global military spending to peaceful purposes and convert military production to socially useful purposes. Governments must abolish weapons of mass destruction by banning testing, sales, and stockpiling of nuclear, chemical, biological, and all other weapons. The production, trade, and use of all land mines must be banned, and immediately governments must develop programs that will assist disabled victims of land mines, many of whom are women and children. We demand that our governments work together to solve conflicts without using violence, and that they fully include women in peacemaking and conflict resolution initiatives. (Christiansen-Ruffman 40)

This statement reflects more accurately some of the perspectives feminists bring to the peace process. It mentions the differential impact of war on women and also the everyday damage done to women because of military expenditures. In particular, it makes note of the critical need for women to be involved in the processes, negotiations, and initiatives undertaken to promote peace.

Feminist interventions to oppose war must be based, in my opinion, on the necessity of including women in the public arena. Women's support for peace is rooted in the social, economic, and political context of women's lives. The exclusion of women from public space; the damaging effects of the gendered division of labour; women's total responsibility for children, the sick, and the elderly; the ravages of public and private violence; and the silencing of women's voices in economic and political decision-making, create a different relationship to the world. Women's support for peace is part of the struggle to participate fully as participants in democracy. Cynthia Enloe states, "... in the torrents of media images that accompany an international crisis, women are typically made visible only as symbols, victims, or dependents" (353). The challenge is to go beyond these fabricated images. Women's participation as politically conscious actors must be visible and explicit. Feminists need to be clear and cogent in defense of women's particular interest in opposing war and resist the tendencies to reduce our interests to our maternal roles and responsibilities. There are good reasons for women to organize as women to oppose militarism and war. The highly gendered dimension of war is clear and well documented. The impact of war on women is obvious. Women's right to participate in the public debate is part of our struggle for equality. The images of the war in Kosovo make it clear that once again decisions being made in the public domain do not include women and yet have the greatest impact on women. The refugees are mostly women and children and the military leaders and politicians are almost all men. It is clear that women are absent from the corridors of power where the decisions about war are made. I agree with Sara Ruddick's statement that, "Women can no longer understand themselves as peaceful by "nature." They are responsible for their attitude toward war and nonviolence" (1998: 218). Women's relationship to war and peace is not a light topic for feminists. It is demanding and challenging. It demands that we look at the complexities of women's lives and experiences and come to an understanding of how women operate in the world and what changes we need to bring about for women to participate as fully functioning actors in determining the future of the planet.

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LYN LIFSHIN

Survivors at the Kovno Exhibit

Washington Post, Jan. 28, 1997

"My mother carried me
to the fields in a potato
sack, gave me to Christians
For weeks I'd been drilled

in Lithuanian and coached
remember you are not a Jew.
Not a word of Yiddish. Never."
"A dog bit my arm," another

woman said, "and I let go
of my little brother. I remember
the look in his eyes as they
took him away and left

me. There is not even a
picture of him. When I die,
there will be no evidence
he ever existed." "I forgot

my own name," a man says,
"they never used me name.
They always called me 'you
damned Jew.'"

Lyn Lifshin's poetry appears earlier in this issue.