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The Gendered Dimensions of Identity Wars

The Case of the Former Yugoslavia

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Abstract

In this thesis we investigate gendered dimensions of the war in the former Yugoslavia. We do this with the help of gender theory, as well as theories about the construction of identities and the role of the identity aspect in contemporary warfare. By combining these theoretical points of departure we hope to shed light on how gender can be used by political and military leaders and by the media in times of war. We explore how underlying gender assumptions in the Yugoslav society affected the course of war as well as how gender relations were altered just before and during the war.

We come to the conclusion that gender was central to the construction of collective identity in the Yugoslav wars. Women were pushed in to traditional gender roles and constructed as carriers of culture and mothers of the nation. Further the symbolic values associated with women made them vulnerable to sexual violence, since an attack against enemy women were considered to be an attack on the entire nation. The intersections between gender and identity aspects in the Yugoslav wars made women strategic targets of military violence.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

”Clearly the nature of war has changed. It is being fought in homes and communities – and on women’s bodies – in a battle for resources and in the name of religion and ethnicity. Violence against women is used to break and humiliate women, men, families, communities, no matter which side they are on. Women have become the greatest victims of war – and the biggest stakeholders of peace.”¹

These are the words of the Executive Director of UNIFEM, Noeleen Heyzer. She draws attention to one of the tragedies resulting from the wars of our time – the ever so pressing issue of violence directed at women. In conflicts all over the world, from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to East Timor and the wars in former Yugoslavia, women have been subjected to mass rape, forced impregnation in rape camps, deliberate contamination of HIV/AIDS and sex slavery.² Clearly, the ways in which women are affected by war can severely differ from how men are affected.

During the last decade, “globalization” has been a major topic for research within international relations. Often described as different things, its effect on the different layers in the political arena has been much debated. Globalization is often said to be characterized, among other things, by homogenization and fusion of culturally divergent traditions and processes. But there is also another side of the process of globalization – that of escalating particularism. The importance of identity and to distinguish oneself and one’s group from others is in some ways greater than ever. Lately an extensive debate about identity wars has taken place in the academic world of international relations. Many scholars have claimed that the wars that have taken place since the end of the Cold War have a different character than previous wars; instead of being fought over territories, economical issues and natural resources the focal point of the new wars are identity, ethnic aspects and symbolic values. Symbolism and how it is used by political elites in warfare is important not the least in order to understand how conflicts between different groupings are fuelled. Differences in identity are sometimes portrayed as so severe that it

¹Heyzer, Noeleen (2002), Executive Summary in Rehn, Elisabeth and Sirleaf, Ellen J., *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts’ Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women’s Role in Peace-building*, UNIFEM, p. 1

² Ibid.

becomes a factor making it impossible to coexist and, above all, coexist in peace. In the long run this type of understated warfare can lead to politicians having goals outside the official agenda. Some scholars argue that identity conflicts have a logic that makes the actors forget the original goal. Keeping the conflict alive becomes valuable in itself and thus committing acts of violence that are seen as unforgivable, directed at symbolic targets and cultural treasures, becomes a part of the strategy. These actions can be of bigger importance, than strictly material damage, leaving long term emotional scars and altered relationships between the groups involved.³

It is particularly interesting to examine identity conflicts from a gender perspective, because of the centrality of gender construction to the construction of collective identities. The figurative emotional values associated with women have made them explicitly vulnerable to symbolic violence in times of war, making them strategically interesting for the warring groupings. There is little doubt that violence against women has always existed in wars, but generally this has always been addressed as a secondary effect rather than a strategy in itself. It is increasingly evident that rape is used as a deliberate war method in contemporary warfare. However, feminist research has shown that wars have always been gendered.⁴ This is manifested by the fact that constructions of masculinity and femininity are built upon the notion that men are the fighters, and women and children the ones they protect.⁵ Naturally, matters are not as easy as to simply categorise all adult women in the same section as children, as the eternal victims, mute and invisible to the war makers. Neither are their sufferings purely a natural result of war aimed at the men who are official fighters. Rather, they have been determinant factors of war making in many ways. Many women have throughout history taken roles usually aimed for men, as fighters and troop leaders. They have also become the providers of the nation, being responsible for industries and production units.⁶ However, the role women that have been put in – or, rather, being forced into – that are the subject of our analysis, is the one of battleground. Here we do not talk about the unintended victimization that most often is indeed a natural result of conflicts, but the intentional usage of women and women's symbolic value to harm the enemy nation. We talk about situations where violence against women is used as a strategy in itself and an important weapon to attack the identity of the enemy.

³ Féron, Elise and Hastings, Michel, (2003) *The New Hundred Year Wars*, UNESCO, pp. 490-491

⁴ Yuval-Davis, Nira, (1997) *Gender & Nation*, chapter 5

⁵ *Ibid*, p.15

⁶ *Ibid*, p.93

1.2 Purpose

In this study we are going to investigate how gender relations affect women's position in identity conflicts leading to symbolic warfare. The term "identity conflicts" here has the meaning of conflicts where difference in identity is the main official motivation for conflict, or where identity politics is used by elites to provoke conflict. Constantly bearing in mind the specific contextual circumstances of gender relations in these societies, our aim is to find out what role gender constructions had in the identity conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and the consequences this had for the women affected by the conflict. To achieve this, our analysis will deal with the following questions:

- How did gender interact with the identity aspects in the Yugoslav wars?
- How was gender reflected symbolically before and during the war in the Yugoslav society?
- How did these gender constructions affect women concretely in this type of warfare?

1.3 Method

1.3.1 Qualitative analysis

To answer our questions we are going to use qualitative methodologies. We are mostly going to perform our study in the form of text analysis of academic publications on the subject. Doing our text analysis requires an active reading, posing questions and interpret the answers with help from our theoretical frameworks. Since we do not have the possibility to make interviews ourselves, we have to rely on interviews performed by other scholars and already published testimonies. We are interested in how the gender system is reflected in the new type of warfare, therefore analysing the underlying gender assumptions that pervaded society is essential. The ways in which gender relations are demonstrated in war are in our opinion linked to how they were expressed generally in society before the conflict.⁷

Our research question requires us to theorise the examples and exemplify our theories. By this we mean that it is just as important that our theoretical discussion is grounded in empirical examples, as it is important to have a theoretical framework in order to analyse these examples. Our intention is to steer clear of a discussion too abstract to fully grasp. As researchers attempting to make partial conclusions, we recognise the problem of thinking in terms of universal truths. We in fact reject the idea of the "objective researcher" and argue that everyone

⁷ See for example Olujić, Maria B, (1998) Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 31

has their own pair of glasses through which they not only observe and interpret the world, but also affect the choice of analyse objects in the first place. Hence all situations can be analysed from a variety of perspectives, and in order to see the logic behind the reasoning and actions of all actors we need suitable theoretical frameworks. We have chosen to use theories about gender, the construction of identities and ethnic conflicts, since we see them as most useful considering our research questions.

When sketching our theoretical gender framework, the theories of Sandra Harding have turned out to constitute major parts. She takes into account the different dimensions of gender and the fact that gender varies with culture as well as the intersection between gender and other social power relations. To theorise the construction of identity and examine the dynamics of resistance identity in former Yugoslavia, we use Manuel Castells work about the determinant role of identity in the modern world. Further, to draw the link between resistance identity and ethnic conflicts we explore the theory of modern warfare described by Mary Kaldor. Finally we have much benefited from the works of Nira Yuval-Davis, who have merged together theories of gender and national identity. Since gender is one of the fundamentals in identity construction, both individually and collectively, and the constructions of identities is central to war making policies in ethnic conflicts, we argue that gender is determinant factor of the strategies used in this kind of warfare, bringing severe consequences for women in the area. In this manner, we attempt to show the significance of gender constructions in identity conflicts.

1.3.2 The Case of Yugoslavia

The conflicts in former Yugoslavia are commonly described as a typical example of new warfare – the wars had distinct ethnic profiles and symbolic features. The region has for a very long time been a melting pot and a mixed salad⁸ alternately, of different religions, cultures and ethnic groups that have periodically lived in peace only to repeatedly fall back into hostilities. This poses questions about how identities are constructed and reproduced over time, the changing natures of those identities and how they have contributed to and/or being affected by the new types of warfare. Gendered violence such as war rape was seriously attended for the first time during and after the wars in former Yugoslavia. Previous attention to female victims of war did not regard the violence from a gender point of view; hence it mainly treated these extensive incidents as merely yet another way of abuse. Suspecting indications of strongly militaristic,

⁸ Mixed salad, meaning ethnic groups living side by side without extensively blending together in marriages and reproduction.

nationalistic rhetoric in the Yugoslav society, we hope to be able to see links between political and military procedures targeting identity aspects, and the crimes directed at women.

1.3.3. Delimitations

We do not have the ambition in any way to describe the complicated chain of events during the Balkan wars. Nor do we aim to make “safe” statements about gender construction and its effects on polices in general. However, we do expect to be able to make some conclusions about gender traces in society, and to analyse its links to violence against women in times of war. We limit our investigation to the time leading up to war, and the war itself, meaning approximately from the last few years of the 1980’s to the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995. Thus we focus on the war whose major actors were armed groups within Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia. The conflicts in the Albanian-populated areas of 1996-2001 are thus not our objects of analysis.

The reasons we focus on rapes and sexual violence, and not other forms of violence such as genocide, are the specific gendered aspects. A focus on rape is interesting because of the fact rape can be seen as an attack on the identity of the ethnic group in question, thereby effecting the entire community.

1.4 Material and sources

Considering that we are studying events that took place during war, we have to be highly aware of the risk of unreliable information. The course of the war is still a controversial subject, and there are many ways to look upon and interpret actions of the participators. Therefore, all sources must always be critically valuated.

Our main sources are going to be reports on the crimes committed, including witness testimonies, and feminist literature concerning sexual violence and gender relations during the war. Since the gender aspect often is neglected in conventional research, the works of feminist scholars have proved to be necessary. Like other fields of research that focus on uneven power relations, feminist research is in general very aware of matters of objectivity in that they want to recognise marginalised and silenced groups and analyse situations from their position. By doing this, feminists aim at correcting an inherent bias in conventional political science and contribute to further enrich political and academic discourse.⁹

The testimonies used are mainly from the book “Women, Violence and War” by Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, which consists of interviews with some seventy women of all ethnic groups about

⁹ Maiguashca, Bice, (2006) Making feminist sense of the “anti-globalisation movement”: some reflection on methodology and method, *Global Society*, Vol. 20, No.2, pp.115-136

their experiences from the Yugoslav wars. We complement the picture with examples from Yugoslav media, and testimonies from other sources. Many of our examples contain very strong material that can prove to be upsetting to read. It can be worth noting, though, that we have only included testimonies and examples of significance to our specific fields of investigation. Much of the material we came across was indeed upsetting. However, we felt it necessary to sift out the most explicit examples that did little to further prove our point, and not indulge in the description of atrocious assaults just for the sake of it. Nevertheless we want to work in the spirit of Bice Maiguashca, taking a position close to the victims and giving them a voice¹⁰

1.5 Disposition

In the following chapter, we are going to sketch our theoretical framework, which consists of Sandra Harding's theories of gender, Manuel Castells' works about identity construction and Mary Kaldor's theories about new wars. We also present Nira Yuval-Davis contributions of the link between gender and national identity. The third chapter will consist of a historical account of the proceedings leading to war in former Yugoslavia, as well as the general contextual circumstances and the gender relations before the wars. Our empirical findings will be presented in chapters four and five. Here, we will combine examples of real events and relevant theoretical perspectives, in order to see how gender constructions permeate different levels of society. In chapter four we will attempt to address our first research question and investigate how gender was reflected culturally, both symbolically and on the level of everyday social relations. In the fifth chapter, we will investigate how these specific gender relations were drawn to its extreme during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where sexual violence was used as a strategic weapon. Our sixth chapter is our final one. Here, we will highlight the links between chapters four and five and make conclusions about the gender aspect of identity wars.

¹⁰ Maiguascha, p. 136

CHAPTER 2 – Theoretical framework

Theorizing the wars in former Yugoslavia from a gender perspective requires a combination of frameworks. Naturally, our point of departure is gender theory and the view that gender is socially constructed. This leads us into theories about the identity construction and its significance in warfare in the form of identity conflicts as well as some of the distinguishing features of identity wars. Taken the centrality of nationalist movements in former Yugoslavia it is also necessary to address the question of the relationship between gender constructions and nationalism. Therefore, we will begin by describing the different aspects of gender and its connections with power hierarchies.

2.1 Gender

The essence of gender is captured in the words of Marianne Marchand as “socially learned behaviour and expectations that distinguish between masculinity and femininity”.¹¹ Gender is in nearly all societies central to how we shape our identities, organize social activities and symbolize the world we have around us. Even if the gender relations are organized in different ways around the world, they are always unequal and masculinity is favoured over femininity.¹² Or as Harding puts it: “Gender is an *asymmetrical* category of human thought, social organization, and individual identity and behaviour”.¹³ Ann Tickner agrees with this description and adds that the unequal gender relations, on the structural level are “a primary way of signifying relationships of power”.¹⁴

Talking about gender, it is essential to recognise all of its aspect in order to totally understand it. In all cultures there is a relationship between how gender symbolism is expressed, how the division of labour is organised around gender and what counts as feminine and masculine identity and behaviour on the individual level.¹⁵ On the symbolic level, gender difference is one of the most ancient ways for us to understand the world. Even nonhuman entities are often divided into the categories feminine or masculine. To assign dualistic gender metaphors in this way to things that does not have anything to do with sex differences, is a way of dividing

¹¹ Marchand, Marianne H and Sisson Runyan, Anne (editors), (2000), *Gender and Global Restructuring – Sightings, sites and resistances*. 8

¹² Harding, Sandra, (1986), *the Science Question in Feminism*, p. 17-18

¹³ Ibid, p. 55

¹⁴ Tickner, J. Ann, (2001) *Gendering World Politics – Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*, p. 16

¹⁵ Harding, p. 52-54

necessary social activities between groups of humans and to socially construct individual identity in a way that is only weakly correlated to the way sexual differences is perceived.¹⁶

The function of gender symbolism and gendered metaphors is according to Marchand to “naturalize” hierarchies to make existing power relations appear natural and impossible to alter. Gender symbolism does not only legitimize unequal relations between men and women, but also serves to support other wider societal phenomenon, such as economic globalization, militarism and nationalism.¹⁷

Since gender is variable, what counts as masculine as well as feminine differs between different places, times and circumstances according to the requirements of power. Masculinity is a tool for the powerful and produces and reinforces the links between power, masculinity and men. It is important to note that masculinity primarily is associated with power, not with men, and that strategies of feminization not only can be used as an instrument to marginalize women, but also groups of men.¹⁸ Further, since gender is relational, femininity must always be understood in relation to masculinity and vice versa.¹⁹ Masculinity is constructed as the opposite of everything that is culturally seen as feminine, and femininity to absorb everything that does not count as masculine. Central to the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity is also the way that male domination and female subordination is legitimated.²⁰

One of the big advantages of the gender model is that it opens up for the possibility to see inequalities as socially constructed and thus possible to challenge and eventually to change or abolish. Another advantage is that the model opens up for the investigation of the intersections between different social categories such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality, to see how the different categories work to produce and enforce inequalities between and among men and women.²¹

2.2 Resistance Identity and nationalism

Since our analysis circles around the identity aspect in conflicts we have to clarify how we define identity and how we view the process of identity construction. Furthermore, we are here going

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 17-18

¹⁷ Marchand, p. 12

¹⁸ Hooper, Charlotte (2000), Masculinities in transition; the case of globalization, in Marchand, Marianne H and Sisson Runyan, Anne (editors), (2000), *Gender and Global Restructuring – Sightings, sites and resistances*, p.62

¹⁹ Tickner, p. 16

²⁰ Harding, p. 54-55

²¹ Marchand, p. 8

to present the kind of identity construction that is relevant to understand the identity formations in former Yugoslavia.

On a basic level, identity can be seen as “people’s source of meaning and experience”.²² Identities go deep psychologically, and involve a process of self-construction and how we define ourselves as individuals. Manuel Castells define identity as the organisation of meaning. In this context, meaning refers to “the symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose of her/his action”.²³

The next question requiring an answer is how identities are constructed. What is needed for social actors to form their identity in a specific way? This rather complicated process is described by Castells in this manner:

“The construction of identities uses building material from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinants and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure”²⁴

The construction of identities is sometimes viewed as a tool for elites to manipulate the masses. Castells does propose that “who constructs collective identity, and for what, largely determines the symbolic content of this identity, and it’s meaning for those identifying with it or placing themselves outside of it”.²⁵ However, the construction of identities is also a far more complicated process. Of course, political elites can use already prevalent identities as a tool for mobilization, but it would not be successful if these identities did not already have some meaning to the people. Castells notes that dominant institutions can try to impose identities on the people, but that they only become identities when they are internalized by the social actors.²⁶ Further he argues that nationalism is used by political elites because it is effective, and that this strategy would not work if national identity not already was important to people and vital as a

²² Castells, Manuel, (2004), *The information age: economy, society and culture. Vol. 2, The power of identity*, p.7

²³ Ibid, p. 7

²⁴ Ibid, p. 7

²⁵ Ibid, p. 7

²⁶ Ibid, p. 7

mobilizing principle. Identity can only be reconstructed around existing basic institutions in the collective memory, such as family, community, the rural past, religion or the nation.²⁷

Manuel Castells identify what he calls Resistance Identity as “the most important type of identity-building in our society”²⁸ We see this kind of identity-building as the most relevant when discussing ethno-nationalist movements and identity conflicts. The search for meaning is canalized through the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles.²⁹ This kind of identity-building is focused on collective resistance to what is seen as unbearable oppression that can be economic, political or social.³⁰ New cultural codes are constructed out of historical materials as a result of the search for new sources of meaning and identity. These identities are constructed as eternal and natural to prevent them from being questioned and challenged.³¹

In this sense, it is not difficult to see how collective identities and nationalism can attract each other. With the rise of nationalism and nation states in the nineteenth century, the meaning of the words “country” and “nation” soon came to become one. Nationalism could be said to be the ideology of the nations, by which nations and their people distanced themselves from each other. This perception of identity politics has however changed over the years. Today, nations can be defined as “cultural communes constructed in people’s minds and collective memory by the sharing of history and political projects”.³² The constructed element is, again, enhanced by Castells. Nationalism can be defined in many ways, we regard it like this:

“Nationalism involves the belief that people are divided into nations, each of which has the right to be a self-governing unit. It professes the claim that although people may have an array of multiple identities (such as age, gender, religion and ability), it is their national identity or ethnicity that provides them with their primary form of selfhood.”³³

Further, gender is central to the construction of national identities. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that women often are given the role of carriers of the national culture, both personally and

²⁷ Ibid, p. 44

²⁸ Castells, p. 9

²⁹ Ibid, p. 11

³⁰ Ibid, p. 9

³¹ Ibid, p. 69

³² Ibid, p. 54

³³ Snyder et al., (2006) On the Battleground of Women’s Bodies: Mass Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Affilia*, Vol. 21, pp.188

collectively. Symbolically, the honour and identity of the nation is tied to its women.³⁴ Gender relations are often seen as the “essence” of culture, because of the importance of cultural reproduction. Everyday life and its routines are crucial to the transmission of culture from generation to generation, and thus women get central to the process of national identity building because they are mainly associated with the domestic sphere.³⁵

Just like nations and national identity cannot be taken for granted, nationalism too cannot be assumed to be homogenously organised within countries. Rather, nationalist movements are practised by different groups, regardless of whether they have their “own” states or are minorities. This, of course, was exactly the case in former Yugoslavia.

2.3 Identity conflicts

Since the end of the Cold War a specific kind of conflicts has been particularly prevalent. One of the important characteristics of these conflicts is the significance of the identity dimension. Mary Kaldor argues that the political goal in these wars is to gain power on the basis of seemingly traditional identities, such as nation, tribe or religion. It is important to note that these identities cannot be understood as the return to historic identities, but must be seen as part of contemporary society with new characteristics.³⁶

The difference between ideological wars and the identity wars is according to Kaldor that the first in some sense is built on the notion of ideas or a common project for the future. The construction of traditional identities on the other hand, is often built on the notion of a common origin or common blood. People are thus defined by what they are, not by what they think or how they act.³⁷ Some scholars view the return to identity politics as a reaction against the process of globalization. When the traditional cultural communities are restructured³⁸ and political autonomy and sovereignty seems to lose its importance, the return to historical symbols and myths that represent “the original identity” can provide some comfort and be the means to defend oneself against a ever increasing feeling of powerlessness.³⁹ Indeed, ethnic nationalism and the cult of origins often rise in times of transition and social disturbances, such as after the collapse of the Soviet empire.⁴⁰

³⁴ Yuval-Davis, p.45

³⁵ Ibid, p.43

³⁶ Kaldor, Mary, (2001) *New & Old Wars – Organized Violence in a Global Era*, pp. 69-70

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 76-78

³⁸ Ibid, p. 75

³⁹ Yuval-Davis, p. 63

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.20

In identity conflicts such as the ones in former Yugoslavia, the war rarely takes expected paths. Since it is not a question of nation states fighting each other, the armed groups are not necessarily official armies but different paramilitary units and guerrilla groups. Therefore, their actions are not determined by parliamentary or democratic state institutions, and they are not held responsible to anyone but themselves. How these groups choose to operate in terms of forming alliances and targeting enemies are rarely explainable after our usual ideological frames.⁴¹ Often, they are flexible about working through ideological differences, since the causes and goals of the war are not “project building” but ethnic division and segregation. At times, their action can seemingly make little sense and look arbitrary. The study of identity construction is thus at the core of understanding the war making in ethnic conflicts.

Significant for our thesis, there is a strong connection between national and ethnic projects. Although there are some differences between the two concepts, the similarities are considerable; they both concern the ways collectivities view themselves and can some sense be seen as “imagined communities”.⁴² Because the concepts overlap, we will alternately use both of them to the purpose of describing projects where the constructions of collective identities are important.

2.4 Gender in the construction of collective identities

Above we have treated the construction of nationalist identities and gender relations as two separate processes, but they are in fact deeply intervened and affected by each other. Both nationalism and gender are socially and culturally constructed, and both processes are active in defining the distinction between “us” and “them” through the procedure of favouring one nation or one gender over others.⁴³ Nira Yuval-Davis has shown that gender is central to the construction of national identities. She argues that: “gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectives as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations”.⁴⁴ She also notes that all nationalist projects do not share the same characteristics, but different aspects of gender relations are central to all of them. When the nation is constructed around the myth of a common origin or shared blood, the control of reproduction tend to be emphasized. If the nation is built around a shared culture, symbolic values and customs and traditions becomes more important and are constructed as the essence of the

⁴¹ Kaldor p.35

⁴² Yuval-Davis, p.16

⁴³ Mayer, Tamara (editor), (2000) *Gender Ironies of Nationalism – Sexing the Nation*, p. 1

⁴⁴ Yuval-Davis, p.40

nation.⁴⁵ Sometimes the nation is seen as an extension of family and kinship relation which rely on the patriarchal construction.⁴⁶ Thus, women reproduce nations, culturally, biologically and symbolically.⁴⁷ Women are generally “constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively”.⁴⁸ Consequently, women are strongly tied to symbolic values and are seen as representatives of purity. Especially to ethno-nationalist projects, the purity of biological reproduction is seen as central to the survival of the nation, and only “pure” women can reproduce a pure nation.⁴⁹ Femininity is also central in the construction of national narratives, which construct the ideal image of the nation. These ideal images have the purpose of demonstrating the uniqueness of the nation, to justify its existence and to assure its survival. In these myths the nation is almost always portrayed as a feminine entity in need of male protection.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is common to let a figure of a woman symbolize the nation, like in the cases of Mother Russia, Mother Ireland, Mother India,⁵¹ and Little Mother Serbia⁵². When women represent the symbolic purity of the nation and men as seen as the protectors of the women, it becomes logical that an attack on the bodies of these women can be seen as an attack on the nation’s men and the nation itself.⁵³

This perspective of the link between gender, the construction of collective identities and nationalism will be our main analytical tool in the rest of our essay. The structure of our analysis will draw on the gender analysis developed by Marianne Marchand. It explores the relation between what she calls sightings, sites and resistances. Sightings refer to the symbolic functioning of gender, and how it operates on the ideological level. Sites are concerned with the concrete routines and structures in specific societies. By resistance she means the feminist response to the processes determined by sightings and sites. These concepts are our points of departure in investigating the relations between gender constructions in Yugoslav society and identity warfare. First, we turn to the background of ethnic conflicts and gender relations in Yugoslavia.

⁴⁵ Yuval-Davis, p. 21

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.15

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 2

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 45

⁴⁹ Mayer, p. 7

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 10

⁵¹ Yuval-Davis, p. 45

⁵² Cockburn, Cynthia, (1998) *The Space Between Us – Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, p. 161

⁵³ Mayer, p. 18

CHAPTER 3 – The Yugoslav context

3.1 Brief History of the political, ethnic and nationalist activities

The Balkans was during the early Middle Ages strategically important, geographically situated in the dividing line between the Holy Roman Catholic and the Greek Byzantine Orthodox empires.⁵⁴ In the 15th century the Turkish took control over the area, making the territory part of the Ottoman Empire⁵⁵. Mid-nineteenth century, Christian and nationalist beliefs began to stir when the Slavs in the northwest of the region started to celebrate Croatian catholic identity, and the Slavs in the southeast began to identify themselves as an orthodox Serb nation. The dialogue between these two nationalist movements hardened at this time and ethnicity became a crucial factor of self-identification for the people of the area.⁵⁶

The political activities too became gradually more ethicised, with the main political parties having distinct Croat, Serb and Muslim interests and relatively exclusive features. Yugoslavia was officially formed after WWI⁵⁷, and the Bosnian Muslims formed a large part of the population. After WWII, with serious and bloody conflicts occurring among Yugoslavian groups of different ethnicity⁵⁸, the Balkan states united under the leadership of Tito, forming a six-republic federal state. Basically following old Ottoman borders, the republics were Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In 1948, Yugoslavia formed its own version of socialism with rather liberal market policies and trade with the capitalist states.⁵⁹ As years went by, the connections between the republics were chilled, with low rates of inter-republic trade and investments. President Tito died in 1980, leaving a politically weak collective eight-man presidency. It was at this point clear that the Yugoslav socialist market and price liberalism had failed, and the country suffered from increasing inflation and an enormous national debt.⁶⁰ Economic reforms forced the national federal government to restrict the authority of the republics, and the rivalry between republican leaders and the federal government authorities became extensive on economical and political

⁵⁴Cockburn, Cynthia, (1998) *The Space Between Us – Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, p.28

⁵⁵ Lampe, John R., (2000), *Yugoslavia as History- Twice there was a country*, p. 20

⁵⁶ Cockburn, p.28

⁵⁷ Lampe, pp.125-128

⁵⁸ Cockburn p. 29, Lampe, p.201

⁵⁹ Cockburn p. 30, Lampe, pp. 241-245

⁶⁰ Cockburn, p.31, Kaldor p.37, Lampe pp.321-322

issues. Class inequalities were highlighted by increasing unemployment, and the general discontent among the people was widespread.⁶¹

Clearly, socialist ideology had lost its impact on Yugoslavs. Along with the increasing rivalry between the republics, Croatian and Serbian nationalisms were flourishing. The republican leaders, fearing the loss of power resulting from the weakened federal policies, switched from socialist to nationalist ideology and rhetoric.⁶²

The press and television in Yugoslavia increasingly turned nationalist republican in identity and sympathy, subsequently becoming tools of the nationalist movements.⁶³ In the first multi-party elections in 1990 the nationalist parties were clearly dominant.⁶⁴ Ideological debate was not allowed during the socialist days, and in theory the division of social classes had been abolished. The constitutionally recognised nationalities became the only tool to use in the competition for resources.⁶⁵ Slovenia looked to join the wealth of Europe and loosening the bonds to Yugoslavia. Croatia searched for ways to distance itself from the aggressive Serbia. But President Milosevic of Serbia had now bigger plans, and consequently refused to loosen the federation. Instead of Yugoslavia, he now envisioned a Greater Serbia that would include the other republics under a Serb flag. When Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence in 1991, Milosevic answered with violence. The wars had begun, and went on for ten years, killing hundreds of thousands of people and leaving the Balkan area in economic poverty. The combatants were except from the National Yugoslav Army and different republican armies, several paramilitary and guerrilla groups.⁶⁶

To conclude the ethnic-political heritage of former Yugoslavia as a whole, it is of vital interest to recognize the complicated historical relations in the area. As stated in the method section, the area has been a melting pot *as well as* a mixed salad, and years of mixed marriages and connections have left the ethnic groups indistinguishable physically.⁶⁷ The significance of the construction of ethnic identities, and how it was used by political leaders, is therefore extremely important to consider.

⁶¹ Cockburn p. 31, Lampe pp.333-334

⁶² Cockburn, p. 31

⁶³ Lampe, p.342

⁶⁴ Cockburn, p.32

⁶⁵ Kaldor, p.80

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp, 45-50

⁶⁷ Cockburn, p.29

3.2 Gender relations in Yugoslavia

Gender relations in war cannot be properly understood without an investigation of the gender system in the same context in times of peace. Violence against women is not in any way exclusively a consequence of war. According to Maria Olujić, “wartime gender violence highlights pre-existing social dynamics”.⁶⁸ Therefore, we have to make a brief overview of the gendered structures in the Yugoslav society before the war broke out.

The traditional culture among the Slavic people in south Eastern Europe is highly patriarchal. It is built around the extended family, called *zadruga*, where the property is transmitted over generations on the patrilineage. Women are seen as being outside the core social unit and further, female blood is seen as thinner than male blood because they join the patrilineage of the husband when they marry and move into the home of the husband. Women are primarily valued because of their qualities as mothers, workers and sexual objects.⁶⁹ These gendered cultural patterns are reflected in traditional songs, jokes and stories. Men usually sing songs to express their own virility and portray women as sexual objects through symbolic language.⁷⁰

Even though the nuclear family is the most common way of living together today, the relatives of the extended family often live nearby and the *zadruga* is still at the core of Yugoslav cultural identity.⁷¹ Women are also seen to represent the honour of the whole family, and the honour is tightly tied to their sexuality. It is the task of the men to protect the honour of the women through tight control of their virginity, chastity, martial virtue and reproduction.⁷² With the rise of nationalism, women’s position in society was transformed back into a more traditional role. Feminine images were increasingly used as symbols to represent the nation, and emphasis was put on women’s responsibility to reproduce the newly formed nation states, both culturally and biologically. One of the consequences was increased control over women’s reproductions and pressure was put on women to give birth to more children to assure that the nation had enough soldiers to defend their territorial power. In general the rise of nationalism spurred a revival of patriarchal values in order to legitimate male power and control.⁷³

In the next two chapters, we will turn to our empirical findings. Every section is ended with conclusions connected to our theoretical framework.

⁶⁸ Olujić, p. 31

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 33-35

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 34

⁷¹ Snyder et al., p. 187

⁷² Olujić, pp. 33-34

⁷³ Snyder et al., pp.188-189

CHAPTER 4 – Gender symbolism and gender relations in war time Yugoslav culture

As we have seen earlier, gendered symbolism and metaphors are central to the construction of collective identities. We will now turn to how gender constructions were expressed on the symbolic level as well as on the level of gender relation in war time Yugoslavia. First, we will examine how the description of women's roles changed in the context of war. Further, we will investigate the association of women with land, gendered images in popular culture as well as in media reports. Our focal point will be women's symbolic roles as guardians of culture and biological reproduction.

4.1 Gender roles in nationalist discourse

If gender roles are seen as the border guards of the nation it is interesting to investigate how gender roles were expressed in Yugoslavia, during the war and just before the war broke out. Obrad Kesić argues that women were mainly divided into five categories; amazons, sluts, victims, wombs, and witches. He asserts that the gender imagery was manipulated in the interests of the nationalist movements and used to facilitate the mobilisation for war.⁷⁴ Women who participated in the fighting were described as mythical figures and heroines (and had their femininity questioned, just as women tend to be when they perform traditionally male tasks). This mythologisation served, according to Kesić the purpose of mobilising the nation and recruiting fighters, but also to implicitly shame the men who did not participate in the armed forces, indirectly saying that they were coward or "lower than women" not living up to their obligation to the nation.⁷⁵

The image of women as sluts or whores in times of war is linked to the view of women as the property of men. If the duty of men was to fight for their country, the duty of women was to be sexually available in order to boost the morale of the troops. According to Kesić pornography and prostitution has become much more prevailing because of the war. Provocative pictures of girls wearing military attributes and expressing their patriotic feelings and preference for strong men became a central theme to pornography. The message transmitted is that men who fight for their nation get access to the bodies of young women who are grateful to be defended.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Kesić, Obrad, Amazons, sluts, victims, witches and wombs in Ramet, Sabrina (editor) *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans – Women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states* p. 187

⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 188-189

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 191-192

The image of women as victims of war (especially as victims of rape) is very common, and can also be manipulated and politicised by governments in order to attract support for their cause.⁷⁷ Women who did not conform to accepted roles of nationalist discourse, such as feminists and anti-war activists, were generally labelled as witches and betrayers of the nations.⁷⁸ This is clearly demonstrated by an example from Croatia after a local female journalist had defected to Belgrade. One of the political tabloids weakly called *Slabodni tijednik* (ST) called her “a great whore’, ‘a sexually frustrated Serb woman’, an ‘illiterate’ who used her vaginal secretions for inc.”⁷⁹ Another Croat journal attacked five female feminists and writers after their open criticism of Croatian nationalism and the leading nationalist party in a similar way. The title of the article was: “Croatia’s feminist rape Croatia!”⁸⁰

In nationalist discourse in all the Yugoslav republics, the image of a good woman was always a mother, naturally of “ethnically pure children”. The image of women as wombs is spread and reinforced by the media, political and religious leaders.⁸¹ Since this image is central to the construction of femininity in nationalist projects, we will address the question of women and reproduction in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

The masculine role changed as well when nationalism gained ground. Men was seen as having lost their masculinity during the socialist days, and within the nationalist discourse the new man was portrayed as protective, martial, virile and of course heterosexual. Pressure was put on men to “stiffen up and be ‘that which nature and tradition intended them to be’.”⁸²

To assign these narrowly defined roles to both men and women is a clear illustration of the functioning of the gender system. Remembering that gender is a relational category and that femininity always must be understood in relation to masculinity, it is easy to see how women are defined as inferior to men in all of these roles. Even in the case of female warriors, who are described as heroines, it is implicit that it is an extraordinary phenomenon and that it is not the natural role of women. Rather, the myths serve to enforce the view that it is the responsibility of men to be fighters and that female soldiers not are real women.

The connections between gender constructions and power are obvious as well. The gender roles are described in a way that serves the interests of the nationalist power elite, mainly through the facilitation of military mobilisation and in making critics appear in unfavourable light.

⁷⁷ Kesić, pp. 193-194

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 198-199

⁷⁹ Thompson, Mark, (1994) *Forging War – The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* pp. 191-192

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 192

⁸¹ Kesić, pp. 199-201

⁸² Cockburn, p. 162

In the appeal to women and men to go back to their traditional and ‘natural’ roles, we can discern the link between identity politics and gender relations. Going back to an imagined natural order becomes the means to give feelings of security, comfort and “truthness” to one’s origins in a time of societal transformation and disintegration. In this description of reality, the nation or ethnic group is portrayed as an extension of the *zadruga* where women are assigned the traditional role of mother and wife.

Both of the examples from Croat media demonstrate the sexualised language used to stave off criticism. Women who dared to express criticism were portrayed as sexually deviant. To use the emotionally charged concept of rape in this way is an example of how the land itself was feminised and that the honour of the nation was tied to sexual metaphors prevalent in the honour/shame culture. Effectively, who ever dares to criticise the politics becomes a violator of the motherland. Thus, accusing the critics of one of the worst crimes possible is an effective way of publicly demonising them.

4.2 Women as biological reproducers

With the rise of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, the biological reproduction of the nation ended up at centre stage of the political debate. Women of all nationalities were encouraged and even pressured to give birth to more children in order to secure the survival of the nation.⁸³ The centrality of reproductive policies in the former Yugoslavian states was due to the fact that power claims over territories was made on the basis of the numerical strength of the dominant nation. In the nationalist system of thought, women were seen as heroines and symbols of virtue and fertility, when they fulfilled their roles as mothers and biological reproducers of the nation. Women who did not want to fulfil this role, or who had children with men of other nationalities were seen as traitors.⁸⁴ To illustrate this we are now going to look closer on the Serb example.

The fact that the nativity was higher among the Albanians in Kosovo than amongst the Serb minority in the region⁸⁵ led to what Yuval-Davis calls a demographic race, where demography was seen as just as important as geography in the ongoing conflict.⁸⁶ Serb nationalists had the feeling that the Serb nation was under threat, and even faced the risk of dying out if the nativity did not increase among Serbs. In order to fulfil their duties as Serbs, Serb women should take their responsibilities as mothers and wives more seriously and return to their “natural” roles and live up the traditional patriarchal values of motherhood, submission and sacrifice. This rhetoric

⁸³ Snyder et al. pp. 188-189

⁸⁴ Mostov, Julie (2000), *Sexing the nation/desexing the body – Politics of national identity in the former Yugoslavia*, in Mayer, Tamara (editor), (2000) *Gender Ironies of Nationalism – Sexing the Nation*, p. 91

⁸⁵ Cockburn, p. 161

⁸⁶ Yuval-Davis, p. 30

was exaggerated when war broke out and many Serbs considered themselves to be under threat, not just from Kosovo, but from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In order to carry out their duties as “mothers of the nation” Serb women must be willing to sacrifice their sons to fight and die for the nation. The epic heroine Jugovići was portrayed as a good example for Serb women. She was the mother of nine sons who all fought and died in the war against the Turks in Kosovo in the 14th century. She willingly sacrificed all of her sons without even shedding a tear, because she believed in the just cause of the war.⁸⁷ The discourse became more and more aggressive as the war went on. When the Serbs had gained control over the radio in the Bosnian town Foča, the minister of information in the Serb Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina stated Foča from now on was Serbian and Muslims would not be allowed to live there any more and that every Serb woman would have to give birth to at least seven children.⁸⁸

The Serb political leaders were not the only ones to emphasise the importance of biological reproduction of the nation. In its platform from 1991, the majority party in Slovenia stated that “women should not have the right to abort future defenders of the nation”.⁸⁹ In Croatia economic rewards were proposed for women who gave birth to more than four children. In Bosnia a prominent Muslim leader requested the Muslim women to have at least five children, “Two for themselves, three for Bosnia”.⁹⁰

These examples clearly demonstrate the effect of the building of a resistance identity on gender relations and women’s position. The Serbs considered themselves to be under serious threat from outside forces. Since this threat was linked to questions of demography it is easy to see how the policies pursued affected women’s situation. The ideal female role was affected as well by the wish to go back to an imagined natural order, in line with identity politics in general. Further, it is possible to discern the link between the construction of women as mothers of the nation and power interests of the nationalists. It does clearly not lie in the interest of women to be denied the right of abortion and give birth to a lot of children just in order to send them off to die in war. What we see here is how the female role is redefined in a way that serves the interests of the nationalist governments.

The example with the heroine mother Jugovići is also a clear example of how cultural stuff from history is dug up in order to legitimate identity policies today, and give people a sense of continuity and feeling that they are defending ancient values. In other words, historical symbols

⁸⁷ Bracewell, Wendy, (1996) Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 19, pp. 28-29

⁸⁸ Thompson, p. 258

⁸⁹ Yuval-Davis, p. 30

⁹⁰ Snyder et al., p. 189

are used in a modern context and are used by individuals in the construction of their identities provides meaning to their everyday actions.

4.3 Women and land

There is a symbolic strong connection between women's bodies and geographical territories and there are various examples of gendered metaphors associated with land.⁹¹ Julie Mostov claims that "Gender and, in particular, proper gender roles became symbolic boundaries of the nation in the nationalist discourse [...] in the former Yugoslavia. Women's bodies actually became boundaries of the nation".⁹² According to Maria Olujic this link is due to the fact that the symbolic "body" of family and ethnic lineages became a geographic territory because territory was not only the land that the military groups were able to hold, but also the physical bodies.⁹³ On the symbolic level, ethnic cleansing was portrayed as a way of taking the territories virginity, and holding the territories was presented as protecting it from the symbolic rape of invasion.⁹⁴ Similar metaphors are expressed in the construction of the national territory as a feminine entity that should be protected from outside forces and that the honour of the motherland must be defended.⁹⁵

The symbolic association between women's bodies and territories is interesting to examine from the perspective of Mary Kaldor who claims that modern wars no longer are fought over territories. She argues that territorial gains in the Yugoslav wars were made through the political control of population rather than military offensives. Consequently, violence was mainly directed at the civilian population and not against the opposing parties, and the front was fragmented.⁹⁶ Considering the gendered symbolism surrounding land and territory, this new focus on territorial gains through political control over the population certainly affects the war strategies in a gendered direction. As we have argued above, it is essential to see how different dimensions of gender affect and reinforce each other. In this case the symbolic representation of national territory affects the actual gender relations and women's position in war. In a context where symbolic gains get more important and since women represent the land, the land can be conquered through the conquering of women's bodies.

⁹¹ Farewell, Nancy, (2004) War Rape: New Conceptualisations and Responses, *Affilia*, Vol. 19 p. 395

⁹² Mostov in Mayer, p. 90

⁹³ Olujic, p. 45

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 45

⁹⁵ Farewell, p. 395

⁹⁶ Kaldor, pp. 50-51

4.4 Women and culture

Drawing on Sandra Harding's argument that gender is variable with culture we will now turn to on of the specific gender features of the Yugoslav context, namely the culture of honour and shame. As we have seen earlier priority was traditionally given to guard women's chastity, fertility and monogamy, and it was the responsibility of men to do this. This results in the view that women's honour is tied to men's honour which in turn reflects the honour of the nation.⁹⁷ As Snyder puts it: "By dishonouring a woman's body, which symbolizes her lineage, a man can symbolically dishonour the whole lineage. On a larger scale within the context of war, the concept of lineage extends to the entire ethnic group or culture".⁹⁸ According to Olujić, the honour complex has its roots in women's reproductive function. The underlying fear is that "a man from another group will impregnate a woman and make fools of the whole group by forcing them to raise an "alien" child. In this way the competing lineage would have permanently invaded the victim's lineage"⁹⁹ The ways in which these line of thoughts appeared violently will be further explored in chapter 5.2.

In a culture where women are seen as bringing shame over their family through their sexual activity, it does not matter if a women have consented or not to sexual intercourse. What matters is that her family has been permanently damaged because she has been penetrated.¹⁰⁰

The image of women as representatives of the purity of the bloodline became an important feature in the nationalist projects in Yugoslavia, which accentuated the symbolic meaning of sexual violence as a weapon in the conflict between the ethnic groups.¹⁰¹

Sexual violence against women can also be the means to destroy nation's cultural and social stability, since women often are the ones who hold the families and communities together in times of war. This was demonstrated by the Serb strategy to take over territories during the war. The first phase of invasion was often to destroy culturally important buildings and monuments, the second phase included killing of intellectuals who had a particularly prominent role in the preservation of culture and in the third step, rape camps were set up. Highly educated and prominent women were often the first ones to be selected and brought to the camps.¹⁰² Nicolić-Ristanović reports of a case from a Croat rape camp where a physician and a teacher were among the imprisoned women and where they were especially tortured due to their higher social

⁹⁷ Olujić, p. 38

⁹⁸ Snyder et al. P. 190

⁹⁹ Olujić, p. 45

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 44

¹⁰¹ Cockburn, p. 162-163

¹⁰² Seifert, Ruth, (1996) *The Second Front – The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 19 p. 39

status.¹⁰³ Thus, the aim of tearing down the cultural identity of the other group as well as women's vulnerable position as carrier of the culture stands clear.

The significance of cultural border guards is demonstrated in the testimony of a young Muslim woman, Sanela, of how she was treated by Serb soldiers. When she was standing naked in front of them one of the Serb soldiers accused her of being a spy, because her pubic hair was not shaved. According to Sanela, it was custom for the older women to shave, but it was not mandatory for younger women. When Sanela withheld that she was a Muslim, the soldiers started to pull out her pubic hair, cutting it off with a knife and cutting her all over her body while laughing.

What is interesting in this example is that the soldiers inscribe markers of ethnicity on Sanela's body, in a context where people believe to be of different "blood", but where it is impossible to distinguish the groups from each other through physical examination.¹⁰⁴

These examples confirm the theories that assert that women are symbolic carriers of culture. The collective identity is defined from the starting point that the women belonging to the group are chaste and pure and the honour of the entire group is tied to women's sexuality.

The ways in which women were attacked as a part of a strategy to break down the enemy's culture and pride indicate women's central role as carriers of the culture, both symbolically and practically in everyday life. In general women have the role of holding the family together in times of war. Sexual violence directed at women thus makes it possible break down the social cohesion through the infliction of unbearable shame.

The case of Sanela demonstrates the significance of symbolic cultural markers in distinguishing the different groups from each other. The female body is in some sense instrumentalised in order to confirm the group identity. In this case, these cultural bodily markers even got consequences for how violence was practised.

4.5 Gender symbolism in media reports

Gendered arguments were an important feature in reports from media, in order to legitimise the war. From all sides, emphasis was put on the defensive nature of war. In Serb television, Serb soldiers were generally said to guarding and protective their native soil¹⁰⁵, and on the list of "correct terms" to use when reporting about the war on Croat television was the rule to always

¹⁰³ Nicolici- Ristanović, Vesna (editor), (2000) *Women, Violence and War – Wartime Victimization of Refugees in the Balkans* p. 61

¹⁰⁴ Olujić, p. 43

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, p. 102

comply figures about Croat casualties with expressions like “gave their lives to defend the homeland” and “heroes in defence of the homeland”.¹⁰⁶ Both Serb and Croat media described their own soldier as defenders of their “centuries-old hearths”¹⁰⁷

A more aggressive form of gendered media reports were demonstrated when the weekly tabloid ST in Croatia reported about raped women in Bosnia in July 1992. The text was illustrated with pictures from a German violent pornographic film, without acknowledgement, implying they were images from Bosnia.”¹⁰⁸ Another related example is the names of the rape camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They could be called things such as Nymph’s Tresses and Coffee-house Sonja, which draw the thoughts to brothels where women satisfy men’s desires by free will.¹⁰⁹

The expression of “centuries-old hearths” reflects both a gendered imagery and the attempt to portray the collective national identity as something ancient in need of protection. It draws on the traditional image of the ethnic group or nation as an extension of family and kinship relations with references to home and hearth. These metaphors also serve the purpose of symbolically legitimising a return to traditional gender roles where women are mainly associated with the domestic sphere.

To draw a parallel between rape camps and pornography or prostitution in this way implies the women in some sense took part in the events by free will and is to blame for the things that happened. These examples fit into the stereotype of women as sluts as described in chapter 4.1., the association of sexuality with violence was demonstrated in pornography and this way of describing reality affected how violence was described in general. Further it is connected to the honour/shame ideology where sexual activity per se is seen as shameful and that it does not matter if the sexual intercourse was consensual or not. In allusion to underlying gender conceptions this way of describing the atrocities further work to dehumanise the victims and makes the strategy of rape even more effective.

¹⁰⁶ Thompson, p. 160-161

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 103, 166

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 191

¹⁰⁹ Olujić, p. 40

CHAPTER 5 - Gendered violence in the Yugoslavian wars

We have argued that the interaction between gender, resistance identity and identity conflicts were determinant aspects of the course of actions in the Yugoslav wars. Further, we demonstrated lingual and cultural symbolic traces of these relations in Yugoslav society before and during the war. We will now turn to the war itself, and investigate how these relations were expressed in the form of sexual violence against women.

Traditionally, sexual relations with women belonging to enemy groups were regarded as highly inappropriate by military officials, mainly because of fear of transmittable diseases and weak discipline among the soldiers.¹¹⁰ This was however the opposite of the policies implemented in the Yugoslav wars, and the effects were considerable for the victims.

For a long time, the existence of organised strategic rape was dismissed by military and political officials.¹¹¹ The exact number of rapes in the Yugoslav wars will probably never be determined. Different statements range from 10,000 to 50,000.¹¹² Most cases reported illustrate mainly Serbian rapists, but in fact sexual crimes were committed by all sides.¹¹³ However, “Serbs who attacked Muslim women initiated the vast majority during the Bosnian conflict. The Serbs possessed a greater military force, and it was they who initiated rape as a strategy of war within the broader context of ethnic cleansing or the forceful removal of civilian Muslims from conquered territory to establish a Greater Serbia.”¹¹⁴

5.1 Rape as ethnic cleansing

One of the ways in which rape strategy worked was as an expulsive method. In this case, the threat of rape was used to make people leave their homes and never want to come back.¹¹⁵ To achieve this, extensive public rapes (not seldom gang ones) in public places or in front of family members or friends were committed, inducing the local population to flee the area. Often, people left their home area out of concern for daughters and their vulnerability in war time. Parents preferred to have their children sent away by themselves to uncertain times in refugee camps rather than facing sexual violence in their home town. Nikolic-Ristanovic reports of

¹¹⁰ Münkler, Herfried, (2004) *De nya krigen*, p.127

¹¹¹ For example, Radovan Karadzic, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs commented the reports of mass rapes with the words “We know of some eighteen cases of altogether, but this was not organized but done by psychopaths.”, and continued to call the allegations propaganda by “Muslim mullahs”. (Dorothy Q. Thomas and Regan E Ralph, *Rape in War: The Case of Bosnia in Ramet, Gender Politics in the Western Balkans*, p. 206)

¹¹² See for example Snyder et al. p.189 and Cockburn, p. 170

¹¹³ See for example Snyder et al. p.189 and Cockburn, p. 170

¹¹⁴ Snyder et al. pp. 189-190 and Nikolic-Ristanovic, p. 66

¹¹⁵ See for example Snyder et al. p. 190

Olivera and Lepa, two women who witnessed of how they and their husbands sent away their daughters to refugee camps of fear that they would get raped. Lepa's words were "*We decided that our daughter should leave Sarajevo because we had heard that there were brothels; we had heard about assassinations, abductions, mistreatment.*"¹¹⁶ One commentator said of a woman in former Yugoslavia that she would in fact kill herself if she was raped. "She could not stand the shame and humiliation, she could not face her children afterwards."¹¹⁷ This demonstration of the feelings of guilt and shame put upon women after being exposed to rape, is important in order to grasp the impact extensive sexual violence had in Yugoslav society. "By virtue of being a rape victim, a woman becomes the perceived agent of her community's shame. In a bizarre twist, she changes from a victim into a guilty party, responsible for bringing dishonour upon her family or community."¹¹⁸

Considering the shame/guilt concept, sexual violence in the form of rape was in many ways the worst possible scenario, making it a very effective way of driving large groups of people from their homes. "*With rapes one saves bombs*" is the explanation of a female witness in Zagreb of the Yugoslav disintegration wars. "*With rapes one can carry out the ethnic cleansing more efficiently and at a lower cost.*"¹¹⁹

Ethnic cleansing through rape is tightly knitted together with the idea of women as "boundaries of the nation", as mentioned by Julie Mostov.¹²⁰ Remembering the symbolic meaning of women representing land (as discussed in chapter 4.3), and considering the importance of purity of women in Yugoslav society, it becomes possible to estimate the impact of mass rapes. When women represent the collectivity's identity and honour, the raping the women of a region, thereby taking their purity from them, become an effective way for attackers gain territory. The fact that concern for their loved ones was what made people flee does not clash with this analyse. Actually, it's quite the contrary. It shows how political and military leaders knew how to make use of the culture prevalent in the area in order to fulfil their goals.

5.2 Rape and women's reproductive role

Women's biological abilities were important factors in the sexual crimes committed in former Yugoslavia. Primarily, the desired effect was to produce children of the rapist's ethnicity. There are many examples of this reported. In one case, a woman, called I.J., who was raped in the

¹¹⁶ Nikolic-Ristanovic, p.67

¹¹⁷ Thomas and Ralph, in Ramet, p. 210

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 210

¹¹⁹ Münkler, p.128

¹²⁰ Mostov in Mayer, p. 20

Croatian camp of Slavonski Brod, said: *“When they [the soldiers] knew that many of us, including me, had become pregnant, they left us alone for a while. They said they did it for the benefit of future Croat children. They were not bothered by the fact that these are Serb women who will give birth, because, as they said, their fathers are Croats and therefore the children will be Croats too.”*¹²¹ Another woman called Gordana said of another rape committed by Croats *“The physician, a 38-yearold Serb woman, was raped several times every day; they told her they wouldn’t release her until she gave birth to an ustaša”.*¹²² Women were also raped in Serbian camps, *“with an alleged strategy by their captors to impregnate them in an effort to breed Serbian children.”*¹²³ There were also reports of Serb troops telling women they raped that *“little Chetniks¹²⁴”* or Serbian soldiers would be born to later kill them.¹²⁵ A Bosnian women and rape victim told Human Rights Watch *“It was their aim to make a baby. They wanted to humiliate us. They would say directly, looking into your eyes, that they wanted to make a baby.”*¹²⁶

The impact of these enforced pregnancies was for the women huge. Most crucial from an identity/ethnicity point of view was how these women were regarded by their own as a result of the pregnancy. The strategy of the invaders was to send a message to the spouses and other men of the same nationality of the women: your women are giving birth to the children of the enemy. The effect was that the raped women often were despised and rejected by their husbands and families, for betraying their nationality by giving birth.¹²⁷ This is exemplified by the case of a 19-yearold Bosnian girl who was raped by Serbian soldiers. *“When her father discovered that she was pregnant and by whom, he decided that she could not go on living with them. So she ran away to another city.”*¹²⁸ Many women experienced the same thing. For in their wombs, Chetniks and Ustašas were slowly growing, thereby taking over the very core of their nationhood. These feelings could be enhanced when the children in question had been born. *“The physic state of the woman is furthermore complicated by the fact that the child is frequently seen by her family and/or other compatriots as a ‘proof’ of the woman’s collaboration with the enemy, or as evidence of her immoral behaviour.”*¹²⁹ Consequently, the children conceived through rape, were often either given up for adoption or became innocent victims of physical and mental aggression.

¹²¹ Ibid. p.68

¹²² *Ustaše*, Croatian fascists. The name is also used by Croatian nationalists, but is a word of insult among Serbs.; Nikolic-Ristanovic, p. 61

¹²³ Snyder et al. p. 190

¹²⁴ *Chetnik*, term for Serb paramilitary forces

¹²⁵ Snyder et al. p. 190

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 208

¹²⁷ Nikolic-Ristanovic, p. 68

Milillo, Diana, (2006) Rape as a tactic of war: Social and Psychological Perspectives, *Journal of Women and Social Work*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 199

¹²⁹ Nikolic-Ristanovic, p. 70

Maria B. Olujić concludes this concept by saying “Through forced pregnancy resulting from rape, aggressors can ‘purify the blood’ of the attacked group by creating ‘ethnically cleansed’ babies belonging to the group of the invading fathers”¹³⁰

In this case, the intersection of the different perspectives in our theoretical framework is important to fully analyse the course of events. Yuval Davis’ argument that control of the reproduction is central to the idea of common origin describes the lines of the patriarchal society in Yugoslavia. The fact that the babies conceived through rape were considered belonging to the rapist’s ethnicity contributes to prove that purity of the blood is a crucial element in preserving the nation. This can be further explored considering Mary Kaldor’s claim that this type of warfare has a focus on origin as determinant of who you are, by tying together identity construction and nationalistic policy goals by creating an “us and them”-way of thinking. When women are raped and impregnated by the enemy, this means that the enemy has seized the very core of the collective identity. This strategy can be seen as a part of the demographic race, as explored in chapter 4.2. By simply making sure that as many babies as possible are half-and-half ethnically (in effect regarded as fully of the rapist’ blood), the attackers are indeed considered by the whole Yugoslav community to be slowly but surely diluting the collective blood of the nation.

5.3 Rape as inter-ethnic male communication

Most women who were raped were done so by men belonging to other ethnicities than their own. Thomas and Ralph talk about the importance of broaden the lens through which we explain wartime rapes. “While it is absolutely essential that efforts to achieve accountability tease out the ‘gender element’ of rape’s motivation, an overemphasis on gender alone, at least on a narrow conception of gender, can obscure other characteristics of a woman’s identity that determines *which* women are raped. In Bosnia, a woman’s religion or nationality as well as her gender make her a target for rape.”¹³¹

To illustrate this, Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic talks of the vulnerability of women in ethnically mixed marriages.¹³² The threat comes from several directions. In the first case, the members of the ethnic group to which the woman belongs want to offend her husband by raping her. “Nataša described such a case. *‘A Croat woman, married to a Moslem man, was raped by Croats, in the presence of her daughter.’*” A second case illustrates when men of the man’s ethnic group want to

¹³⁰ Olujić, p. 39

¹³¹ Thomas and Ralph, in Ramet, p. 211

¹³² Nikolic-Ristanovic, p. 64

punish him because he did not get rid of his wife who belongs to the enemy nation. Nikolic-Ristanovic reports of people saying: “*If it is a mixed marriage, you either go away or make your woman go away.*”¹³³ Thirdly, a man of a third nationality intrudes in order to punish the man for simply fraternising with the enemy nation by having married one of their women.¹³⁴

Regardless of the woman was part of a mixed marriage or not, ethnic belonging were ground for being exposed of rape.

The vulnerability of women is further dependant of not only their own but also their male relations’ behaviour; women were frequently raped as an act of revenge for their husband’s political activities (or accusations of it).

“Women had to ‘pay’ for real or alleged, previous or actual ideas and acts of their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers. Or, more precisely, rape was used as a means to punish a woman’s male relatives. This is a way to explain the abduction, rape, torture and murder of the women whose men were absent and presumed to be fighting on the opposite side.”

Emina talked about such a case where her sister, a Moslem whose husband was Serbian, was taken away by their Croat neighbours. “*They threatened my sister with rape and viciously insulted her. Because her husband was absent, the neighbours thought that he was on the front line, fighting against Croats*”.¹³⁵

Bosiljka talked about her friend, a Serb woman, who was taken away to a rape camp where she was repeatedly raped because her son and husband did not surrender.¹³⁶

The overall conclusion is expressed by Nikolic-Ristanovic. “Women’s bodies become a battlefield where men communicate their rage to other men, because women’s bodies have been the implicit political battlefield all along. Rape in the context of war is the means by which differentials of power and identity are defined.”¹³⁷

In this manner, wartime large scale rapes are neither incidental nor private, but serve strategic functions in war and act as a tool for achieving particular military goals.¹³⁸ Again it is important to address Yuval-Davis comment on women generally being “constructed as the symbolic

¹³³ Ibid, p.64

¹³⁴ Nikolic-Ristanovic, p.64

¹³⁵ Ibid. p 64

¹³⁶ Nikolic-Ristanovic, p.61

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.63

¹³⁸ Thomas and Ralph in Ramet p. 206

bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively".¹³⁹ Part of this strategy is to shame the women's communities by sexually violating their bodies. In communities where much of the nation's status is tightly knitted together with the body of the women, doing this is a way of sending messages of victorious deeds to the enemy and communicating your dominance. This is, according to Thomas and Ralph, exactly why soldiers do rape women. "Soldiers rape to subjugate and inflict shame upon their victims, and, by extension, their victim's families and communities. Rape, wherever it occurs, is considered a profound offence against individual and community honour."¹⁴⁰ Indeed, if it was not such a powerful weapon, it would probably not be used to such an extent.

¹³⁹ Yuval-Davis, p. 45

¹⁴⁰ Thomas and Ralph, in Ramet, p. 209

CHAPTER 6 – Concluding remarks

6.1 Conclusion

To answer our first research question it is evident how the construction of the Woman as a carrier of culture was at the core of the building of national identity in the Yugoslav wars. With the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and its enhancement of original identities and traditional roles, ethnicity became central to the construction of collective identity. Because of the focus on collective identity based on ethnicity by political leaders, women's role as biological reproducers was enhanced in the conflicts. Government-friendly media were actively legitimising the war with gendered metaphors, and allusions of defending home and hearth were a reoccurring theme in the early phase of the war. The defensive language can be seen as a part of the construction of a resistance identity, by recognising the enhancement of traditional and natural roles as a form of unification against the feeling of threat from outside forces.

The ways in which women and gender were symbolically reflected in the wars were in many ways determined by power interests in society, and how women responded to these or not. In the interests of the nationalist elite was to strengthen the reproductive role of women, thus making the prevalent ideal role of women as the Mothers of the Nation. This was also reflected culturally and in media, where women who complied with their duties were celebrated and those who did not were demonised. Further, in nationalist discourse the land and territory was represented as feminine, and the purity of the Motherland was in need of protection. The whole complex of honour and shame was projected on the nation, and thus influenced the course of actions during the war.

It is evident how gender intersected with ethnicity - women were raped because they were women *and* because of their ethnicity. The underlying gender assumptions in the Yugoslav society, combined with how gender was expressed in relation to ethnicity and the Motherland, affected the course of the war. Because of the decreasing importance of territories in identity wars, questions of demographic and symbolic strategies became essential in war making. The women, being the core of the collectivity, were the very embodiment of the honour of the nation. Precisely because of the symbolic values associated with women, rape could be used as an effective strategy for ethnic cleansing and war making. Thomas and Ralph effectively capture the essence of our argument:

“Soldiers can succeed in translating the attack upon an individual woman into an assault upon her community because of the emphasis placed – in every culture in the world – on women’s sexual purity and the fact that societies define themselves, in overt or less clear-cut fashions, relative to their ability to protect and control that purity. It is the protection and control of women’s purity that renders them perfect targets for abuse.”¹⁴¹

6.2 Discussion

Bringing the conclusions out of these specific circumstances, we can hopefully apply analyses of gender/identity-relations to other conflicts. The dichotomy between masculinity and femininity exists in almost all societies and influences the gender relations as well as other societal phenomenon. The identity aspect of conflict seems to be particularly prevalent in contemporary wars. However, we feel that it is the importance of *how* one identifies oneself that have increased, rather than increased importance of identities per se. It is in our opinion the very construction of identities that are objects to politics and power relations in identity conflicts, and possibly in the global society in general.

In this essay we have mainly focused on the construction of femininity and how women were affected by the war. Naturally, the definition of the male role was equally important for the development of the war. The ways in which men were affected (through rapes, forced sexual violence against friends or family and punishments for not living up to the expected masculine role) were similarly significant to the course of war making. Analysing the male role from a gender perspective would almost certainly enrich the description of identity wars. This could be an interesting subject for further investigation.

The centrality of these aspects to contemporary warfare changes the reactions required by the international community in order to form long lasting and effective policies. The interaction between gender, identity construction and ethnic warfare is crucial for the understanding of many conflicts today. This call for a gender awareness of the specific ways women are affected by war. Therefore, we welcome the attention directed at these issues by the ongoing Swedish Red Cross campaign “Save the Mothers”¹⁴². However, bringing academic knowledge to public attention, thereby influencing international policies, is necessary in order to make durable solutions to the problem of strategic violence directed at women.

¹⁴¹ Thomas and Ralph in Ramet, p. 209

¹⁴² www.redcross.se

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