

# letters to the editor



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**Response to Marina Hughson's review of  
Ana Miškovska Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War:  
Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s*,  
published in *Aspasia* 13 (2019): 216–222**

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When Marina Hughson e-mailed me in May 2014 her criticism of my then recently defended doctoral dissertation, I hinted in my reply that I would be willing to comment more extensively if we would move our discussion to an academic journal. That was, in my view, a much better way to contribute to the publicly available scholarly knowledge on the topic in question. I am, therefore, thankful to her for reviewing my book—a substantially abridged and modified version of my dissertation—as well as to *Aspasia's* editors for giving me the space to respond to that review.

It is unfortunate, however, that Hughson portrays me as a particularly *mala fide* scholar who set out to disclose some feminists and, thereby, discredit them and their work. Moreover, that scholar (i.e., me) allegedly wasted no time to achieve her “witch-hunting”<sup>1</sup> mission and “was eager to distribute her PhD dissertation throughout the region as soon as she defended it.”<sup>2</sup> Regrettably, Hughson has chosen not to mention that already in the first chapter I explicitly stated in which key I would like my analysis to be read: “My contribution to the historiography of (post-)Yugoslav feminism will, hopefully, ‘enrich the collective memory [and] make it more critical by integrating in it the knowledge which has not been produced for rehabilitating or denouncing, but rather for explaining and understanding’ (Noiriel, 2007: 691).”<sup>3</sup>

On the same page, just a few sentences earlier, I also expressed my hope that the results of my research would give to my respondents something “in return for the knowledge, histories and archives which they shared with me.”<sup>4</sup> Due to that commitment toward a fairer exchange, and a discontinuation of the unidirectional knowledge transfer between foreign researchers and local research subjects, I sent my dissertation to all my respondents and invited them to comment upon it. My second and somewhat related goal—enriching publicly accessible academic knowledge—manifested in my choice both to make the dissertation freely available via the Digital Academic Repository of the University of Amsterdam, and to distribute it to other (feminist)



women's activists in the post-Yugoslav region. Sadly, much of the contents of the dissertation—including many quotes, footnotes, and references—did not make it into the book because of the publisher's word limit.

Hughson recurrently suggests that I have taken the terms "antinationalist" and "nationalist" for granted, without reflecting about their meaning, origin, and implications. Such a claim could not be further from the truth. As I make clear from the very beginning of the book,

I argue . . . that the terminology and the scholarship (including Western sources) are not neutral and objective, but ingrained with partisanship and power differences. Although I keep the terms "antinationalist" and "nationalist" in order to have a clearer dialogue with those texts, I put "nationalist" between inverted commas. Thereby I want to attend to the thus far unreported (power) differences in naming between the antinationalist and 'nationalist' feminists, and accentuate the importance of approaching these designations critically and carefully.<sup>5</sup>

Hughson's accusation of a lack of reflexivity is even more dubious, given that it comes from a person who has read my dissertation, where I employed the constructions "self-declared antinationalist" and "so-called nationalist." Although these designations addressed the power differences better, I had to take them out of the book because of the already mentioned word limit. This statement (i.e., my indication that I did not use the term "so-called nationalist" in the book) might perplex careful readers when they come across the following sentence in Hughson's review: "As the author herself says: 'Even the anti-nationalist feminists did not blame other so-called nationalist feminists for being nationalist.'"<sup>6</sup> This alleged quote is not to be found, though, either in my book or in my dissertation. Besides pointing to Hughson's rather inattentive reading, her reference to my duly stated elaboration of the lack of consensus among the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists on who was a real 'nationalist' directly contradicts her insinuation that I have treated the categories as carved in stone.

My thorough examination of the terms "antinationalist" and "nationalist" is visible throughout the whole book. I warned "against the creation of simplified dichotomies"<sup>7</sup> and I reminded "scholars to always ask what one's alleged nationalism or antinationalism actually entailed and in which context the positioning in question was produced."<sup>8</sup> These words served too as my guidelines. At the same time, I worked with dichotomies for heuristic purposes, and in accordance with the already mentioned aim of having a clearer dialogue with the scholarship on the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists in the 1990s.

The designations "antinationalist" and "nationalist" were used, by and large, in that scholarship to distinguish the feminists' war-related positionings. I did not prioritize "one specific type of division, that between nationalists and nonnationalists," as Hughson states,<sup>9</sup> but I did focus on it because of its prominence in the relevant works. I was intrigued by what I found there: *There was a regular mention of the division, but those dynamics were usually only somewhat described.* The scholarship contained many imprecise and implicit assertions, and there was an abundance of silent places and re-

petitive information, which had been uncritically referenced from the same few earlier works. In the course of the eight years that I dedicated to this topic, starting with my master's thesis, I conducted a comprehensive literature search for sources in different languages. Therefore, it is an understatement to say that I "believe . . . this particular separation has been underresearched and misrepresented in scholarly literature, especially in the case of Belgrade."<sup>10</sup> Quite to the contrary, I have a firm, empirically based ground for making such claims.

In addition, I did not engage in "ignoring tangible interests" and I did not "essentially hide . . . the initial underlying causes of divisions and conflicts, to which labeling of the other side as 'nationalist' was highly instrumental for some 'nonnationalists' to build their international academic careers and activist recognition."<sup>11</sup> Using Bourdieu, I spoke of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic feminist capital, as well as struggles for legitimacy. In my book one can find sentences like: "The names which the feminists gave to their own positionings and those of other feminists . . . served to situate the concrete feminists and their positionings in the feminist field and legitimise or delegitimise them";<sup>12</sup> and "Given that one's legitimacy was related to access to funds, networks, conferences, trainings, and other resources, the attempts at (de)legitimation were far from insignificant."<sup>13</sup> In fact, the finding that the use of self-ascribed and ascribed-to terms was an essential part of the struggle for legitimacy among the feminists is one of the key findings of my research. Next to not holding water, Hughson's suggestion that some activists were antinationalist (i.e., nonnationalist) just for the sake of pursuing personal gains is highly problematic, as well as disrespectful toward the risks which those people took by publicly expressing such a positioning.

Besides addressing the terminology, I dedicated a lot of space to the contents of the various positionings, and their gradual and painful coming into being. I described that process in as much detail as possible and I repeatedly referred to the context, including the power of war violence to create new meanings and change people's allegiances. Unlike the treatment of this topic by the majority of fellow scholars, I insisted on differentiating between Belgrade and Zagreb, as well as between the first and the second half of the 1990s. Moreover, I attended to the reactions of the feminists when they were faced with their feminist collocutors' disbelief, distrust, and/or a (very) divergent understanding of the extent of responsibility and victimhood of the warring sides. Although I maintained a classification of four feminist clusters—two antinationalist and two 'nationalist'—I made sure to note the discrepancies which I encountered within each cluster. Lastly, I compared the positionings of those clusters with the positionings of the respective authorities: the positionings of the Zagreb antinationalist and 'nationalist' feminist cluster with those of the Croatian state, and the positionings of the Belgrade 'nationalist' and antinationalist feminist cluster with those of the Serbian state.

Due to space constraints, I cannot present here an extensive elaboration of the contents of the analyzed positionings. I claimed that, compared to the positionings of the antinationalist feminists in the same city, the positionings of the Belgrade and Zagreb 'nationalist' feminists stood closer to the positionings of the respective state. That proximity was much greater in the case of the Zagreb 'nationalist' feminists—one of the key reasons why I underlined that Belgrade and Zagreb should not be treated as

interchangeable locations. Unlike their Zagreb counterparts, the Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists did not resort to a warmongering discourse and did not uphold that only one warring side was the perpetrator of (sexual) war violence. Still, the positioning of these feminists resembled more that of the Serbian state because of their comparatively greater attention to the victimization of Serbia and the Serbs by the non-Serb forces, including NATO.

This brings me to Hughson's rebuke that I have performed "two basic intentional misreadings: that these [the Belgrade 'nationalist'] feminists were actually talking about *equal responsibility and victimhood*, and that they did not accept the *collective responsibility of Serbs*."<sup>14</sup> She refers here to the following quote from my book: "[T]he Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists did not underline the foremost perpetrator's role of the Serb militaries nor insist on assuming collective Serb responsibility. Instead, they generally criticised the nationalism of all ethnic groups and the (sexual) war crimes committed by all sides against people of all ethnicities. The Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists, thus, kept using the positioning of equal responsibility and victimhood—which had been, too, the initial positioning of the other Belgrade feminists—but usually focused on the suffering of Serbs."<sup>15</sup>

While disagreeing that I have intentionally misread some statements, I do not reject the possibility of producing misinterpretations. Such a rejection would wrongly and arrogantly imply that I have the last word on the topic. In fact, it is true that I have mistakenly spoken of a "positioning of equal responsibility and victimhood." The positioning of those who have criticized in general all nationalisms and all war crimes is better called a "positioning of shared responsibility and victimhood." I did not state, though, that the Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists had not accepted the collective responsibility of Serbs, as Hughson claims above, but that those feminists did not "insist on assuming collective Serb responsibility."<sup>16</sup> Such insistence eventually became one of the main components of the positioning of the Belgrade antinationalist feminists, together with their focus on the non-Serb victims of the Serb forces.

The Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists' positioning of shared responsibility and victimhood only concerned the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. In the second half of the 1990s, during the war in Serbia (the NATO bombing of Serbia and the Serb ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians), these feminists did not speak of shared responsibility and victimhood. More precisely, they "only spoke of the NATO-induced suffering of Serbs and destruction of Serbia, while being [virtually—I must add] silent about the Serb ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians."<sup>17</sup> Hughson uses this quote to show that my readers were "led to believe that the 'nationalist feminists,' as a 'cluster,' supported the 'ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians.'"<sup>18</sup> That is a far-fetched suggestion. Nowhere in my work did I allude to the existence of tacit approvals, but I did point to the instances of (virtual) absence of overt disapproval, such as this one. Finally, I did not construe, as Hughson asserts, "any mention of Serbian victims as 'Serbian nationalism.'"<sup>19</sup> I argued that a very specific form of mention of Serb victims resembled the nationalist discourse of the Serbian state: a mention where attention to the Serb victims was not accompanied by attention to the victims of Serbs.

If I were to write my analysis now, I would probably alter the classification of the Belgrade feminists and instead of "antinationalist" and "'nationalist,'" speak of "rad-

ical antinationalist" and "restrictive antinationalist" feminists, respectively. In doing so, I would do better justice to, for example, the finding that the Belgrade restrictive antinationalist feminists were less outspoken on the Serbs perpetrating deeds against non-Serbs than the Belgrade radical antinationalist feminists, but still more outspoken than the Zagreb 'nationalist' feminists on, *mutatis mutandi*, Croats perpetrating deeds against non-Croats.

Hughson raises too several methodological and ethical concerns about my research. She criticizes the possibility that readers might be able to reveal the respondents' identity. My choice to combine and juxtapose already published sources with quotes from the interviews, although offering valuable scholarly insights into an insufficiently explored and tabooed subject, can indeed potentially help disclose the person behind the interview quote. Unfortunately, I was and I still am unable to bypass this challenge. The readers will draw their conclusions, but I hope that they will approach my work with an open mind and appreciate the contextualization, (methodological) details, nuances, and reservations, instead of reducing the text to a source of clues for disclosing people's identity. Social scientists are not judges, and their findings, even if empirically sound, are not verdicts and should not be treated as such. On a different note, it is a pity that Hughson decontextualized a statement of mine to show that, apparently, I was deliberately seeking to disclose people's names: "In the book she openly says, 'I wish I could have kept the full names.'"<sup>20</sup> My purpose was altogether different, though:

I wish I could have kept the full names—a choice which would have pleased some respondents, too. There is urgency in documenting the direct actors given the large gaps in the historiography, the fragility of human life . . . and the influence of time on the fading and loss of human memories and paper sources. Furthermore, I would have liked to pay these activists a more explicit tribute for the immense amount of important and often life-saving work which they had conducted under very difficult conditions.<sup>21</sup>

Hughson objects that I did not tell the Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists "that they were being considered part of the 'nationalist' cluster. On the contrary, they believed they were being interviewed because of their engagement in the anti-war movement."<sup>22</sup> To begin with, I do not necessarily see being in the antiwar movement and being seen as a member of the 'nationalist' feminist cluster as two mutually exclusive allegiances, but more to the point, I approached my respondents first and foremost as feminist activists and only then as related to one cluster or another. As I stated in my dissertation and book alike, I asked only one Belgrade 'nationalist' respondent "what she thought of the fact that some feminists did not consider her an antinationalist."<sup>23</sup> It was not due to my intentional strategy of deception that I did not pose this question to the other three Belgrade 'nationalist' feminists. The laden character of the term "nationalist" and the, compared to Zagreb, much more covert war-related intrafeminist dynamics created a barrier that, regretfully, I did not manage to break. On the single occasion when I did ask, I resorted to the more indirect construction "did not consider her an antinationalist," instead of using a direct one, "did consider her a nationalist."

This episode additionally shows that scholars too both suffer from and perpetuate silences.

In closing, I disagree with Hughson that “[t]he case of the Belgrade ‘nationalist’ feminists is the real weak point of the research,”<sup>24</sup> although, compared to Zagreb, the Belgrade part of the research was more difficult. The greater silence surrounding the war-related divisions and tensions among the Belgrade feminists hindered the data collection and analysis. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 added to the complexity of the Belgrade dynamics by raising—more intensely than in Zagreb—the question of justification of such military interventions. There were both Belgrade antinationalist and ‘nationalist’ feminists who began to differently conceptualize the issue of Serb victimhood and responsibility. Some did not publicly express that out of fear of being seen as nationalists by their fellow feminists. I hope that (an)other scholar(s) will be interested in exploring these dynamics further. I also hope that my published accounts of the encountered dilemmas, pitfalls, and other challenges will help other researchers of the (post-)Yugoslav region, especially those exploring the entangled legacies of nationalism, (sexual) war violence, societal instability, and existential insecurity on social movements.

## ◆ Notes

1. Marina Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War: Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s*,” *Aspasia* 13 (2019): 216–222, here 219.
2. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 218.
3. Ana Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War: Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2017), 18.
4. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 18.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 218.
7. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 86.
8. *Ibid.*, 87.
9. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 217.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 221.
12. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 133.
14. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 220, emphasis in the original.
15. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 122–123.
16. *Ibid.*, 122.
17. *Ibid.*, 126.
18. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 220.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 219.
21. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 17.
22. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 218.
23. Miškovića Kajevska, *Feminist Activism at War*, 160.
24. Hughson, “Review of Ana Miškovića Kajevska,” 221.