

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Feminist Activism at War: Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s**, by Ana Miškovska Kajevska, New York, Routledge, 2017, \$149.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138697683

In her informative work *Feminist Activism at War: Belgrade and Zagreb Feminists in the 1990s*, Ana Miskovska Kajevska accomplishes her main goals—to correct misconceptions in the existing literature concerning feminist activism during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and to explore the different “positionings” of feminist activists during this time. Written in an effort to “understand and explain” rather than “rehabilitate and denounce” the various “positionings” or viewpoints of activist women, Kajevska’s work is pioneering and inspiring, especially for scholars who are interested in writing about this time in Yugoslav history. Kajevska successfully lays down a scholarly foundation for future research, providing the necessary missing details and filling in crucial components of previous work. Completed as a doctoral dissertation in 2014 and adapted to a book format in 2017, Kajevska’s work has the advantage of a critical temporal distance from the issue at hand, as she deems necessary for objective insight and analysis. Through extensive personal interviews (48 in total) with feminist activists and those familiar with the movement in the (post) Yugoslav region, a detailed and thorough analysis of previous literature and relevant original documents, Kajevska creates a persuasive narrative that informs new beliefs, as much as it challenges previously held beliefs.

Nuance is a significant part of this work—as is clarification. The breakup of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, and the various conflicts that began as a result, was a tragic occurrence with complicated causes and consequences that still linger in the ex-Yugoslav region. Throughout Kajevska’s impressive work, it is apparent that she acknowledges and is sensitive to this complexity and attempts to explain it further. By examining significant “clusters” of feminists involved in anti-war efforts, who through humanitarian and lobbying efforts tried to counter the bellicose and nationalist character of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Kajevska acknowledges the complications of that time. The feminist women, according to Kajevska and others, performed admirable deeds in the wake of severe conflict. Feminist activists provided services such as psychological counseling and housing to refugee women, who were often the victims of sexual violence. Through links to Western feminists, feminists of the Yugoslav region also worked to increase international awareness about the disturbing nature of the nationalistic violence that was occurring in the region and affecting women in particular and troubling ways.

These accomplishments, however noteworthy, sadly belied serious tensions and differences that existed among activists. This is where the Kajevska work makes a significant contribution: previous interpretations of this anti-war movement speak mostly of one group, the so-called anti-nationalist group, at the expense of the other, nationalist group, so that in this replication of an overstated and uniform positionality, significant nuance and details have been lost. Kajevska refers to the “homogenizing” tendencies of previous scholarship in her work and dedicates the entire third chapter to dispelling some of the problematic tendencies of previous scholarship.

One key argument of this book deals with the nature of the feminist activists of the region and their relationship with one another. Kajevska makes the argument that feminist activists in Belgrade and Zagreb were not only at times in opposition to one another, but also faced serious

intragroup divisions—some of which existed prewar and were based partly on a fight for legitimacy and social capital. Zagreb feminists were particularly “split” across so-called nationalist and anti-nationalist camps. Relatedly, Kajevska makes the point that these terms, nationalist and anti-nationalist, are also sites of contestation; for example, “nationalist” feminists did not self-describe this way but were ascribed this term by scholars.

Furthermore, emblematic of this “split” was the activists’ positioning related to sexual violence during the wars in Bosnia and Croatia. Zagreb nationalist feminists were more inclined to position their criticisms of the violence occurring in warring Yugoslavia as ethnically specific. In other words, Zagreb nationalist feminists viewed and described the wartime rapes and aggression occurring as Serb-led, whereas the Zagreb anti-nationalist feminists took a more neutral and gender-specific feminist stance, noting that there were also Serb women victims of rape and that women during wartime are especially vulnerable to rape and sexual violence in diverse contexts. It was this divide that challenged the Zagreb feminists to their core.

In some contrast, Belgrade feminists, whose split was not as noticeable as the one in Zagreb, were divided in terms of recognition of the culpability of Serbs and Serbia proper during the conflicts. Anti-nationalist Belgrade feminists were more critical of Serbia’s involvement than “nationalist” feminists—and this became particularly salient during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Some Serb feminists endorsed the bombing as a proper punishment for Serbia’s involvement in the fighting occurring in the then break-away region of Kosovo. So-called nationalist feminists were more critical of the military intervention by NATO, citing it as yet another example of masculine/militaristic politics feminism should be countering and fighting against at the very least. Through these recollections and through the powerful words of interviewees, the reader senses the painful and sometimes insurmountable divisions that existed between these groups and within them. It is difficult to not be moved and challenged by some of these details. The tensions that existed between these activists mirror the tensions in Yugoslavia *per se*—reminding one of how difficult the war was.

Besides the many admirable nuanced points, the structure of the book makes cogent sense. The book is organized into six chapters. All six chapters make a significant contribution to the overall thesis. However, some chapters perhaps resonate more than others. Chapter two explores the various key nongovernmental organizations in Belgrade and Zagreb and positions them according to political positioning before the war, during the war, and, when applicable, after the war. This chapter is a valuable resource for anyone who wishes to understand the origins and diversity of certain segments of civil society in the former Yugoslavia, particularly the feminist one. Additionally, chapter four provides a fascinating overview of various events that highlight the divisions that existed between activist groups. From the notorious feminist meeting in Venice in 1992, when post-Yugoslav activist women publicly disagreed, to the more conciliatory meeting in Medulin, Croatia, it is clear that certain events had direct effects on the positionality of the activist women. Kajevska calls these interactions a “process” and most certainly they had effects on the trajectory of this movement and its various sub-parts.

What is also significant about this work is its potential applications to other regions and feminist scholarship itself. Kajevska touches on this point in some parts of her work. She deems this work relevant for feminism, especially feminism that is in opposition to virulent nationalism. By effectively documenting a feminist initiative, or movement, that attempted to stand up to ethno-nationalism and in turn was affected by this same nationalism, Kajevska notes the challenges many feminists can face in similar contexts. It could be noteworthy to see this work connected to other regional studies explicitly. Perhaps through a comparison of diverse regions and movements, we, as scholars of feminism in this context, can begin to spot trends or patterns relevant to both academia and practitioners. For example, a lingering question that I have is: how can feminist women overcome these kinds of divisions to further common goals? One can only hope that the feminist women of the former Yugoslavia will, at least now, place

differences aside and work toward common goals in a region that desperately needs their valuable perspectives.

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**Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus**, by Gerard Toal, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190253301

During the course of the past decade, Russia has pursued an increasingly proactive and assertive neighborhood policy. Russia has launched military operations against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014); it has repeatedly meddled in the domestic political affairs of other post-Soviet countries; it has used economic threats and embargoes vis-à-vis neighboring small states; it has established Moscow-led institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); and it has expanded its network of military facilities and bases in the post-Soviet space. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that Moscow's regional policy has received much attention from area specialists and international relations scholars. In recent years, a slew of articles and books have been published on the topic.

Gerard Toal's *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* is an important contribution to this growing body of literature. As the title suggests, the book focuses on the geopolitical tussle between the US and Russia over Georgia and Ukraine. Toal's starting point is that 2008 became a "very significant year in the remaking of post-Soviet space" (92). There are three reasons for this: the official recognition of Kosovo's independence by the US and its allies in February, NATO's Bucharest summit in April, and the Russian five-day war against Georgia in August. These closely intertwined events led to a major rupture in East-West relations.

The root causes of this rupture, however, run deeper. As Toal shows, Russia has had a longstanding ambition to maintain a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. The US, for its part, seeks to promote liberal norms and institutions across the globe, including the former Soviet region. Accordingly, successive US administrations have worked hard for the eastward expansion of NATO. Many former Soviet republics, in turn, seek protection from Russia by teaming up with the US-led NATO alliance, whereas several minority groups within the post-Soviet space look to Moscow for protection. In other words, there are numerous fault lines of conflict in the former Soviet region that—like a Matryoshka doll—are nested within each other.

To shed light on this complex web of relations, Toal draws on concepts and insights from critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitics is an approach to international relations that seeks to expose how political authorities use geopolitical speech acts to justify their decisions. The specific purpose of Toal's study is to identify the competing "geopolitical policy-storylines" (40) of different actors in the run-up to and aftermath of Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. The resulting analysis is highly nuanced, but simultaneously accessible to a general readership. Its main conclusion is that "affective geopolitics involving identity, status and memory" (287) has been the driving force behind Russia's interventions.

The book's particular merit is that it examines in detail the interplay of the local, regional, and global dynamics that have surrounded Russia's military actions in Georgia and Ukraine.