

PREFACE

Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic and I first met in 1994 at an international conference in Adelaide, Australia. Fortunately for us, we spoke on the same panel - the one dedicated to gender and violence. I was taken with her compelling research on the experiences of violence among women in East-Central Europe. Situated amidst war, economic collapse, political upheaval, globalization and the "new Europe," women in this region faced increasing levels of violence and victimization while struggling to hold their families and societies together. Most significantly, Dr. Nikolic-Ristanovic's research shows that large-scale global changes dramatically affect the most private aspects of the lives of men and women in East-Central Europe - their marital lives, their relationships with their children and parents, their friendships, their community ties.

Impressed by her presentation and our initial meeting, I began a correspondence with Nikolic-Ristanovic, from which I was to benefit considerably. We talked about the war in Serbia, her ethnographic research with women refugees, and the challenges she faced as a criminologist working in that context. After contributing a chapter to a book that Lois Lorentzen and I co-edited, *The Women and War Reader*, Nikolic-Ristanovic developed a research project that synthesized her scholarship on war, gender, violence and women's experiences in the public and private spheres. Her proposal was funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and resulted in this book. We can learn a great deal from it.

Social Change, Gender and Violence counteracts the tendency to view the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc system in purely positive terms. "Transitionology," the near orthodoxy that has emerged and that is appropriately critiqued by Stephen Cohen in his book *Failed Crusade*, contends that Russia and the Eastern European states are undergoing a transition from communism to free-market capitalism and democracy. While that process will entail short-term difficulties, transitionologists argue that the ultimate outcome will be great for the peoples of that region and for international relations. Nikolic-Ristanovic is not the first to question that orthodoxy but her challenge is distinct. While recognizing the positive features of the collapse of Soviet and Yugoslav models of communism, she demonstrates that the economic collapse underway has devastating effects on the people of the region. Her project accounts not only for the economic changes, but for other large-scale changes affecting the societies of East-Central Europe: war; globalization; and radical political and cultural change.

Rather than limiting her study to macro level aggregate data, her research applies ethnographic methods to situate the lives of women and men, girls and boys, amidst these changes, melding both macro and micro levels of analysis. Her book shows that hardship falls disproportionately on women in the region. Women are most likely to be left in poverty. They often become heads of household, responsible for providing not only for their own children, but also for members of their extended families. Elderly women and young girls are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poverty. Women and girls constitute the majority of the refugees. Under these conditions of social stress, more women experience violent attacks from their

husbands, male partners, and sons. Nationalist forces within the region have reinstated traditional gender roles in their mobilization of support for the state, further reducing women's social status and power. With the breakdown of the communist or socialist model, social protections previously guaranteed to women have eroded. Thus, while in some ways the "transition" is to be welcomed, in many other ways it spells disaster.

This research brings to bear the kind of analysis we need in order to understand societies in transition and societies at war. While a flood of books and articles, both scholarly and popular, have positioned one ethnic group against another in a battle for morality in East-Central Europe, Nikolic-Ristanovic's work reaches out to women and men from four countries: Bulgaria, Macedonia, Hungary, and Serbia - and to many more ethnic groups. When I spoke with her during her research, she expressed her anguish at hearing the stories of women from not only her home country of Serbia, but also Croatian women, Albanian women, Roma women, and others, who have suffered violence during this time of upheaval and change. Nikolic-Ristanovic showed what was common in these experiences, while avoiding a reductionist gender analysis that overlooks cultural differences. She calls on us to listen to women's stories, but does not reduce the problem of violence to male pathology. Instead, she has placed the lives of both women and men in context, showing how the difficulties produced by war and economic hardship destroy the relationships of people who love and care about each other. Nikolic-Ristanovic calls this phenomenon "the mirror" - the reflection of global change in our private and community lives.

Nikolic-Ristanovic's account reflects an author who is not only a committed social scientist, but also a woman who has experienced the upheaval firsthand. With this book, she shapes the interpretation of events that have dramatically affected her own life. Her dedication to the research under severe conditions stands as an emblem of compassionate scholarship - melding her heart and mind to explain and witness history unfolding in East-Central Europe.

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