

Conscientious Objection and Antimilitarism

LOOK AT THE PHOTOS

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION
SUPPORT FOR DESERTERS
REPORTS FROM CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

From 1991 to 1996:

Already beginning in October 1991 we openly expressed solidarity with those who reject war and with all men who refuse to go to the front, demanding amnesty for deserters as well as an end to the mobilization of violence for war.

Beginning with the end of 1991, Women in Black have been operating a men's support group, and together we have organized this concrete help and these actions:

- Moral, emotional, and political support to deserters and conscientious objectors;
- Counter-information and alternative information by writing reports about the status of the human rights of deserters and conscientious objectors and about the violent mobilization of refugees, implemented together with international antimilitary networks and networks for human rights and also relevant international institutions (European Bureau for Conscientious Objection, Council of Europe, Amnesty International, etc);
- Contact with those threatened and their representatives (asylum seekers, deserters, veterans, lawyers' offices, bureaus of human rights);
- Cooperation with other groups in the country, especially in the area of former-Yugoslavia that is concerned with the same or similar questions;
- Antimilitarist education.

From 1996 to 1999:

We announced a journal on conscientious objection, OBJECTION, to begin in 1996 (up to now 9 numbers have been announced).

That same year, we began regular observations of May 15, the International Day of Conscientious Objection, and we promoted the idea in concerts, public places, and men's festivals. Activists participated in seminars about conscientious objection in European as well as non-European countries, and established very lasting and solid connections for mutual support, cooperation, and common works with antimilitarist networks in all of Europe, especially Germany and Spain.

With the goal of better functioning informal networks, in the end of 1996, we held three meetings, each with around thirty young activists from about thirty cities in Serbia. During the NATO intervention a solidarity support network to offer concrete help for young people who refused to be mobilized was set up, and a couple of our activists founded Safe House in Budapest for this purpose.

From 1999 to 2003:

The end of 1999 was the beginning of more organized work of the Network for Conscientious Objection, and for that purpose many meetings were held in May 2000 in Studenica and Kraljevo, in August 2000 in Vuc and Montenegro, and in May 2001 at Srebrn Lake in eastern Serbia. Besides that, the network also started a larger number of campaigns for the acknowledgement of the right to conscientious objection in May 2000 in more than 20 towns in Serbia and Montenegro, and additionally in December 2000 and January 2001 in over 30 towns in Serbia.

From December 2000 to May 2001, we continued gathering signatures to shorten the period of military service and to acknowledge the right to conscientious objection. The action was implemented with others in around ten towns throughout Serbia, and had a very significant impact both on public consciousness towards demilitarization and on confronting the past, but above all on public sentiment regarding the question of conscientious objection.

Educational work on demilitarization consciousness and destruction of the patriarchy continued also during 2003 as a series of workshops in various parts of Serbia. These workshops were primarily intended for young people. Cooperation with other organizations who also deal with these questions on a legislative plane continued.

In this period there were also two feminist antimilitarist gatherings:

- "Let's Globalize Feminism and Antimilitarism", March 29-31, 2002, in Belgrade, with the participation of activists from the International Network of Women in Black from Italy, as well as women peace activists from the Women's Peace Network and Network of Women in Black from Serbia and Montenegro.

- "Women Create Peace: More for Health and Knowledge, Less for Armament!" May 25, 2002, in Belgrade.

FROM CARING FOR OTHERS TOWARDS ANTIMILITARISM

On the streets and squares of Belgrade in December, January, and February, Women in Black organized a petition-signing campaign for a legal petition to reduce military service and recognize the right to civil military service. Four thousand signatures were collected. Several activities took place at the same time: the collection of signatures for the legal petition and also education for peace, antimilitarism and non-violence. The reactions of the Belgrade citizens were no different from the reactions in other places.

The action on the whole had two important characteristics:

- The action was markedly decentralized (most of the signatures were collected by organizations outside of Belgrade).
- Many women from organizations with a feminist and pacifist orientations participated, and more women than men signed the petition.

The Women in Black consider that this action consolidated the civil society in Serbia by strengthening cooperation between NGOs, especially the ones outside of Belgrade, and by strengthening the network of alternative antimilitarist policy. On the whole, this action strengthened the network of conscientious objectors initiated by Women in Black.

Why did so many women's groups participate in the action?

- Primarily because women activists consider support given to conscientious objectors not only as support given to friends but as a political statement representing their choices.
- Because conscience objection cannot and must not be reduced to only the right for civil alternatives to military service and the abolition of compulsory military duty, but because it is connected with the every day life of women, first of all with their marginalization, inequality, and gender roles.
- Because feminism and antimilitarism are inseparable as much as militarism, sexism, and nationalism are a part of patriarchal control over women
- Because feminists who have taken part in the action do not admit the existence of separate men's and women's issues, do not concede to being put into a ghetto where women's activism would represent just another form of caring for in the private sphere.

- Because women activists make transparent the connection between military expenditures and the poverty in which most of the women in the region live.

- Finally, because it was a good opportunity for the de-Nazification of the consciousness, and that is the basic precondition for abolishing the causes of wars.

The next question was, why did such large number of women take part in the petition? It turned out that largest number of people who signed the petition were women between the ages of 40 and 65. Why?

- Because their experience showed that regardless of their ideological orientation they were the ones who carried and are still carrying the greatest burden of militarism.

- Women were the ones who provided the most care for their male relatives who were forcefully drafted, who ran away from the front, and who avoided or still avoid military duty by managing to think of different ways to hide and protect them.

- Because they are tired of taking care of others.

- Because they do not want to live in constant fear.

- Because they do not want other people constantly making decisions for them.

- Because they want to regain control over their own lives and the lives of their families.

- Finally, because they have learned the hard way that they are the ones who have to carry the burden of the so-called sublime national goals.

So the following conclusions can be made. These women's actions are due to anti-militarist stands, which stem from painful personal experience and not from theoretical feminist analysis. It is more about a motherly/maternal advocating for peace and their desire for their children to have a better life. Most often the women would say while signing: "This is for our children's better life," "Let it be better for our children," "Let there be peace."

Their own marginalization and devotion to caring for others is transformed into a kind of opposition to militarism. ("We will not allow them to take our children away from us anymore" was a statement which could very often be heard while signing the petition). Marginalization is thus transformed into a means of fighting against militarism.

Women are very willing to participate in antimilitarist activities that are connected to their personal life and everyday experience. Antimilitarist theory is something completely foreign to them unless it touches their personal lives.

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