

# Making Female Bodies the Battlefield

Alas for women, there is nothing unprecedented about mass rape in war

By Susan Brownmiller

“This is all about identity,” the TV newscaster said earnestly, attempting to shed some light on the murderous ethnic rage that has torn the former Yugoslavia apart.

Perhaps the newscaster should have amended his analysis to say *male* identity. Balkan men have proved eager to fight and die for their particular subdivision of Slavic ethnicity, which they further define by religious differences. The Serbs are Eastern Orthodox, while their sworn enemies, the Croats, are Roman Catholic. Bosnians, or rather the 44 percent of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina that is neither Serb nor Croat, are Muslims; they currently side with the Croats. But Balkan women, whatever their ethnic and religious background, and in whatever fighting zone they happen to find themselves, have been thrust against their will into another identity. They are victims of rape in war.

If the Serbs have emerged at the bad guys in world opinion, it is largely because they have been wildly successful in carving a Greater Serbia out of Chunks of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbian land advances have been accomplished in the are-old manner of territorial aggression, with looting, pillage and gratuitous violence that gets lumped under the rubric of atrocity.

So it is heart-rending, but not surprising, to hear of mass rapes committed in Bosnian villages recently overrun by Serbian fighters. Bosnian refugees fleeing to Croatia give horrendous eyewitness accounts. Detention camps have been turned into brothels that the Bosnian foreign minister in Washington call “rape camps.” Pregnant detainees will suffer the additional shame of bearing unwanted children of war. An emotional Bosnian appeal calls the Serbian rapes “unprecedented in the history of war crimes,” an organized, systematic attempt “to destroy a whole Muslim population, to destroy a society’s cultural, traditional and religious integrity.”

Alas for women, there is nothing unprecedented about mass rape in war when enemy soldiers advance swiftly through populous regions, not is it a precedent when, howling in misery, leaders of the overrun country call the endemic sexual violence a conspiracy to destroy their national pride, their manhood, their honor. When German soldiers marched through Belgium in the first months of World War I, rape was so extensive, and the Franco-Belgian propaganda machine so deft, that The Rape of the Hun became a ruling metaphor. Afterward, the actual cases were dismissed by propaganda analysts as rhetoric designed to whip up British and American support, but if the rapes had not had propaganda value, they wouldn’t have surfaced.

Women are raped in war by ordinary youths as casually, or as frenetically, as a village is looted or gratuitously destroyed. Sexual trespass on the enemy’s women is one of the satisfactions of conquest, like a boot in the face, for once he is handed a rifle and told to kill, the soldier becomes and adrenaline-rushed young man with permission to kick in the door, to grab, to steal, to give vent to his submerged rage against all women *who belong to other men*.

Sexual sadism arises with astonishing rapidity in ground warfare, when the penis becomes justified as a weapon in a logistical reality of unarmed noncombatants, encircled and trapped. Rape of a doubly dehumanized object—as woman, as enemy—carries its own terrible logic. In one act of aggression, the collective spirit of women and of the nation is broken, leaving a reminder long after the troops depart. And if she survives the assault, what does the victim of wartime rape become to her people? Evidence of the enemy's bestiality. Symbol of her nation's defeat. A pariah. Damages property. A pawn in the subtle wars of international propaganda.

**Sexual conscripts:** During World War II, when the Germans were on the march again, atrocious rapes were committed on the bodies of Russian and Jewish women in the occupied villages and cities while still more women were dragged off to forcible brothels, or to death. When the tide reversed and the Soviet Army began advancing into German territory on the road to Berlin, it was the turn of German women to experience the use of their bodies as an extracurricular battlefield. In the Pacific, the euphoric Japanese occupation of China's wartime capital in 1937 was accomplished with such freewheeling sexual violence that it became known as The Rape of Nanking. Astounding though it seems, it wasn't until this year that Korean "comfort women" overcame their shame sufficiently to tell of *their* unwilling role in World War II as sexual conscripts for the Japanese Army.

How short is the memory of those who see warfare strictly in terms of national and religious pride. The mass rapes committed by Pakistani soldiers in newly independent Bangladesh were also called "unprecedented" in 1971, when the government of Bangladesh appealed for international aid to help with the aftermath. As in Bosnia now, Bengali women were abducted into military brothels and subjected to gang assaults. Although the raped women of Bangladesh were termed Heroines of Independence and permitted to secure abortions, there were ostracized by their own men when they returned to their Muslim villages. And lest this brief overview be accused of its own ethnocentric bias, sporadic cases of gang rape appear in the records of courts-martial for American soldiers in Vietnam, and further accounts are contained in the Winter Soldier Investigation conducted by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

The plight of raped women as casualties of war is given credence only at the emotional moment when the side in danger of annihilation cries out for world attention. When the military histories are written, when the glorious battles for independence become legend the stories are glossed over, discounted as exaggerations, deemed not serious enough for inclusion in scholarly works.

And the women are left with their shame