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Five Women Who Won't Be Silenced

The Nation

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“Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia!” read the headline in a December 1992 Issue of *Globus*, a nationalist weekly that some Croats call a *revolverblatt* because it spends so many words shooting at enemies. The story went on to tell about five "witches" who, to make names for themselves as political dissidents, covered up the rapes of Bosnian women and shamed their country by talking about press censorship in Croatia to international human rights monitors. The article took as its point of departure last year's 58th Congress of International PEN, where U.S. delegates had protested that because of war in the former Yugoslavia and conditions of wartime censorship, the organization should not hold its next Congress in Dubrovnik, Croatia, as planned. *Globus* asserted that this threat to Croatia's prestige had been engineered by five women writers: Slavenka Drakulic, Rada Ivekovic, Vesna Kesie, Ielena Lovrie and Dubravka Ugresie. The article kicked off a scandal that now, months later, as International PEN meets in Croatia, continues to make headlines in Central Europe. The story, involving the manipulation of International PEN for nationalist purposes, reveals much about the state of Croatian culture.

The *Globus* article included a chart on the five women, noting their ancestry (proving they were not of pure Croatian blood), political affiliation, occupation and address. A lot of the information was wrong, as was the crude characterization of their politics. They were accused of suppressing information about Serbian rape camps, though both Drakulic and Kesic had written about wartime rapes. They were said to have described these rapes as crimes of men against women, not crimes of Serbs against Bosnian Muslims

and Croats. They were attacked for being published too much abroad, reading foreign literature, complaining a lot and having a bad attitude:

Almost without exception, they were little girls of communism! Girls from the families of informers, policemen, guards of prisons, diplomats, high Party and political functionaries. The few among them who, in spite of their theoretical position and physical appearance, did succeed in finding a marriage partner, chose something according to the official Yugoslav standards: a Serb from Belgrade by Rada Ivekovic, Serb (two times) from Croatia by Slavenka Drakulic, and Serb from Croatia by Jelena Lovric. It would be immoral to mention these facts were it not, when one looks at it now, altogether a matter of systematic political choice rather than accidental love choice! [Note: In the nationalist papers, "Yugoslav" has become a synonym for Communist or traitor.] What was this all about? Surely not PEN. I attended the 58th Congress in Rio de Janeiro and was present at all its public discussions; at none of them were these women even mentioned. But there are plenty of other reasons that Croatian patriarchs and patriots might find the "five witches" objectionable. Slavenka Drakulic, an essayist and contributing editor of this magazine, is an outspoken feminist whose essays published in The New York Times and The Nation provoked much ire in some circles for their lack of a sufficiently nationalist world view. Rada Ivekovic comes from an old diplomatic family (one of her sins) and is a scholar of Indian philosophy. Because she was born in Croatia and her husband in Bosnia, they are no longer citizens of the same country and cannot live together anywhere in the former Yugoslavia, so they live abroad, the worst sin of all. Vesna Kesic is not only a journalist but an activist in the Zagreb Women's Lobby and the Center for Women Victims of War, which does rape counseling on a non-nationalist basis, also a sin. Jelena Lovric, a distinguished political columnist known for her fearlessness in pursuit of a story, was the first journalist to be hauled into court by the new government; she received a six-month suspended sentence for accusing a government official of corruption. And Dubravka Ugresic has a character flaw: She makes jokes about everything, even nationhood. Besides, her literary reputation—many consider her the best Croatian fiction writer—cannot have endeared her

to male rivals. Above all, these “witches” write as individuals, each with her own point of view, rather than as Croatian citizens. And the fact that they travel and publish so much abroad makes patriots even more uneasy, for Croatia, feeling misunderstood, has turned its back on the world. The public abuse of the five women has only escalated since December, and the list of other traitors named in the press grows daily: actors, artists, writers, film directors—anyone with an international reputation who can open doors, bring ideas back and forth, and let a little bit of air into a closed society. Ivekovic calls this state of mind “cultural autism,” a fortress mentality that looks only inward and into the past. “Many people, not only we five, are treated like this all the time. They want us and any critical intellectuals, possibly any intellectuals, to go away. The result for culture is disastrous, and journalism has never been so low, not even during socialism. It is ideological and cultural cleansing!” Yet in this atmosphere, PEN, which people in Central Europe think of not just as a literary club but as an international protector of free speech, is holding a conference. It is no ordinary meeting. Because of protests about attacks on freedom of the press, including the campaign against the “five witches,” the executive committee of International PEN took the unusual step of polling all PEN centers to see if they would go to Dubrovnik. Thirty-three said the congress should be deferred; fourteen said they would go. The executive committee compromised: A literary conference would be held, but it would be moved from Dubrovnik to the island of Hvar. It would not be a real congress—having no Assembly of Delegates and passing no resolutions for freedom of speech—but the president of Croatian PEN, Slobodan P. Novak, would be allowed to use the name “59th Congress.” Novak immediately issued statements trumpeting his victory over those who had protested, and suggesting that they had been working in the interests of Serbia. Echoes of the Globus article? Indeed, there is substantial evidence indicating that Novak himself started the “five witches” affair by sending a fax from Rio that, for the first time, treated the women as a feminist group and labeled them a threat to the PEN congress. This was then circulated to the Croatian press. When asked if he had prompted the attacks that followed, Novak replied that these “can only be taken as a sign of freedom of the press.” Despite requests, he has issued no public statement affirming that the women never spoke or

organized against the Dubrovnik congress. They are now suing Globus under a new law against "infringing the dignity of the person," and he is about to be subpoenaed. This court case will be the first test of whether anything can challenge the power of the Croatian revolverblatt. In a state of war, where armed patriots roam the streets, articles calling people traitors—and there have been many such, mostly against Serbs living in Croatia and critics of nationalist politics—are incitements to violence. Some people did indeed disappear at the beginning of the war. And there is little possibility of printing opposing points of view. The privately owned Croatian press consists of two extreme nationalist scandal sheets, one of which is Globus; both are published out of the government printing house. The chief editors of all other dailies and periodicals are appointed by a board of directors nominated by the government. Radio and television are state-owned, and program content as well as personnel are supervised by a director who is also the vice president of the ruling party. This amounts to freedom of speech for nationalists, and censorship for everyone else. As Ivekovic says, the nationalists "don't need to put writers into prison; they simply give them to the press, like to rabid dogs." Through the early months of this year, one Croatian daily still maintained editorial independence, printing a spectrum of opinion including non-nationalist material disagreeable to the government. This was Slobodna Daimacija, published in Split, on the Dalmatian coast, rather than in the government printing house in Zagreb. But in the middle of March, the government took control of the paper, breaking a strike by employees who had protested the takeover. Non-nationalist journalists like Vesna Kesic and Jelena Lovric now have a harder time getting published than dissidents did under communism.

Shortly before the first "witches" article appeared, Dubravka Ugresic wrote on the predicament of the Croatian writer, saying that, unless one sends all the correct ethnic signals and makes it clear she shares the approved patriotic sentiments, she will be considered weak, vacillating and self-indulgent, if not actually treacherous. "In a time of destruction of the old world, the new reality differentiates only between black and white. right and wrong. In the world of strong coordinates, in the clear world, there is no fear that one could be lost in

polysemantic truths. Because we are at the beginning, we need only one truth." In other words, Croatian writers have been told to forget nuances, gray areas, individual points of view, and report for ideological duty. This is the position of President Franjo Tudjman, a member of Croatian PEN, and it is that of Slobodan P. Novak, until recently his Vice Minister of Culture. But whatever Croatian PEN may represent, PEN as a whole should stand for internationalism and freedom of thought and speech. Edmund Keeley, president of PEN American Center, says the Congress in Croatia has "brought the integrity of International PEN into question." The organization has allowed itself to be used by Croatian nationalists, who otherwise have turned their backs on the world, in order to present a false picture of world approval for domestic consumption and to give Croatian writers their marching orders.

"I, as a Croatian woman-writer, will not obey these requests," Ugresic writes. "Instead of being at the frontier of my country, I would rather walk the frontier of literature, or sit on the frontier of freedom of speech. Should I believe Osip Mandelstam when he says that a writer is a parrot in the deepest meaning of the word? A parrot, he says, does not know time; this bird sleeps whenever you cover the cage with a cloth. If the parrot disturbs its master, he will simply cover the cage with a cloth, and for literature that is a substitute for the night. I don't know if it is dark enough yet, but good night, Croatian writers, wherever you are."