We Come in Peace

War Veterans in Peacebuilding

Centar za nenasilnu akciju

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Foreword

"We Come in Peace" – this phrase often appears in science fiction narratives and is spoken by extraterrestrial visitors on their first encounter with a planet's inhabitants to signal that they come with friendly intentions. "We came in peace for all mankind" is the inscription on the Apollo 11 lunar plaque which was placed on the surface of the moon. But in our – very different – context, the phrase refers to another type of pioneer, much more down to earth. In this book, it signifies the powerful engagement of ex-combatants who decided to reach out to former enemies from the wars in the Western Balkans and take one small step by sharing their experiences and building relationships. In a second step, they then spoke about their feelings in public and started to engage for a culture of remembrance that recognises the pain and losses on all sides. It takes a great deal of courage to engage with people who fought on the other side. Step by step, this group of veterans transformed themselves into peace activists and helped to build a broader network of like-minded people who are willing to speak out in public and engage in peace education.

This took immense courage and cannot be taken for granted after the brutal history of violence that accompanied the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1990s. Today, international actors tend to describe the region as "stable". However, many wounds are still burdening the people who live in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia. In some of the war-torn areas, it would be more accurate to speak of a "cold peace" rather than a settlement or transformation of conflicts. This is particularly true for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, where questions of state-building and political status are still contested. In some places, people are still fearful and see a risk of relapse

into confrontation. It is important to look back at recent history to understand this situation.

The region of the Western Balkans endured oppression and intervention by major powers under the Ottoman Empire, during the Habsburg period and finally in the Second World War, and suffered occupation by the Nazis in the 20th century. Societies in the region experienced a high level of violence, shifts of borders and population transfers throughout their history. Different empires succeeded in securing their claims to power in the Balkans for a while, but numerous forms of ethno-political nationalism emerged and were fostered at the same time. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) consisted of multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious societies. However, the implosion of the state in the 1990s was marked by an almost unimaginable rise of ethno-nationalism, followed by brutal wars and numerous atrocities.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia and Serbia in particular look back on a common history of confrontation and violent struggles over power, possession and territory. In 1991, Croatia's declaration of independence marked the start of a war between the Croatian military and the army of the SFRY. One year later, BiH's proclamation of sovereignty was followed by more than three years of war, mass killings and systematic ethnic persecution. The wars ended in 1995 when the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) between the conflicting parties was brokered by international negotiators against a backdrop of NATO air strikes.

Following the establishment of an international mechanism for the prosecution of war crimes, transitional justice processes started quite early in the Western Balkans compared with many other war-torn societies. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), set up by the United Nations in 1993, had a leading role in this process. By signing the DPA, the governments of BiH, Croatia and the FRY committed to mutual recognition and the peaceful settlement of disputes. They also agreed to adhere to the provisions on dealing with the consequences of the war, notably the return of refugees and the prosecution of war crimes. Cooperation with the ICTY was one of the main criteria set by the European Union (EU) for accession negotiations with the governments in the region, and international actors (EU, UN, OSCE) assisted those governments to establish domestic war crimes chambers and transitional justice strategies, which are expected to serve both accountability and fact-finding.

All these efforts were helpful in ending impunity, giving a voice to the victims and providing documentation and a historical record. However, they were of limited effect for peacebuilding. Unfortunately, there was no proper process of peacebuilding in the wake of the Dayton Peace Accords. As a result, more than 25 years after the Accords ended the war in Bosnia, the signatory states (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia) continue to be burdened by the legacies of the violent past. Furthermore, they are also struggling with political structures and institutions, identities and cultures of remembrance in the present.

In *Bosnia-Herzegovina* in particular, ethno-political division is ongoing and visible in the construction of different languages, cultures and religious identities, and significant sections of society do not identify with the (nation) state of BiH. Ethno-nationalist thinking and political action also hinder processes of reconciliation and relationship-building in neighbouring countries. *Serbia and Kosovo* are still attempting to deal with the legacies of the 1999 war (which was further complicated by NATO's intervention). In Serbia, politicians and society at large are still struggling with the status and independence of Kosovo. In *North Macedonia*, tensions continue between those who define themselves as ethnic Slavic Macedonians and those who identify as Albanians, a situation which came close to escalating into another war in 2001. Some of the conflict lines that triggered the wars in the 1990s have not been transformed; on the contrary, in some areas (notably in BiH and Kosovo), we can speak of frozen conflicts at best. Furthermore, myths and narratives about past events exist that can easily be activated to fuel new dynamics of hatred. Diverging memories are used by ethno-nationalist political leaders to foster division instead of social cohesion.

Against this background, there is an urgent need for people who present undeniable facts in order to counter false historical narratives and propaganda. There is also a need for initiatives that focus on acknowledgement and bridge-building between people from different constituencies and communities, despite their differing, often antagonistic, memories of the past. It would be too much to expect that a joint view and interpretation of past events can be established. Nevertheless, it should be possible to create some empathy for different views and experiences. Efforts to understand the pain and suffering of people who belonged to "the other side" can pave the way for building confidence, trust and relationships. Civil society actors have a key role to play – a role which is replete with potential but also involves a high level of responsibility – in this challenging process.

The Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), founded in Sarajevo (BiH) in 1997, is a very important actor in this crucial field, with more than 25 years of experience in peacebuilding and nonviolent conflict transformation. Working across ethno-political and national borders, CNA has demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity to the specific conditions pertaining in the region and has shown that it is capable of working with groups and individuals from different contexts. Since 2001, the CNA team has maintained offices in Sarajevo and Belgrade, managing a wide variety of networking and bridge-building activities across the region. One of CNA's most important characteristics is its high degree of flexibility and creativity in shaping initiatives for dealing with the past in a way which contributes to peacebuilding.

But what does "peacebuilding" mean in the highly complex environment described above? People who engage in this field need to constantly reflect on their activities and strategies in order to create processes that can genuinely make a difference and contribute to social change. They must ask themselves: Who should be approached, and which kind of alliances are needed? Who will be brave enough to embark on this ambitious journey in an environment of ethno-political fragmentation and polarisation in which only the victims of one's own constituency are remembered? What is the role of ex-soldiers and former combatants? Can people who were actively involved in the war, either as conscripts or as volunteers, contribute to peaceful transformation of a war-torn society? What do we know about these people, their attitudes and motivations? This is why the CNA team started to approach war veterans' organisations in order to find out more. How did they get into the war, what was their experience, and how do they cope with their memories? Is it possible to involve them as connectors and peacebuilders?

The peacebuilding work carried out by the Centre for Nonviolent Action shows that despite some veterans' organisations in the region cultivating ethno-nationalist identities and behaviour, others are very open to exchange and dialogue. The same applies to individuals. Some war veterans who fought on opposing sides during the wars are more than willing to discuss their views. After engaging in conversations in a safe space, some of them are prepared to share their experiences and interpretations of past events, not only with former enemies, but also with a broader public. Encouraged by CNA, they have taken part in joint commemoration initiatives that pay respect to the victims on all sides and, in this way, started to establish an inclusive culture of remembrance.

From roundtable discussions that CNA held with ex-combatants in Berlin, Sarajevo and elsewhere, I recall three main findings: (1) Many of these former

soldiers had no desire to fight a war, but were convinced that they had to defend their nation, territory, homes and families. (2) They say that other forms of dealing with political conflict need to be established, and (3) they believe that they should make it their personal responsibility to ensure that war does not happen again: "I want to be able to look into the eyes of my children who might ask me: What have you done to stop violence from breaking out again in our region?" This sentence was repeatedly expressed in different ways. Thanks to continuous support from the Centre for Nonviolent Action, an impressive network of veterans has emerged in the past 20 years, connecting groups and individuals who are eager to visit sites where atrocities were committed, hold silent commemorations and reach out to people in local communities, political parties, media and administration. Many of the protagonists faced multiple challenges, and not all of them can count on acceptance from their own (cultural, national or religious) context.

CNA and the network of war veterans can now look back on more than 20 years of cooperation. They have a wealth of experience with the potential to inspire activities in other post-war contexts. It is this, above all, that motivated the CNA team to write this book. I want to congratulate the authors, interviewees and editors who contributed to this important publication. Above all, I would like to pay tribute to the war veterans who agreed to make their voices heard here. I am sure that this book will prove to be a great source of inspiration for readers not only from the Western Balkans but also from many other regions who want to understand the needs of ex-combatants and how to bring them into dialogue with each other and with wider society. The book offers a wealth of practical knowledge, but also sheds light on the dilemmas and obstacles that arise in post-war peacebuilding.

CNA has been an important hub for cross-border peace work in the Western Balkans for 25 years, focusing on peace education, nonviolent conflict transformation and public awareness-raising. People from all over the former Yugoslavia have participated in its training programmes and workshops on nonviolent action. The CNA team has developed various training formats that have helped to embed the concept of nonviolence (nenasilje) in the regional context. They have also produced films and publications that provide insights into various approaches for dealing with the past. All this has helped to create an impressive cross-border network of experts from the education sector, the media and the NGO community, and finally also from war veterans' organisations.

I am grateful for the many opportunities that I have had to accompany CNA on this journey over more than 25 years in a variety of roles, including fundraising, strategic

reflection, evaluation and joint workshops with friends and partners from the region and beyond. Our cooperation at every stage has taken place in an atmosphere of mutual learning. Thanks to CNA, I learned to understand that the reality in the societies in the region of former Yugoslavia is much more complex than academic studies have revealed so far. Furthermore, I learned that peace work can only be successful if it is done by a variety of individuals who are open to experiments and ready to change perspectives. CNA's approach is full of sensitivity, decency and respect for the specific local circumstances and the complex challenges of trust-building. This is highlighted, for instance, when the team explains why it is reluctant to use the term "reconciliation" in the post-Yugoslav context, trying to avoid overloading people with excessively ambitious concepts. I want to thank the team for several decades of innovative and creative peace work in the face of numerous obstacles and lack of support from political leaders. I would like to conclude with an appeal to CNA: Please persevere and ensure that the network of peace activists continues to grow. This will help to build the hope and confidence that are urgently needed for sustainable peace in Europe and the world. And please continue to showcase peacebuilders' experience in documentaries and publications.

Dr Martina Fischer, Berlin, Germany.

I
The Peacebuilding Potential of War Veterans

Introduction

In the late 1980s, a process of transformation from one-party rule to a democratic system began in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). At the time, the country consisted of six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia, which also had two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina). Each of the republics and the two autonomous provinces had a representative in the SFRY presidency, which made decisions based on a majority of these eight votes.

Tensions were already high in Kosovo (the southern province of Serbia) throughout the 1980s. Police violence and military interventions were used in order to crack down on the nationalist movement of Albanians who formed the majority within Kosovo and demanded self-determination rights. However, these actions led to dissent within the leadership of Yugoslavia. The new leader of Serbia (and later war crimes indictee) Slobodan Milošević took a hardline stance and attempted to secure a majority within the presidency in order to impose his own will. These actions sparked a major row within the Yugoslav presidency and the ruling Socialist Party in the late 1980s. A nationalist surge in Kosovo led to nationalism in Serbia, which caused concerns in other republics and non-Serb ethnic groups, further antagonising nationalism. The stage was set for the violence to come.

Free elections were never held for the whole of Yugoslavia, but as single republics held elections in this atmosphere of fear, nationalist forces came to power, promising solutions and offering the prospect of secession. Many of the nationalist forces used unprocessed historical events from past wars as "evidence" of who their enemies were, claiming that the "perpetrators of crimes had evaded their rightful punishment".

Rumours of military coups and/or civil war became more frequent. Nationalist parties won elections in Croatia, with the consequence that Croatian Serbs (a large population group in various areas of this country) rebelled against the new Croat

authorities with armaments and incitement from Serbia. Many people were afraid that their "own" ethnic group would be discriminated against. This fear led them to believe that violence was the only way to prevent that from happening.

A similar development could be observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, the self-declared Bosnian Serb leadership attempted to impose political solutions by using threats and force, having secured large sections of the Yugoslav Army and armaments for this purpose. A spiral of violence started and within three or four years, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had seemed to be a relatively peaceful society, was turned into a powder keg. The fact that most citizens of Yugoslavia could not believe that the war would actually happen, and did not want it to happen, made no difference once the threat to their lives and communities arose.

A decade of wars followed, lasting from 1991 to 2001. They were characterised by massive suffering among the civilian population, countless war crimes, ethnic cleansing, detention camps with appalling torture, mass rape and other kinds of abuse. No post-Yugoslav country has calculated the total human losses or compiled a list of victims, but according to credible research by non-governmental organisations, around 150,000 people were killed. In addition, 200,000 people were detained in concentration camps, several million people became refugees or internally displaced persons, and about two million joined military or paramilitary formations. It affected or involved, directly or indirectly, all the constituent parts of the former Yugoslavia. The violence was stopped by a series of peace treaties, most of them negotiated or imposed by the major powers, primarily the United States of America. The first of these peace accords was signed in 1994 (Washington Agreement) which ended the war between Bosniaks and Croats in BiH; this was followed in 1995 by the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia and led to mutual recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. The war in Kosovo, which included the bombing of Serbia by NATO, ended with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement in 1999. The 2001 war in North Macedonia ended in the same year with the signing of the Ohrid Agreement, supported by European leaders.

It is important to remember and learn from this. Probably most important is the fact that the war was a long time in the making. Its causes developed over a period of ten years, at least, before the fighting actually started. Another key factor which contributed to this disaster is that the fears and hatred between the communities were fuelled by "unresolved" conflicts from the past. We are convinced that it is important to learn from this period, and in particular from the developments that led to the wars, in order to be better prepared for the task of preventing violent conflict. This

is why we engage for peace and nonviolent conflict transformation in our region by networking and conducting a variety of cross-border activities that support people to deal constructively with the past and work for a peaceful future.

The Centre for Nonviolent Action came into being in 1997 and started its peace work with a very small team based in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina). A few years later, in 2001, we also opened an office in Belgrade. In the beginning, we mostly focused on organising training courses in nonviolent conflict resolution, gathering people from different communities. Participants came from non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, the media and political parties, and many of them were meeting people from the other side for the first time. It was only two years after the end of the war in BiH and Croatia. However, among those who participated in these first encounters were some individuals who had served as soldiers in the wars of the 1990s. These were young people in their twenties who had been drafted during the war. Some of them were reluctant to share that they had participated in the war, although it was quite clear that ordinary people had no choice, as general mobilisation was mandatory and imposed under the threat of force. The participation of people from different sides, with direct combat experience, added weight to the dialogue established at the workshops, even when these young people felt the need to distance themselves from their wartime experiences or to suppress them. The war was not at all easy on those who were not in uniform, but wartime combat experience also left indelible traces on the souls and often on the bodies of the veterans. Fear, suffering, death, injuries, the brutality of the enemy and of fellow combatants, and certainly hatred, were all part of that experience. In public discourse, they are most often referred to as the people to whom the country owes a great debt. As opposed to the refugees and/or deserters, who are treated with contempt and derision, the combatants enjoyed respect, except in Serbia where the role of the Serbian state in the wars was concealed, so war veterans remained invisible until the war in Kosovo. It is often said of the fighters that "if it were not for them, this country would not be here today, and neither would any of us". In the early years after the war, they were held in high regard and respected. Veterans' associations had political weight and influence, and in the initial years of the post-war period their representatives were unencumbered by accusations of corruption.

In the first few years after the end of the war in BiH, fear of the war erupting again was high and opportunities to meet people from the other side were few and far between. There were no reliable transport and communication links, and the general social climate of deep animosity, distrust and intolerance was the new normal. The

main symbol of the hostility and inhumanity of the other side was the image of the enemy soldier. It would not be going too far to say that soldiers from the other side were completely dehumanised; they were perceived as unjust, cruel and inhumane, and this perception was widespread in all the communities. This image would often be transferred and generalised so as to apply to entire ethnic communities, which were seen as represented by their soldiers. Recognising exceptions to this rule was seen as a gesture of generosity and proof of one's own fairness and tolerance.

In the post-Yugoslav war-torn societies, war narratives stated the collective guilt of nations that were at war with each other. Such narratives were ubiquitously imposed and left no room for doubts, for owning up to mistakes, injustices or delusions, for human gestures on the part of the enemy. They replicated the matrix of an oversimplified and carefully selective narrative that stemmed from the Second World War and reflected the dichotomies of aggressor/defender, fascist/antifascist, just/unjust. They left no room for empathy with others, for seeing the injustice committed on your own side, or for understanding that the fears people felt may have been irrational, but they were undeniably real. At the centre of all these narratives were the just and united "us" personified by "our fighter" and the unjust "them" represented in the dehumanised and monstrous figure of "their fighter". The exclusion was deep: communities were permeated by a sense of their own righteousness, so that even invitations for cooperation or reconciliation could be seen as belligerent, because the idea of former enemies meeting as equals was unacceptable to those deeply convinced of the moral superiority of their collective.

At a couple of training events, we had the opportunity to experience the infectious emotional charge that developed between former enemy soldiers, due to the process of being liberated from the fear of (former) enemies and seeing each other as human beings. We noticed the positive effects that dialogue can have, that it contributes to rehumanising of the enemy, and creating empathy. It became clear that such encounters could unlock a huge potential and symbolic power if they were portrayed in the media without distortion.

Cooperation with veterans meant opening a process for dealing with the most hardened prejudices that formed the biggest barrier to normalising relations, for facilitating a dialogue among members of the enemy collective. Our aim was to create a space where former enemies could see each other as equal human beings, as part of a heterogeneous group, and realise that not everyone committed or supported injustice: some were victims of it themselves and some tried to help. For veterans, entering this process meant stepping not only out of their comfort zone, but out of the safety and self-sufficiency of collective ethnic positions of superiority and into exposure to criticism from outside their own collectives.

We were sure that if we managed to make conversations between former war enemies acceptable and if these encounters proved to be constructive, we would open the door for bridge-building and for a debate that may question the narrative of inevitability of wars. We were convinced that the wars that marked the dissolution of Yugoslavia could have been prevented and that we have a responsibility to prevent our societies experiencing a repetition of such a disaster. It depends on us and our ability to make the idea of peacebuilding – which is undoubtedly socially beneficial – visible, real, feasible and rational. The emotional relief that comes with deconstructing hatred and hostility will be pure bliss.

On the following pages, peace activities that were carried out in cooperation with ex-combatants are explained in detail. We started with public forums in local communities where speakers were "former enemies". Then we developed a special training programme for war veterans. We organised war veterans' visits to each other, where a local ex-combatant association would assume the role of host and "guide": they would take us to the places of suffering and places of remembrance in their local communities, while sharing with us what had happened and how. We had the feeling that we had done something quite revolutionary when we went together for the first time to the place of remembrance of a war crime committed by members of their army. Slowly, we included the media, as well as victims' families, human rights activists and representatives of local authorities and religious institutions, in this work. We started going to the official commemorations together, influencing the paradigm shift away from mourning only "our own" victims. Ex-combatants appeared together in various media, with a distinct anti-war message. They were very helpful by joining our work on marking unmarked places of suffering. They decisively and unobtrusively showed the public that it could be different and that we have a chance for lasting peace.

The idea for this book came into being several years ago, when people from other parts of the world started taking an interest in our peacebuilding work with war veterans. We realised we should try to gather all our experience in one place and publish it, so that it would be more readily available to anyone looking for inspiration about what else could be done and how. We also felt we owed our associates, the war veterans, something more as a way to recognise their courage in working with us to pave the way towards reconciliation and peacebuilding in our post-Yugoslav societies, for their years of cooperation and the tremendous trust they had placed in us. These two reasons were more than sufficient for us to roll up our sleeves.

One of the aims of this book is to present many original voices of war veterans in order to illustrate their motivation and personal experience. This is why we organised

interviews with 29 war veterans that included a wide range of questions: where they were from, what they did before the war, what they do now, how old they were when the war started, why they took part in the war, what they fought for, what their wartime days were like, what was most difficult, what they still like to remember, what they hoped for at the end of the war, what they feel proud of, etc. We also asked veterans about their peacebuilding experience: why they decided to become involved in peace work, what they expected when they first encountered an "enemy" veteran, how they imagined the encounter and how it turned out, how people from their communities responded to their peace activities, how they dealt with negative reactions, where they found support, what they believe can be achieved with joint peacebuilding activities by war veterans, should they continue, and what they hope for.

In his article "Developing Cooperation", Nenad Vukosavljević writes about how the cooperation between CNA and war veterans developed from 2002 onwards. He describes what kind of activities have been conducted in BiH, Serbia and Croatia and explains in detail the dynamics of how the work developed: the things we tried, the good and bad and the ups and downs, giving an overview of our experience over the past 20 years.

The article "Times of War and Its Aftermath: Combatants' Experiences" (by Ivana Franović) explains how veterans entered the war, what they experienced, and how they came out of it. Her following chapter "Taking Part in Anti-War and Peace Activities" illustrates how ex-combatants slowly transformed into peace activists, and the chapter "Community Reactions" sheds light on the – often sensitive – social context in which they had to operate. What is their experience in their respective communities? Do their relatives, neighbours, colleagues and friends appreciate their cooperation with people from the other side and their engagement for inclusive cultures of remembrance? Amer Delić, himself a veteran and one of CNA's coordinators of activities with war veterans, describes his experience in the text "Fighter Turned Peacebuilder – What Will People Say?" He presents a very personal reflection on his wartime activities and perceptions (which include contradictions and dilemmas in dealing with "the enemy") and explains his individual process of transformation.

One of the most frequent questions we get asked about our work and cooperation with veterans is about their encounters, whether they ever get into arguments; *has it ever escalated to physical violence*? The atmosphere at these encounters can best be described as touching, even though there are significant differences between

individuals. This is the topic of the chapter on "Peace and Harmony?" by Nenad Vukosavljević, which also explores prospects for the future.

Essential background information is provided in the second section of this publication. First of all, we present key facts that may be of interest to readers who want to go deeper in their research in order to understand the social and legal situation of war veterans in the region. In his chapter "War Veterans in BiH, Croatia and Serbia: Definition, Numbers and Legal Status", Nedžad Novalić tackles the issue of who is a combatant, how many war veterans there are in the region, the role and number of veterans' associations, the budget allocations for war veterans and how their social situation has developed.

In the chapter "Who Are These People? Profiles of Ex-Combatants", we present short biographies of the war veterans who contributed to the peace activities, commemorations and visits to sites of suffering. These profiles were compiled by Ivana Franović, based on the interviews.

One of our very close friends, Novica Kostić, sadly passed away before this book was finished. We miss him desperately and honour his engagement in the obituary "In Memory of Novica Kostić".

The chapter "About the Team Working with War Veterans" describes the experiences of the people (CNA team members and trainers affiliated to us) who carry out activities with veterans. Based on interviews with these persons, Ivana Franović presents a picture of their motivation, how they found themselves engaging in peace work and what they feel is important in their work.

We would like to thank all the veterans who contributed to this book by giving extended and comprehensive interviews. We also thank all those we didn't manage to interview but who have worked with us for many years and helped our peace work develop and grow, who were with us as we learned together and kept up the hope that a better world was possible.

In particular we want to name: Franjo Grgić, Krešo Primorac, Spasoje Kulaga, Zoran Milenković, Samir Škiljan, Senad Jusić, Krsto Rakić, Seid Čeho – Čupo, Ibrahim Topčić – Pajo, Enver Karabeg, Đorđo Jež, Goran Nikolić, Sead Đulić, Mirko Vujanović, Zdravko Kufner, Nesib Efendić, Boban Gorčić, Ljudevit Kolar, Boban Blagojević, Zerin Džambić, Nermin Karačić, Gordan Bodog, Zoran Leković, Drago Franciskovič, Kemal Bukvić, Marko Martinić, Dževad Budimlić, Vojo Vuković, Dragan Mavrak, Željko Bračun, Emir Zjajo, Aljoša Bauk, Abdulah Sijerčić – Pelam, Božo Matanović, Narcis Mišanovic, Nenad Bukvić, Osman Zulić, Stipan Grgić, Viktor Maras, Vlado Dragojlović, Adem Macić, Zdenko Šupuković, Rado Purić, Emir Likić,

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Even though this book focuses mainly on cooperation with war veterans, it is also a fact that CNA's work in general has a very broad scope and aims to engage with the whole community. We are therefore especially grateful to all the victims' associations we have met over the years and with whom we paid our respects to the victims. The open doors and hearts we found motivated us to do more and overcome difficulties and failures. We would also like to thank the local authorities for their cooperation, the representatives of religious communities who supported us or joined our actions, and all the other people of good will and the organisations we met that gave us their support, if in no other way than through a pat on the back. We are grateful to all the media that covered the war veterans' activities; our particular thanks go to the reporters whose sensitivity helped convey how much these people were doing for peace.

We hope this book will be an inspiration to peace activists in the post-Yugoslav region, in other war-torn societies and the world out there. To this end, we are making it available for free on our website nenasilje.org together with all our other publications.

Ivana Franović and Nenad Vukosavljević
on behalf of the Centre for Nonviolent Action

Developing Cooperation

Nenad Vukosavljević

In this text, I will try to relate how our peacebuilding work with war veterans started and developed, a path that was by no means easy or straightforward. To make it clearer how this work developed and what made each next step possible, I will present it chronologically, rather than by the types of activities we designed and implemented. I will focus in particular on our misconceptions, overly optimistic expectations and the mistakes we made. We had no one to learn from, so we learned from each other – our own team, peace activists, war veterans, fellow citizens past and present – and from our successes and failures. We learned patience and we learned to accept imperfection and show understanding. It would not be going too far to say that we learned how to be better people, first towards those whose attitudes seemed foreign or objectionable, and then towards ourselves and the societies we live in.

Public forums and what came out of them

Our first goal was to deconstruct or at least start taking apart the uniformity and homogeneity of the image of the enemy by creating a space where former combatants could present their human experiences together, in the presence of the enemy, in a process that would be public and open to an interested audience. It was not our goal to prove that "they" were not what they were seen as, but to show individuals from the other side who were not afraid to testify in front of an audience of the "enemy", to let the audience decide for itself. The product of that were public forums organised from 2002 (seven years after the end of the war) with former combatants from all three sides (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian). In speaking out, they were not representing either

the entire veterans' population, or a nation or state; they were speaking exclusively in their own name. The intention was not to retell and restate the common distorted historical interpretations of the recent war, but to uncover human life stories from the other side of the demarcation line. To reduce the chances of people still seeing the speakers as representatives of their armies, the forum programme included a moderator and four speakers, two of whom were from the same side, but whose different experiences and views provided insights into how the narrative of the wartime past was not and could not be uniform. We therefore titled the forums *Four Views – From the Past: How did I end up in the war? Towards the Future: What is the path to lasting peace?* Apart from our colleague Adnan Hasanbegović, member of CNA and veteran of the Army of RBiH, we found other speakers through meetings with veterans' associations or recommendations and mutual acquaintances, as well as contacts made at the peacebuilding training sessions that we organised.

Our aim was to bring dealing with the past closer to ordinary people and step beyond the social divisions, particularly prevalent in Serbia at the time, between the "smart and innocent" and the others who were "stupid and to blame for the war". The gap between those who supported the war and those who opposed what led to it was unproductive, because apart from moral condemnation, it did not offer a way for society to learn the lessons of the past in order not to repeat it in the future. We wanted to start a dialogue between people who did not agree and let it serve as an example that would help develop an awareness about how it was necessary and possible, despite the differences that were plain to see. The programme of public forums was not organised in Belgrade but in other towns across Serbia where the possibility of meeting people from neighbouring countries was significantly smaller, where broader community engagement was more likely, and where the impact would be more significant.

The first series of public forums, entitled "Four Views", was launched in June 2002 in four cities in Serbia: Inđija, Niš, Novi Pazar and Kragujevac. Four veterans – most of them unknown both politically and professionally, with no experience of media appearances – came together around this idea. With some of them, we felt we shared ideas of peacebuilding, while with others we weren't sure what we could expect.

Support from the local authorities was also important for us, so we sought it out. Most of the forums were held in municipal buildings, which was also a way to diminish security risks. Despite this, there were attempts to prevent the forum in Kragujevac, when the police had to intervene.

Both the public and the local media turned out in large numbers for the first four forums. However, after the first forum, we found ourselves in an uncomfortable situation: the speakers had presented some views and positions that we were deeply opposed to, but our role as organisers did not leave us room to become more actively involved in the discussion. As encouraged as we were by the positive responses from the audience, mainly their positive experience of an encounter with former enemies, i.e. guests who had come from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, we were dismayed by the messages of some speakers from Serbia that were either generalisations, labelling, or unacceptable simplifications and selective interpretations of history. We had asked the speakers, above all, to refrain from generalising and pointing fingers at others, from assigning blame. We wanted to encourage all of them to be self-critical and speak about how they questioned themselves, based on the assumption that this could inspire most of the audience to do the same. We wanted to try to avoid the pattern of proving others' guilt, which was common in the dominant media. It goes without saying that the speakers were free to accept our advice or reject it. As it turned out, some of our associates managed to resist the urge to blame others, while some did not. Of course, in a safe space, building mutual trust, we spent a lot of time talking about what hurts us and bothers us among "our own" and among the "others".

The concept of the forums, the speakers and the Centre for Nonviolent Action featured in a publication that was printed as an insert of *Vreme*, the most respected independent political weekly at the time.

The lesson we learned from these first steps was that knowing each other better and having an opportunity for dialogue in a safe space could reinforce trust among the speakers and our organising team and help us create the dynamics for self-reflection and self-criticism. Applying this lesson learned was only partially possible ahead of the scheduled forums in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The next series of "Four Views" forums was held in Zenica and Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Zenica, two speakers who were veterans of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) were joined by veterans of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO), while in Banja Luka, two veterans of the Republika Srpska Army were joined by veterans of HVO and ARBiH. It was very difficult to find local partner organisations that were familiar with the local context and prepared to participate in organising the forums, because the expected risk was very high. People often said that someone might decide to set off a bomb at the forum if we dared to bring in former enemies from the other side. For this reason, the forum in Banja Luka was organised in the government building with high security measures. The fact that the forums were organised at all

was a major success and a step forward, testifying to the possibility of dialogue in a social climate of hostility.

After these forums and the difficulties we faced, we decided to form a larger group of potential speakers who could be engaged as needed and where possible, with a view to ideally having the veterans themselves connect in the future and organise cross-border activities without assistance. This concept relied on our experience of peace education programmes where in a short time we managed to create a regional network of activists who used their peace education from CNA's Basic Training and Training for Trainers to initiate numerous activities and/or establish new peace organisations. We understood that the formula that worked with activists could not simply be replicated directly, but we reckoned that skill gaps would be overcome if connections were made at the level of motivation and the basic idea.

We therefore decided to carry out a **two-part training (5+2 working days) in peacebuilding for war veterans** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. The focus of the training was on dialogue, developing empathy, practising communication skills and mutual sensitisation. We worked with ten participants who responded well to what was, for them, an interactive workshop methodology they had not experienced before. From the group of participants, we formed a team of people prepared to appear in public together and they were the backbone of the **second series of "Four Views" forums**. The training had the effect we were hoping for and even exceeded our initial expectations, so that the speakers sometimes also acted from a position of understanding and defended their former enemies at the subsequent forums or in TV appearances. This atmosphere they created among themselves was transferred to the audience, producing a strong emotional charge throughout the second series of forums in 2003-2004 (three in Serbia: Vlasotince, Novi Sad, Kraljevo; three in BiH: Nevesinje, Gornji Vakuf, Sarajevo; two in Montenegro: Bijelo Polje, Podgorica). The messages that were sent out to the public during the second series of forums were in principle aligned with nonviolence and peacebuilding values, and there was room for both dialogue and criticism between us as the organisers and the veterans as forum participants.

In 2004, we also made a **documentary called *Traces*** with the participation of veterans from all three sides and members of their families. Over the next few years, the documentary was broadcast by all the major public TV stations in the region. In the period from 2002 to 2004, we invested a great deal of energy into working with veterans, while in parallel we continued our other programmes, especially the peace education programme.

The veterans we were working with at that time were individuals who did not hold positions within veterans' associations, while our attempts to win support from veterans' associations were partially successful and remained mainly verbal for individual forums. An advantage was certainly that some members of CNA were veterans themselves, but this was not enough to establish real partnerships and get veterans' organisations committed to peacebuilding in the long term. We wanted to raise our work to the institutional level, and our new associates among veterans were themselves frustrated by the rigid nationalist course of their organisations. This is why we thought empowering them as a group through training and support could lead to a cross-border network of cooperation that could act independently even without CNA. We saw CNA's role as breaking the ice, setting things in motion and then leaving the field to others to continue along an at least partially cleared path. We knew that resistance to veterans' peacebuilding activities would be strong, as was the resistance to the idea of having enemies come to speak about their perspectives on the war.

Our ambitions grew after the second series of forums; we were buoyed by their exceptional success, and especially the progress that was visible compared to the first series. In addition to an excellent turnout by the public and the media, the way the veterans spoke was free of hate speech; it encouraged taking individual responsibility, without broad generalisations of guilt and innocence or of collectivising victimhood. The way they spoke elicited empathy; the audience was rapt and the speakers did not give any cause to question their honest intentions or the trust placed in them. We thought that we could perhaps get a group of war veterans ready to work on their own, without us, and they could continue along the path set by the forums and the interest they had elicited. We planned to do a **10-day training in peacebuilding for war veterans** and then assess how we could support them further.

The 10-day training was held in 2005 under extremely difficult circumstances because of a recommendation from a veterans' association from Serbia for a participant who evidently had the task of sabotaging the training. He refused to participate in the workshops, he would not answer any questions and he used every opportunity when speaking to express his distrust towards the team and the organisers. People who have experience working with groups on dialogue and building trust can imagine how such behaviour by a single person in the group can affect group processes and working together. Since the participant did not respond to our attempts at dialogue or encouragement to engage with the training, on the third day, we had to ask him to leave. In my 25 years of training practice, this was the only case where that happened. Still, the atmosphere in the group was marred and some

of the participants decided to return home early (with a plausible excuse), so the sabotage had worked after all. We were angry and sad that this attempt had been so frustratingly unsuccessful. However, almost ten years later, some of the participants who had left early on that occasion became our local partners again and said of the sabotaged training, "I did not understand what was going on at the time," indirectly apologising for not supporting us openly at the time. In fact, we stayed in touch with most of the participants from that training and have developed long-standing cooperation with some of them that has lasted into the present. However, the aim of establishing a cross-border group made up solely of veterans with the capacity to work together independently, creating programmes and implementing them, turned out to be unrealistic. We had been misguided in our expectations and had to take a step back and face the difficulties working with war veterans entailed, difficulties we would rather have avoided if it had been possible to do so. The failure to form a cross-border group of war veterans that could carry out peace work independently, without any support from us, was largely due to a lack of necessary skills and structures that would be supportive when taking responsibility and independently leading a process of cooperation between war veterans, or rather, their organisations. Ultimately, only a few of them were in a position to devote themselves entirely to this work. Some had only limited working ability, some already had jobs, and some felt they needed support and did not have the ambition to take on greater responsibility. Potentially, there was also some fear of conflict in a situation where they would be left to their own devices, without us at CNA, as a mixed team of people with a proven track record of knowing how to handle such situations, to stand by them.

As opposed to education work with potential multiplier effects that we were familiar with from peace work discourse, working with war veterans, often characterised as disruptors of peace work, was challenging, difficult, emotionally demanding and very unpredictable. There were moments in the next few years that made a deep impression on me personally; for me, they were uplifting, and although it may sound like a cliché, I would say they taught me a lot, which I hadn't expected, or sought out. The processes of personal transformation, inner struggle, changeability, incongruity, awkwardness, honesty and emotion don't sound like something we would ascribe to war veterans, but they were exactly what marked our work with them. As a conscientious objector, I was regularly labelled a deserter and looked at askance by veterans. Still, in time I grew to love many of them, these brave veterans from all sides, despite the many differences that separated us. I could never have imagined that a high-ranking officer of an "enemy" army would be crying on my shoulder or that the leaders of large veterans' associations would treat me like a

brother, but that is precisely what happened and I feel blessed because of it, not just because they made me improve my work, but because I believe this made me at least a bit of a better person.

We were not fully satisfied with what we had achieved at these first training events and dialogues with veterans. However, our long years of experience working with various other groups told us that these meetings were an invaluable tool and that we shouldn't give up and should instead focus our efforts on finding a model that would suit this specific group. We knew that working to build trust was at the heart of fruitful cooperation. We noted all our mistakes and things we weren't happy about and tried to improve our approach in every next step. We had no one to learn from, so we learned from our own experience.

In 2006, we again organised a two-part training for war veterans (5+2 days). In organising these training events, we faced many difficulties, primarily the lack of trust that made veterans' associations wary of cooperating with CNA as a peace organisation and their later wavering and ultimately pulling out of participation. The training was thus left with a smaller number of participants than planned and made us think hard about how to proceed. The content of the training – interactive workshops based on dialogue – helped to dismantle distrust and fears among all the participants, but did not fully clarify what we could do together and how. The training did fulfil the aim of building trust, but it did not meet what turned out to be our overly optimistic expectation that it would activate veterans to engage in structured peacebuilding. They did not see any room in their environments for such activities, and this lack of support in their communities was a critical deterrent. On top of this, they themselves did not possess the skills or knowledge to turn their newly awakened need to engage into strategically developed lines of activity and to design, at least conceptually, specific actions. Simply put, the road was too long and complex, and it was completely unfamiliar to them. They couldn't proceed on their own.

The two-part training we organised in 2007 introduced two important changes. We had conducted a series of individual meetings in advance of the training to agree on the participation of one to three individuals from each veterans' association. We kept in touch with them frequently in advance of the training and thus ensured that we had the planned number of participants and the desired diversity within the group. In the first part of the training, we worked on communication, sharing opinions, establishing trust and finding common ground in terms of values as the basis for our work together and as preparation for the second part of the training. The other conceptual change in the programme was that in the second part of the

training, we focused exclusively on exploring possible joint actions. We invested time in designing them and gave each other feedback on these ideas, thereby making them imaginable. Special emphasis was placed on developing actions to visit sites of memory and sites of suffering. We discussed how, apart from existing monuments that marked sites of memory, there were numerous unmarked sites of suffering where the victims were members of minority communities in the given area and that they also deserved to be visited. This could then be an incentive for local authorities to have the sites marked in a dignified and lasting manner. We talked about sites where civilians were killed and sites where soldiers were killed. What is implied by a public visit to sites where people from one's own community were killed is that the significance of marking the site is to express sorrow over the victims and respect and gratitude to the fallen fighters. The question which then arises is what would be the meaning of visiting sites where enemy soldiers were killed? The meaning of such a visit cannot be either an honouring of sacrifices made in a common struggle, or gratitude, because that would imply negating the nobleness of one's own struggle. If we honour the victims among our enemies, what meaning are we giving to our own fallen fellow combatants, and what message are we sending to their families, to whole communities? Fear of "betraying" their own ideals, but in actuality the dominant narrative about the righteousness of their struggle that they had adopted before, during and especially after the war, was very much present. What answer can be given to these questions? Over the years, each of the veterans from the group sought answers to these questions for himself, sometimes many times over. For us at CNA, the common denominator of each visit, whoever the victims were and whatever the circumstances of their deaths, was mourning the lives lost, no more and no less than that. Our gesture expressing respect for life did not justify the war aims of any side, nor did we make any value judgements about them; we did not call the victims innocent, or guilty, we did not generalise guilt, we did not ridicule myths or interpret the war, and we did not support retribution or justify killings and other crimes.

The first, historic visits

At the start of 2008, the first actions of the war veterans' group were organised: visits to sites of suffering in three cities, in Sarajevo, Bugojno and Prnjavor. Each city had a different majority ethnic community. Decisions on the planning of each visit were made by local veterans' associations that were the hosts of the visit in cooperation with CNA, but the final decision on including sites where *unpopular*, minority victims

were killed and that were not marked in any way were made by the host organisation. On the other side, all those who participated in the visit had to decide, individually, whether to accept the invitation to visit a monument erected in memory of fallen soldiers of the enemy's army. It is not surprising that the war veterans did not want the media to be invited, given that they were all apprehensive of negative responses from the public that would make their lives difficult, forcing them to justify their actions and defend themselves from accusations of betraying and diminishing the importance of victims from among "their own".

During this first series of visits, there were no commemorative visits to unmarked sites of suffering in the sense of leaving flowers and such, but there were conversations about the existence of such sites in each city that was visited.

These visits were historic because it was the first time that veterans' organisations, and not just individuals, stood behind the idea of dialogue, meetings and cooperation with wartime enemies. Cooperation between wartime enemies was the result of an understanding that in order to build a better society, they had to seek solutions together, and that this future-oriented perspective cannot skip over dealing with the past and the injustices committed in the name of the collective. Encouraged by the experience of difficult but productive dialogue from the workshops they took part in, individuals founded their own local organisations and set them on the path to peacebuilding.

Sites of others' suffering – drifting and impatience

Encouraged by the success of the first visits and filled with pride for having written history in this way, at the end of 2008, we organised a new series of visits, this time to Tuzla, Doboj and Brčko. Apart from these cities in BiH, there were also plans for a visit to Croatia, specifically its eastern Slavonia region, but this did not happen because the group of veterans from Croatia who had been prepared to organise the visit had received threats from another group of Croatian veterans, whom we hadn't been in contact with, saying that "they would kill us all if we showed up", so the visit was cancelled. Unfortunately, after this situation, part of the veterans' group from Croatia severed all contact with CNA. Instead of the planned action in Croatia, the gathering was redirected and used for discussions about possible threats and dangerous situations, ways to pre-empt them and how to handle them when they arose.

However, during the actions of visiting sites of memory and sites of suffering, the group felt secure enough to invite the media, which was their first direct step out into the public. An additional dimension was a meeting with representatives of the local authority in Doboj, who welcomed us and our action.

The most important step during these visits was going to the site where enemy soldiers were killed, as well as an unmarked site of suffering where the victims were from a community that was currently in the minority in that area. This marked the achievement of one of the major goals we set for ourselves when we envisioned the cooperation between former enemies. Coming out in public to pay their respects to killed enemy soldiers, with all the discomfort this entails, slowly became the connective tissue within this group and established our common ground. Empowered by having made this step, which had been a dream for us, we felt encouraged to be even bolder and find ways to go further and do more. The positive response from members of the veterans' associations, who met us during these actions, pointed us in the direction of expanding the group of activists among veterans. This was not just a matter of increasing numbers. Adding new people from the cities we visited to the network where we already had a nucleus of people prepared to cooperate with their former enemies meant that the nucleus would get support in their own community and the idea of cooperating across lines of division would be recognised as a prelude to deconstructing fear and hatred.

In the summer of 2009, we organised a new two-part training, including more new people. We were particularly looking for people who, in addition to showing basic curiosity and wanting to meet their former enemies, also had a function within veterans' associations, so that we would gain steady partners for peace work within their structures.

In 2010, we planned various new actions, but we also felt we needed to explain the significance and purpose of the joint visits to sites of suffering, to explain what they are and what they are not. Our aim was to clearly formulate our views, and also to share them with the war veterans who were prepared to organise the actions in their cities, but who were at the same time worried about possible negative reactions and accusations that might follow. In this way, we wanted to encourage them, but also to point out that we did not see the process of implementing the actions as an exchange of favours. Below is the full text of the letter we sent.

Joint visits by former enemies to sites of killing from the past war

Significance of the visits and their message

The local veterans' association acts as our host in the place we are visiting and has the final say about the sites that will be visited.

There are at least two types of sites of killings, which can be divided into groups by the kind of message that is being sent.

- Visiting sites of killings of "our victims" – where the victims are soldiers or civilians who were on the same side as the hosts.
- Visiting sites of killings of "others" – where the victims were people considered at the time to be on the "other side".

When we visit sites of killings of our victims, we send the message to our community that:

- We foster the memory of the victims on our side and warn against the evil that took place. We as hosts do not bear responsibility for the killings at that site.

We send a message to the other side that:

- It is important for us that our victims are shown respect, especially if their deaths are denied or denigrated.
- We want to establish communication and mutual respect as equals.

When we visit sites where others were killed, we send a message to our community that:

- It is our shame and responsibility that evil was committed in our name (and the others' shame is the evil committed in their name).
- We wish to dissociate ourselves from the crime and clearly state that we condemn injustice when it is committed against others, as we do when it is committed against us.
- We are not collectively guilty: guilt is individual.

When we visit sites where others were killed, we send a message to those others that:

- We wish to dissociate ourselves from the crime and clearly state that we condemn injustice when it is committed against others, as we would do when it is committed against us.
- We are prepared to respect the pain of others, to condemn injustice as we would do for our own.

When you are deciding on which sites in your town/region to visit, let your internal sense of justice guide you.

Don't think about what CNA might expect from you or what the veterans from the other side that you are hosting might expect. Paying respects to those killed is not a trade-off in which

one side will offer something the other side should reciprocate, and it is not an attempt to make comparisons or measure degrees of suffering. Some might see it as an exchange of sorts and engage in calculated trade-offs, as in "if they take us there, then we'll take them to ...". It would be better to take the time to think than to act hastily in this way. We are different and our life experiences are different, so let's not presume to judge others' motives. Painful experiences from the war require care and patience.

How to deal with possible disapproval and lack of understanding in the community

If the site you plan to take us to visit is one where the circumstances are known to the public and have been proved beyond doubt, it is unlikely that anyone would seriously oppose a visit to such a site. It would be expected that the local authority and the media would be on your side in this situation.

What about sites and events from the past where the circumstances have not been investigated and proven beyond doubt?

What about accusations that as veterans you have been put in a situation where you're inflating the number of victims from the other side?

Suspicion is a stain on the whole community if it remains unexamined.

If you are not responsible for the crime, why would you hide it? If perhaps there was no crime, why should we not go there and hear what is being said, even if we cannot know for sure what the truth is?

What if they accuse you of being a traitor because "you're bringing criminals to the site of the crime"?

Anyone who has committed a crime should be held responsible; these meetings do not absolve anyone of personal responsibility. Just as you are not responsible for the crimes committed in your name, so the veterans on the other side are not responsible for such crimes.

To build bridges of understanding and respect, to overcome hatred, fear and distrust is a truly good deed for all our communities. And above all, it contributes to building sustainable and lasting peace for future generations.

15 March 2010

A new moment for history

In April and May 2010, four visits took place to the following cities: Zavidovići, Brčko, Modriča and Šamac. In all these places, meetings were also organised with local authorities who expressed verbal support for our efforts.

The visit to Zavidovići has special significance because the itinerary included a visit to the site of a detention facility known as the "13th Kilometre" where a number

of prisoners of war were executed. The group of war veterans included members of the same unit as that of the soldiers – their comrades – who were executed here. At the meeting with the mayor, the local association of ARBiH veterans expressed their desire to place a memorial at the site. **This was the first time that a local veterans' association was seeking government approval to mark the site of a war crime against enemy soldiers in a dignified manner.** This was a new moment for history. We were very proud. At the end of the action, one of the participants said: "I would like to thank everyone at CNA for bringing us together and I would like to thank our hosts for their hospitality. I thank Muhamed for insisting on a memorial at the 13th Kilometre because it was my comrades who were killed there. It was hard for me today. At the memorial room, I saw the emblem of the brigade from my hometown, an emblem that ended up there by force, that was taken off a dead man. I thank Amer for speaking out about this. No one deserves to be brutally tortured, not even prisoners of war. I'd heard about the *13th Kilometre* from an upstanding doctor from Prnjavor. The torturers weren't Muslim, they were inhuman. They were not practising the faith and tradition of the Muslim people. My brother was on another hill. I saw there had been people there from different places who were killed. This war didn't bring anything good to anyone. I'd like to thank everyone once again, including the people I just met."

In the summer of 2010, we held another two-part training for war veterans based on the same concept as before, but we tried to include people from places where we didn't have associates. We also tried to make sure that the training would include smaller groups of people from the same place so as to avoid having just one person as the only contact and potential partner for cooperation. In our experience, the prospects of success are much higher if two or three people get behind an idea and provide each other with support.

Even though all of this seems easy, logical and simple, the whole process from first contacts with associations to them participating in actions is full of ups and downs, unforeseen reactions and, as a rule, the disruptive influence of daily political developments. Not even the training itself is an easy process, even though it takes place in an environment free of pressures, away from the public gaze, and with a feeling of safety and freedom to express emotions and opinions and have them respected. What kind of inner turmoil arises in people who for years constructed their image of the world on myths that others are evil, hateful, inhuman, etc. when they are faced with the fears, pain and hopes of these others? They have the most insight into what this means, and even though in popular film culture it is portrayed differently, these

encounters never involved any physical violence or deliberate verbal violence. They did give rise to catharsis. At the end of the 2010 training, a participant said:

"It was easier for me to take up arms and go to war than to work on reconciliation and peacebuilding, but there's no other way."

The reality of the Western Balkans back then in 2010, and to a slightly lesser degree in 2021, was that memory of the wartime past was used to maintain divisions and hatred for the benefit of a significant proportion of our countries' political elites. The ethno-nationalists nurtured selective memory about the wartime past, with veterans serving as decorative props. Cross-border cooperation between former enemies was welcomed by ordinary people who recognised in it the hope for a better tomorrow, but it was also a thorn in the side of those who claimed that our animosities were eternal and predestined, and that the memory policy in the hands of those who were creating it was merely reflecting these historical facts. Buoyed up by the achievements of joint visits and public statements of solidarity with former enemies, we contributed to deconstructing hatred and building trust, not just among those directly involved, but far beyond them, because these actions started to increasingly attract media attention. In the spirit of the moment, those of us in the CNA team rode the wave of optimism, allowing ourselves to fantasise about next steps that seemed as unrealistic as having veterans show their former enemies sites of suffering where their own side was the perpetrator. We imagined having the influence to change selective memory policies and bring them into dialogue and cooperation, thus changing the very culture of memory by accepting inclusiveness as a fundamental element and precondition for peacebuilding.

We felt we should share our vision of a better future with our group of veterans and start with them a process for envisioning a better future, in addition to the system of small steps and planning actions that we had already developed and put in place.

Eyes wide open

At the end of 2010, we had another two actions: in Derventa and in Brod, and in the spring of 2011, we devised and held a training on "Remembering the Wartime Past". Although envisioning a better future was the topic of the training, the beginning was concerned with recognising painful realities, i.e. problematic commemorative practices that needed to be changed in our environments. What bothers us and what is missing in the existing culture of memory? How do we adapt some existing and

future monuments so that they aren't threatening or offensive to others, and how do we design them so that they don't glorify or incite war and hatred? How do we include the enemy? Are there examples of good practice beyond what we see in our immediate environment? We discussed the possibilities for marking unmarked sites of suffering in a way which was not ideologically or politically predetermined based on the ethnicity of the victims. We talked about how the moment in time and ways of interpreting can change the meaning of monuments, so that what was built to evoke pride becomes a symbol of shame.

One of the most memorable moments was when we set up small mixed groups and distributed photographs of existing memorials from the past war that they were meant to critique. The groups discussed the monuments shown on the photos and then presented to the whole group what they identified on a given monument as problematic or possibly offensive to others. After one group presented its critique of a monument as being inappropriate and manipulative because it misattributed some of the victims, a participant who was from the city where the monument was located said something to the effect of: "People, I was appointed by my veterans' organisation to the committee that approved that monument. It was right after the war, the proposal came and, to tell you the truth, it didn't occur to me to think about how the people who don't live here any more would see the monument. At that time, I really didn't believe that the people who left during the war would ever come back to live here. Now, when I hear everything you say is wrong with this monument, I understand that we made a mistake. And I'm sorry; I regret it." For me, this was a very memorable moment because I often had the feeling that the people making monuments like this one were my opponents, that they were acting from rigid ideological beliefs, that they were fostering hatred, refusing dialogue, that they wanted segregation. And then I see this man before me and instead of anger, I feel compassion and sadness, I empathise with him and I know that there are hundreds like him on all sides. He didn't know, but then his eyes were opened. No one forced him or manipulated him into opening his eyes; he arrived there on his own terms.

There is a complex system that produces hatred and replicates black-and-white narratives about one's own righteousness. It seems well-organised, controlled and indisputable, but then it turns out to be driven by inertia and lack of communication. People act the way they think they're supposed to, because it has always been that way and because there is no one to tell them and offer arguments for not doing things the same way. It was baffling! I'm not saying that a kind word opens every door, but we shouldn't forget that for many people, it can open minds. You can't change a whole policy or culture overnight, but you can inspire individuals to change their way of

Vremenska linija

2002

First "4 Views" public forum held in Inđija, Serbia, on 3 June 2002.
By June 2005, forums were also held in Niš, Novi Pazar, Kragujevac, Zenica, Banja Luka, Vlasotince, Novi Sad, Kraljevo, Bijelo Polje, Podgorica, Nevesinje, Gornji Vakuf - Uskoplje, Sarajevo and Vienna.

2003

First training / dialogue workshops with veterans from different armies held in the spring of 2023
By 2022, another 14 trainings and dialogue meetings of different formats were held.

2008

First visit by veterans to counterparts on "the other side" during which they jointly visited sites where civilians and soldiers were killed. Visits to Sarajevo, Bugojno and Prnjavor.

2010

The first time that a local veterans' association applied for government approval **to mark the site of a war crime against enemy soldiers** (Zavidovići, BiH).

2012

First **significant media turnout** at a joint action of veterans (visit to Srebrenica, November 2012).
First time a mixed group of veterans attended an official commemoration (Gornji Vakuf - Uskoplje, December 2012).

2015

Start of cooperation in actions to **mark unmarked sites of suffering** (onms.nenasilje.org).

looking at things. This will not happen if you accuse them, label them or insult them, but it might if you listen to them, try to understand them, show them that you mean no harm, show them respect, build trust and cooperation.

One of the results of our discussions and thinking at the training was that there is no need to destroy the monuments – but they do need to be transformed. But with wisdom, patience and, above all, respect, everything seems possible, perhaps not right away, not today or tomorrow, but in the future, certainly. Our response to selective memory adapted to ideological, ethno-nationalist goals was the conclusion that for peace, we need memory to include all of our perspectives.

In all honesty, at that moment, we already knew we were at the start of something that had the power to unmask the awful manipulation of victims, to shake the myth of mutual hostility, and if it did not have the power to wipe away the existing mythological approach to memory, it could at least challenge it, show that things could be done differently, that they weren't black or white and that generalisations along the lines of "they're all the same" had no basis in reality.

In 2012, CNA was invited and included as an official delegation at the unveiling ceremony of the monument to ARBiH in Brčko. At the ceremony, as representatives of CNA Sarajevo-Belgrade, we laid a wreath for the fallen combatants and were rewarded with applause from the citizens who had gathered for the occasion. The fact that someone from Belgrade was laying a wreath for fallen ARBiH fighters evidently met with great approval, which just goes to show that the great majority of people want recognition of their own suffering and are prepared to respond to gestures of respect with good will. If veterans can do this, then who would dare claim it wasn't good?

In May 2012, we organised a training for veterans where we brought together the group involved in organising joint actions. We focused on the problems we had encountered in our previous work and tested out and explored ways of overcoming them. We wanted to improve our readiness for expected difficulties and boost our empowerment and self-confidence for future actions.

Sources of inspiration

We kept asking ourselves how to create an alternative memory policy and develop a different form, a different culture of memory, if all the examples around us were monolithic, homogeneous and exclusive.

We decided to seek further inspiration outside our own context and to encourage it among our group of veterans, while at the same time showing them the respect they deserved. We organised a study trip to Berlin with war veterans and two reporters in order to visit sites of memory and sites of suffering there and find out more about the context in which that culture of memory developed. In cooperation with Martina Fischer, our long-time associate who at that time was a researcher with the Berghof Center and who had done much to support our work, we organised a workshop for a group of researchers who were interested in speaking with our group of war veterans. A publication[1] was also produced to document the event.

The study visit encouraged all of us because we received clear confirmation from people outside our context that what we were doing was extremely important and unique in peace work. The group of veterans also felt ready to try to achieve even more. Having had this opportunity to see the various forms a culture of memory could take encouraged us to critically re-examine our own modes of memorialisation.

In November 2012, we visited the Potočari Memorial Centre in Srebrenica. This visit was very difficult and memorable, because it was to a site of genocide, and it was also the first time that veterans from the Serb side had publicly visited the Centre and met not just with the media, who turned out in record numbers (the AFP news item was even carried by the Washington Post), but also with representatives of the Mothers of Srebrenica association. The emotionally charged atmosphere is best illustrated by what some of them said at the time:

Đoko Pupčević, a member of the VRS from Šamac, summed up his thoughts thus: "Emotionally, it was a difficult day. I knew quite a lot about Srebrenica beforehand, but when you come here and see 8,000 graves, tombstones, you see that life is nothing. The dead outnumber the living in Srebrenica today. I did not see a single child or see anyone smile. The streets are deserted, and it's not a working day. I came to honour the innocent people killed here, killed only because they belonged to a different religion." Novica Kostić from Vlasotince in Serbia, a JNA veteran who served in Croatia in 1991, an amputee, missing fingers on his hand and with a wound on his "healthy" leg, said: "Srebrenica is a sacred place. It's not just genocide that happened in Srebrenica; Srebrenica is the ultimate crime." Ljuban Volaš, a VRS veteran from Prnjavor, told me he had visited Potočari twice before. Once, he just looked through the fence; the second time, he entered the Memorial Centre to look around, but did not venture among the graves. "As a man, I stand against crimes. The unit under my command did

1 Martina Fischer and Miriam Schroer-Hippel (2013). *Horror Always Has the Same Face: Workshop and Study Tour in Berlin with War Veterans from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia*. Belgrade, Sarajevo: CNA.

not commit crimes. It was an honour to lay flowers for the victims of Srebrenica. I felt the pain and bitterness of mothers who bear it to this day. We must also see the other side, the Serb side, because there were crimes there, too. That is the only way to get a complete picture of the tragedy in BiH," Ljuban concluded.[2]

I will never forget the moment of leaving Potočari, when a woman from the association that had led us around the Memorial Centre came up to shake my hand and thank us for coming and for bringing a group of veterans. It was a moment when you are left speechless.

Next came visits to sites of suffering in Busovača and Vitez, including a detention camp that was run by ARBiH and where we were joined by members of HVO who had been imprisoned there. It was important that the action was covered by the media, because this increased the visibility of the crimes and the torture committed by that side, which was not as well-known among the general public.

Official commemorations: The war is truly over

We had a long wait until it was the right time for the kind of action we had in mind: a mixed group of war veterans attending public, official commemorations, paying their respects to the victims and sending a message that they are not the enemy, that they respect all victims, and that the war is truly over. In contrast to specially organised visits to memorials and sites of memory that do not fall on the anniversaries of the events they commemorate, official commemorations are usually organised by victims' and/or veterans' associations, generally in cooperation with the local authority and the religious community to which the victims belonged.

At the end of a very busy 2012, we took a major step: the first official commemoration to which former enemies were also invited, and they accepted the invitation. This was in Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje, where the local veterans' association "Goranovi" was organising the annual commemoration "In memory of Commander Goran Čišić". The organiser was also one of the most active members of our group of war veterans. He used his authority to "defend" this action in the local community. Since Gornji Vakuf is one of the divided cities in BiH, home to two communities that live next to each other, with minimal communication and separate institutions, we tried to get HVO veterans from Uskoplje to meet with our group of veterans, but were unsuccessful.

2 From the text by Faruk Šehić (2012). "Srebrenica, a Sacred Place and a Place of Reconciliation". An abridged version of the text was published in *Dani* on 23 November 2012.

Srebrenica, 2012
Retired VRS colonel Ljuban Volaš (1954-2022) during the visit to the Srebrenica Memorial Center.

Breaking the ice by attending the official commemoration, we realised our idea was working; the effect was powerful and we concluded that we should implement these actions wherever else we could.

In 2013-2014, we attended a host of official commemorations: for the civilian victims of the NATO bombing of the train in Grdelička klisura with a visit to Vlasotince/Leskovac; the "June Days of Resistance" event commemorating fallen fighters in the battle on Death Hill near Zavidovići; another visit to Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje and the same commemoration we attended a year earlier; a commemorative event in the village of Stog near Vozuća/Zavidovići titled "Marking the anniversary of the exodus of the people of Vozuća, settlements in the Krivaja River Valley and the southern slopes of Mount Ozren"; a visit to Novi Grad and its annual commemorative event titled "Marking the defence of the western borders of Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina from Croatian aggression"; and a visit to Velika Kladuša.

We also organised a visit to sites of suffering in Bihać, but not on the day of the official commemoration. We used the visit to make contacts with veterans' associations in Velika Kladuša from two opposing sides (National Defence and Army of RBiH), thus preparing the ground for a visit to that city as well.

Attending official commemorations had its share of important moments, such as when one of the speakers in Zavidovići, a veteran himself, approached our group and apologised for the fact that in his speech he would be talking about the Serb side as "aggressors and Chetniks", because that was the official line and he was required to say it. This detail reflects not only that at official commemorations things are said that members of another people might find offensive, which had become common practice, but also that there is an awareness about these things being inappropriate. The fact that former enemies are present disrupts the harmony of a situation where "we are among our own" and where no one will stand up to nationalist rhetoric. Calling wartime opponents "enemies", "butchers", "animals" and the like is not uncommon at such gatherings. What is unusual is when there are people from the other side in attendance and the effect of their presence, without them doing or saying anything, is that it makes those who use hate speech uncomfortable. This kind of nonviolent action is, in my opinion, an example for textbooks on peacebuilding.

Our presence in the village of Stog near Vozuća, home to a small returnee and minority Serb community, was very much welcomed, because our coming was a signal that there was more respect, freedom and security, so we were warmly received by both the local priest from the Serbian Orthodox Church and the whole community. In places where returnee minority communities live, commemorations usually don't feature hate speech; this is something they have in common. However, where

dominance was won by military means, the situation is different. There, official commemorations of the war are used as occasions to celebrate military victories, as reminders of the righteousness of the majority community's struggle and sacrifice. Feeling uncomfortable about using hate speech in the presence of wartime enemies at commemorations did not always have the same effect as at the event in Zavidovići or the encounter near Vozuća.

Conflict as an inevitable part of the process

The visit to Novi Grad (RS)/Bosanski Novi[3] in 2014, which was arranged and carried out in cooperation with the local veterans' association, some of whose members had taken part in some of our previous activities, was our first visit to an official commemoration in Republika Srpska. There we experienced something that highlighted for us an important and probably inevitable part of the peacebuilding and reconciliation process.

"Marking the defence of the western borders of Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina from Croatian aggression" is an annual series of events involving three municipalities from the western part of RS and the programme is organised by the Republika Srpska Government Committee for Nurturing the Tradition of Liberation Wars. The events take place at various locations and the plan was for us to lay wreaths in memory of the victims at two sites. At the first location, which was outside the city, the organisers had been notified that a delegation from CNA with a group of war veterans from different armies would be laying a wreath. Evidently, someone on the Organising Committee was not happy about our being there, so our delegation was prevented from laying the wreath during the official event. We laid the wreath after the official ceremony was over and our friends who were VRS veterans were particularly hurt by this, because they felt personally responsible and humiliated by the treatment we had received. We were then supposed to lay a wreath at the central monument in Novi Grad, the memorial to fallen fighters of Novi Grad killed defending their fatherland. When we arrived, we found out that the organisers had decided that because of the presence of wartime enemies, the Novi Grad veterans' association would be excluded from the official ceremony and not allowed to lay flowers in memory of their fallen fellow fighters. One of the veterans from RS, a disabled war veteran who had lost his leg, was also asked for his ID by the security

3 For more details about this visit, see: https://nenasilje.org/en/war-veterans-at-the-commemoration-in-novi-grad/

Žegar near Bihać, 2013
Franjo Grgić, host of the visit to the central monument to war veterans

Bihać, 2013

War veterans visiting the ARBiH memorial – “Memorial to the defenders of the city”

guards, which only contributed to the feeling of humiliation. All the RS veterans in our group, and especially our hosts from Novi Grad, were angry because of this treatment, while those of us who were from CNA felt disappointed and regretful that we had exposed people to this kind of treatment. Still, it didn't take long for us to realise that the opening of a conflict within a veterans' organisation was a sign of the change to come. Not only did the veterans' association from Novi Grad write a protest letter to the Committee, demanding an explanation, but CNA started to reach out systematically to the Committee, informing them about our work and goals and asking for recognition of our right to participate in commemorations or a written explanation of why we were not welcome. We didn't give up. Receiving no reply, we asked for a meeting, and when it was cancelled at the last minute, we asked again, and again. We knew that there could be no reasonable justification for preventing someone who wanted to pay their respects to the victims from doing so; we knew our intentions were pure and that there was nothing we had done that could discredit us or be used as an argument against us and our work. Time was on our side and that realisation soon replaced the feeling of discomfort, humiliation and anger.

Only a month later, we visited Velika Kladuša, a city where the division between those who took the side of "Alija"[4] and those who took the side of "Babo"[5] sometimes cut through families. The visit was sensitive because it was the first time since the war that members of the ARBiH veterans' association were supposed to attend a commemoration for members of the National Defence and vice versa. This is exactly what happened. There was great excitement around the event because many, including representatives of the victims' association, saw it as an act of reconciliation and it was heartily welcomed. When we met with representatives of the local authority, they did not hide their enthusiasm and fascination with the fact that veterans had come from distant parts of BiH, Croatia and Serbia to Kladuša, to help the people of that city make peace with each other. We had demonstrated how reaching out a hand builds a bridge and people accepted this and built a bridge made of compassion. The gratitude we received that day as a mixed group of former enemies lifted our hearts and, in a way, made us feel obliged to continue. All the minor difficulties that come with this kind of action, such as accommodation without heating at the start of winter and travelling for more than six or seven hours, were and still are unimportant.

4 Alija Izetbegović, former President of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

5 Fikret Abdić, leader of the self-proclaimed "Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia".

Approval

Six months after the situation in Novi Grad, when we were prevented from laying flowers at the monument, after a lot of back-and-forth communication and efforts to be allowed to participate, in the spring of 2015 we succeeded and attended an official annual commemoration in RS, in the town of Sijekovac. This commemoration is particularly important to the Serb side, because it is where civilians were killed at the end of March 1992, i.e. before the date considered by many to be the start of the war in BiH (6 April 1992). We had visited Sijekovac before with a mixed group of veterans, but this was the first time that we were attending an official commemoration. This kind of event entails the presence of politicians and representatives of the church, military and even paramilitary groups (non-existent/made-up formations), as well as strong nationalist messages of homogenisation against those who "hate us". It is not easy for people from other communities to endure this in silence, but we were guided by the thought that we knew why we were there, to pay our respects to those killed and to send a message with our presence that the war was over and we were coming in peace, with no hostility. Our presence at such gatherings had only once made someone feel provoked, probably because the person had not known we were going to be in attendance. The usual reaction to our presence at that time, from veterans, priests, representatives of victims and ordinary citizens alike, was mild surprise, but also tacit approval.

The next visit we organised was to a site of a "massacre committed by Chetniks". This was the inscription on the monument erected in 2003 in Laništa near Brčko. When we appeared at the official commemoration, we saw quite a few people do double-takes at our parked car with Belgrade licence plates. One of our group noticed that the representative of the victims' association was revising the text of a speech prepared earlier. The speech we heard contained no hate speech or anything offensive. We then went to the neighbouring village and gathered in front of the church where a service was being held. The priest told the congregation that a group of war veterans from former enemy armies was in attendance; he thanked us for coming and told everyone that this was the path we should all take, the path of compassion, understanding and love. We stood there, disbelieving, touched by these words of welcome, and I felt gratitude and pride. I watched the other members of our group as they turned to each other, slightly confused, but happy. These were moments to remember. As we were saying our goodbyes, one of the people from the group said that "in ten years or so, all our commemorations will be like this".

In Serbia, we visited Varvarin and Kruševac and attended commemorations for civilian victims from 1999. In both places, we were also received by the mayors. The

Visits to sites of suffering

(organised visits by war veterans in the period from 2008 to 2022)

2008
- Sarajevo
- Bugojno
- Prnjavor
- Tuzla
- Doboj
- Brčko

2012
- Srebrenica
- Busovača
- Vitez

2014
- Velika Kladuša

2015
- Kruševac
- Varvarin
- Čelebići

2017
- Vozućko ratište
- Goražde

2020
- Mostar

2010
- Zavidovići
- Brčko
- Modriča
- Šamac
- Derventa
- Brod

2013
- Vlasotince
- Leskovac
- Bihać

2016
- Novi Grad/ Bosanski Novi
- Daruvar
- Pakrac
- Lipik

2019
- Niš
- Aleksinac
- Jajce

2021
- Trusina
- Stupni Do

Official commemorations

(organised visits of war veterans to commemorations)

2012
- Gornji Vakuf / Uskoplje

2014
- Stog
- Novi Grad

2016
- Hrastova glavica
- Trnopolje
- Pakrac

2018
- Aleksinac
- Trusina
- Stupni Do

2021
- Boderište
- Brčko
- Bradina
- Vitez
- Uborak i Sutina

2022
- Skelani
- Tarčin
- Vitez
- Sjeverin
- Lozje
- Rogatica

2013
- Grdelička klisura
- Kota 715 (Zavidovići)
- Gornji Vakuf / Uskoplje

2015
- Sijekovac
- Laništa i Ulice
- Varvarin

2017
- Varivode and Gošić

2019
- Aleksinac
- Ahmići
- Grabovica

2020
- Skelani
- Prijepolje
- Vitez
- Uborak i Sutina
- Briševo
- Zecovi
- Korićanske stijene
- Grabovica
- Varivode and Gošić

mayor of Varvarin Municipality at the time had lost his daughter in the NATO bombing of the bridge there and was touched and grateful that people from far away, from neighbouring countries, had come to pay their respects to the victims. Whatever side they may belong to, parents who have lost a child will experience similar emotions. This explains the absence of any resistance to cooperation with us, because we never gave anyone any cause to think there was some kind of political agenda or any other ulterior motive behind our actions. At higher political levels, things often look quite different; there is a prevalent sense of suspicion, with politicians "closing ranks" in order to maintain their position in office by avoiding anything that could be used against them, which certainly includes meeting with (former) enemies.

Standard practice, not an exception

We felt we had found a way to overcome obstacles, but the path ahead wasn't clear and we couldn't expect everything to go smoothly from then on. We wanted to find our place as a mixed group of former enemies at public commemorations, first throughout BiH and then Croatia and Serbia. We didn't want our appearances to be remembered as an exception to the rule, but to become standard practice. We wanted to go to many new places, to places we hadn't been to before.

Given that the size of the group of war veterans ready to work with CNA had grown so much that it was impossible to invite all of them to participate in every action, we decided to try to find a balance between wanting to roll out our activities and involve more new people and the need to keep supporting the people already with us by organising actions in their local communities, thereby widening their network of support at the micro level, which we found was still very much needed so that people could persevere despite pressures they were often still exposed to.

We brought together the core group to discuss future actions and meet in our safe space, beyond the influence of other people and events, to foster the friendly atmosphere that had already developed within the group. The meeting also included a visit to an unmarked site of suffering within the Čelebići barracks near Konjic which, after many requests, we finally received permission from the military authorities to enter. As important as the public actions of attending commemorations and the experience of attending them together were, trust and support were mostly built through structured dialogue at workshops and informally through time spent together.

In March 2016, we visited Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi. As part of this visit, we went

to sites of suffering of the Bosniak population, the site where Serb civilians were killed in 1995, and the memorial room dedicated to VRS fighters and their monument in the centre of the city. The arranged joint participation of representatives of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church was, unfortunately, reduced to partial involvement of the imam, because the priest did not show up. We did, however, meet with the local authority and this is how the 2014 incident when we were prevented from laying a wreath got its epilogue.

That same year, we also attended commemorations at Hrastova Glavica near Sanski Most and at Trnopolje near Prijedor.

We also made an important visit for the first time to Croatia, specifically western Slavonia (Daruvar/Pakrac/Lipik). This organised visit was the result of years of endeavours to do something similar in Croatia and was preceded by a series of meetings and our attendance at the commemoration in Pakrac marking the anniversary of the start of the war in Croatia. The visit included several sites of suffering and sites of memory in the western Slavonia region, including the site where Serb civilians were killed in 1995. It was made possible because we had won the trust of our local partners, veterans' associations who had the courage to defend this nonviolent peacebuilding action in public and before their wartime comrades, standing up to various malicious accusations that had been directed at us.

Since 2013, when we first visited Zavidovići Municipality, and continuing with our presence at the commemoration in Vozuća/Stog, up to 2017 when we visited again, we had developed cooperation with the local veterans' association, as well as a sense of mutual understanding and respect. Working with them, we invited the veterans' association from Doboj to a joint visit and thus brought together people who had fought directly against each other in the same region. The visit also included representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the mayor of Zavidovići (Federation of BiH) and the mayor of nearby Doboj (Republika Srpska).

We were invited by the Serb National Council (SNC) and attended the commemoration in Varivode and Gošić, small towns in Croatian Krajina where Serb civilians were the victims of crimes committed after Operation Storm in 1995. We tried to get the mayor of Knin to join us, but were ultimately unsuccessful. However, the fact that veterans from once warring armies appeared together at the commemoration and that it was the first time that veterans of the Croatian Army attended and spoke at the commemoration had a powerful impact. For the local population, that visit represented strong encouragement and they welcomed it wholeheartedly. We were happy that we had found a partner in the SNC who understood what we were doing

and how our actions impacted local communities, and in this particular case, they were even better placed to assess its significance. It should be noted that the next year, the SNC managed to get the mayor of Knin to attend the commemoration himself. He had been encouraged by what had happened the year before when Croatian Army veterans had attended and this opened space for him to do so without jeopardising his political career by participating in such actions.

At the end of 2017, we organised a visit to Goražde, a town in eastern Bosnia that had not seen many cross-border cooperation and reconciliation initiatives. It was hard to win over local partners with enough credibility to neutralise opportunistic criticism in the local community. One of the commanders of the town's defence accepted our offer of cooperation, and for the visit itself, following the example of our visit in Zavidovići, we managed to get the mayor of Rudo, the neighbouring town in the other entity, to join us. A representative of the VRS veterans' association from neighbouring Foča also took part and after giving a statement to the media during the visit, he came in for severe criticism, including allegations that his participation in the visit was "treason". He was removed from his post in the association, lost his job and found himself in serious difficulties, all of which speaks to the dismal level of personal freedom in RS, although similar attacks had been seen in other places too.

When people who had met directly on the front lines as wartime enemies meet again after the war, their encounters are specific because they share a special micro-history. According to Nedžad Novalić: *"The wartime experience of the people of Goražde with the people of Rudo is an example of a micro-history that does not fit the mould of the narrative about everyone against everyone. The people of Goražde remember the people of Rudo as people they fought, but also as people who would let them know when they took up positions and who sent signals that the town would not be shelled and civilians would not be killed, and when they were leaving their positions, they would warn their enemies of potential danger because a unit from elsewhere was coming in to replace them."*[6]

In 2018, together with friends from the "Peacebuilders" organisation in Kruševac, we attended the official commemoration for those killed in the bombing of Aleksinac on 5 April 1999. Participating in the commemoration preceded our planned visit by a larger group of war veterans that took place the following year.

6 Nedžad Novalić, "War Veterans Visit Goražde: Ears Want to Hear", CNA, 6 December 2017.

Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi, 2016
Visiting the monument to fallen soldiers from the last war

Ekići - Alići, 2016
Visiting the memorial to the victims (Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi)

Svodna near Novi Grad, 2016
A group of war veterans visiting the monument to refugees killed in the bombing on 8 August 1995

Lipik, 2016
A visit to one of the places of suffering: an abandoned building that served as an improvised prison

Deconstructing the hierarchy of victims

We rarely managed to organise a visit together with victims' associations, because they were naturally wary of soldiers from the other side. It took tremendous strength on their part to overcome that pain and reach out to fighters from the other side. We found it in Trusina, where we were invited by the courageous Dragica Tomić.

We attended the commemoration for 19 people killed in a war crime committed in Trusina on 16 April 1993. The victims were Croats and the perpetrators were members of ARBiH. That same morning of 16 April 1993, in the village of Ahmići about 100 kilometres from Trusina, a far more notorious war crime with many more victims was committed, but the roles were reversed, with the victims being Bosniak civilians and the perpetrators members of HVO units. For that reason, Trusina had been overlooked for years. Even the commemoration was held the following day. We wanted our presence to contribute to overcoming this injustice of neglecting one group of victims and creating the impression that they are less worthy than others. Some may object that this is relativisation, based on their interpretation of the political context whereby one side led a righteous war and the other fought unjustly. If things were truly that simple and black and white, then how would we explain the killing of civilians in a just war? A hierarchy of victims deepens divisions and re-victimises those victims considered to be "less important". That is why it was so important for us to come to the commemoration in Trusina. We were warmly welcomed and left with hearts uplifted.

On that occasion, Dragica Tomić said: "Gathering members of once warring armies in one place, with people of good will honouring the victims today, is no small feat. This is something we need to do in order to set an example that others will follow on the path to peace, forgiveness and compassion for all victims. This approach to all victims is an important step towards a future in which, I believe, no one wants to see the 1990s repeated."

It seemed important to us to organise a training for war veterans once again that year, after a longer hiatus. It is essentially peacebuilding training with many dialogue-based workshops that offer space for discussing points of contention, but also for determining possible actions in the future, gathering ideas and needs. It is thus an opportunity for both exchange and networking in a structured space created for this very purpose. Also worth mentioning is that the training is intended to strengthen the group; at the same time, by connecting small groups of two or three participants from the same environment, we want to encourage the creation of hubs in micro-

regions that can support each other and be more resilient to external influence. These small groups had proven to be an excellent model of organisation in the past and we use them not just in training events for veterans, but also in other training programmes, especially in regions where there is still strong resistance to meeting other communities.

We held the training for war veterans on Mount Jahorina in 2018 and afterwards, we felt we had gained incredible new fellow fighters that we could and should involve in many more endeavours. A wonderful feeling.

Not to paint too rosy a picture, I must also mention that for years, we had been grappling with the mental burden that comes with this type of work, including burnout, vulnerability and addiction problems that had gotten the better of a few of our colleagues, accompanied by our own sense of failure because we had been unable to prevent this from happening, although we had tried everything.

We then wanted to organise a visit by a larger group of war veterans to the commemoration in Mrkonjić Grad on 12 October 2018, but since we did not manage to arrange the visit with the host veterans' association, we decided that a small group of a few people would attend the commemoration and that we would use this opportunity to talk to the organisers. As in some previous cases, such as Pakrac, this form of action arose out of the need to build contacts and gradually develop cooperation with often distrustful local veterans' associations.

On 23 October 2018, with a larger group of war veterans, we attended the commemoration in Stupni Do near Vareš, BiH, that marked 25 years since the killing of Bosniak civilians. Announcing our attendance at commemorations to the media sometimes had no visible effect, but other times, as with the commemoration in Stupni Do, it attracted a great deal of attention.

Joint monument

Another important process we started in 2018 was to initiate practical steps to erect a monument at Site 715 near Zavidovići that would include all victims, i.e. the ARBiH and VRS fighters who were killed there. The initiative for a monument was brought to us a few years earlier by our associates from Zavidovići who asked for our help. We then started a dialogue with them about the possibility for the monument to commemorate not just their fallen ARBiH comrades, but also enemy soldiers from the front line who were killed in the same place. Our initiative was first cautiously

Trusina, 2018
Peace activists at the commemoration of the murdered locals

and then openly accepted, so we started looking for a partner organisation on the Serb side. We contacted representatives of VRS veterans from Doboj who had fought on the same battlefield and through dialogue with them, we came to understand that we couldn't count on their support, given how unpopular the idea of a joint monument would be politically. The dominant memory policy in BiH, on all three sides, with slight nuances of degree, aims to establish a gulf and not to build bridges. In parallel with trying to find a partner on the Serb side, we brought together our core veterans' group and involved them as advisers around this idea. This resulted in a joint statement of support for the initiative of a joint monument signed by all present. Below is the full text.

Statement of support for the initiative to build a joint monument

Statement of cooperation

Building a monument at the site of suffering
Site 715, Zavidovići

Joint monument for people killed as soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Army of Republika Srpska at Site 715, Municipality of Zavidovići, initiated by:

Organisation of Disabled War Veterans Zavidovići '92 – leading and implementing organisation

AND

_____ – partner

Intention and principles:

Our aim is to honour those who were killed. We want to make sure suffering is never repeated. We want this site of suffering to become a place of encounters, dialogue and learning for future generations, a place where we will come to remember the wartime past, not to incite hatred or revenge, but in order to warn about the tragic consequences of war that span generations. Remembering the deaths of our comrades, neighbours, fellow fighters and former enemies, which we have experienced and witnessed, we want to emphasise the need to respect every victim as a way to move towards the sustainable peace we want to build.

We will reach decisions about the design of the memorial together through a process of consensus.

Support will be provided in this process of cooperation by the peace organisation Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo-Belgrade.

We told ourselves from the outset that the fact this was even being considered was a success in itself, and whatever the outcome, we could see value in this process because it would include local authorities and local associations and a joint statement would be sent to potential partners who would be faced with an offer of cooperation that was hard to refuse. We saw a lot of potential obstacles, both technical and material. For various reasons, the process has been dragged out and it is unlikely that a joint monument will be built. Instead, there will probably be a monument that is intended to reconstruct the wartime situation and freeze it in time as a form of remembrance of suffering. Interpreting the sense and senselessness of drenching a hill in Central Bosnia with the blood of hundreds of people will have to be left to present and future generations who will probably come to different conclusions.

During 2019, we organised four actions in the form of visits or attendance at commemorations in Aleksinac/Niš, Ahmići, Grabovica and Jajce.

It was important for us to organise visits in Serbia as well and to show solidarity with victims of the 1999 war, despite not being able to implement similar actions in places where Albanians were killed. It is very important for society in Serbia to receive a message of solidarity of the kind sent by veterans from BiH and Croatia, because such messages are rarely heard and because they deconstruct the established myth of animosity that persists in the absence of contact with former enemies. People reacted with surprise and gratitude and were welcoming. This was strange to see, given how strong the propaganda was about all their neighbours hating the Serbs, about non-governmental organisations being enemies and traitors and similar propaganda messages that are common in Serbia. Despite all this, we were welcomed. It made sense to reach out.

We had been working to visit Ahmići for a long time. That visit was all the more important because we had been in Trusina the previous year (both crimes were committed on the same day, 16 April 1993). In contrast to Trusina, the crime in Ahmići was committed by HVO units and the victims were Bosniaks. Over 100 people were killed and the village was destroyed. Through personal contacts

with the organisers, we agreed on every detail of the visit and our presence was of uncommonly high interest for the media. This commemoration is the best-known of the commemorations for Bosniak victims from the war between ARBiH and HVO in 1993. In addition to the ceremony at the monument, we also participated in other commemorative activities, making our presence very visible.

Grabovica is a town in Herzegovina known for the crimes against Croat civilians committed by ARBiH on 8 September 1993. Political representatives give it great significance and the commemoration is one of the central events related to Croat victims. Our presence in Trusina the year before helped build the necessary trust, resulting in our being invited to participate with a larger group of war veterans. By attending this commemoration, we additionally sent a message of respect and cooperation with supposedly closed-off political and veterans' structures and associations in western Herzegovina. Various contacts, old and new, helped to make us welcome, which we accepted wholeheartedly.

One of our new associates who had participated in the training on Mount Jahorina in 2018 contacted us about organising a visit by war veterans to Jajce and took on the responsibility of being our host. The visit also included an exhibition, entitled "War of Memories"[7], about sites of suffering and memory in BiH, and an introductory forum with veterans from different sides. We visited monuments in the city as well as three sites of suffering in the vicinity of Jajce, one of which was unmarked. We also met with a survivor and witness of that event who came to Jajce/Bravnice especially for the meeting. Jajce is situated right on the very boundary between FBiH and RS and one of the sites of suffering was the Bosniak village of Jezero located in RS. We were given a particularly warm welcome there, which was no coincidence. People who are in the minority where they live are particularly well-attuned to understanding what it means when former enemies come together to pay their respects to victims. This gives them a sense of security; they feel deeply the expressions of respect and solidarity and, as a rule, respond with unreserved support. Something else that was specific about the visit to Jajce was the significant media coverage, with three TV crews, one from Zagreb, one from Banja Luka and one from Podgorica, producing very prominent news reports about our visit. This was when we definitely got over the fear of media exposure and the risk of manipulation, which at the start of this work was so high that a large number of veterans shied away from the media. In Jajce, there was a sense of freedom in speaking publicly and an energy of togetherness that went beyond mere courtesy.

7 Photographs presented at the exhibition are available at https://kulturasjecanja.org/, along with photos, information and texts from the publication *War of Memories*, CNA, 2018.

Grabovica, 2019
At the commemoration of war crime victims

Pliva Lake, 2019
Paying respects to fallen soldiers

The BORS leadership resisted cooperation with us, so we were unable to find partners in various areas of RS where we wanted to implement our actions. Even so, we participated in the commemoration in Skelani near Srebrenica, where we met with the local veterans' and victims' associations and expressed our compassion with victims on the Serb side, just as naturally as we did elsewhere. The speech by the representative from Serbia (Miodrag Linta, Chairman of the Committee on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia) was extremely nationalistic, exclusive, disparaging about other peoples and hard to listen to. It is sad to hear such volatile speeches at commemorations as they call for hatred and incite the repetition of history and revenge-seeking. But we were there too, as a group bringing together former enemies, to say: we do not hate, we mourn, we respect. We gave no inflammatory speeches, but our presence spoke volumes.

A month later, we went to Prijepolje to attend the commemoration of Bosniak victims abducted in 1993 from the train in Štrpci, on the border between BiH and Serbia. We met with the brother of a victim who told us about the families' long struggle to find out what had happened to their loved ones. We met with representatives of the municipality and the veterans' association. We also attended the commemorative academy organised by the Islamic Community in Prijepolje. There were speeches by political and religious representatives of the Bosniak community, who were sometimes one and the same. And we were unpleasantly surprised by the hate speech we heard, which was reminiscent of the speech we heard in Skelani a month earlier.

This was followed by the year of COVID-related travel restrictions and lockdowns, but we tried to continue with our plans, albeit in smaller groups and with social distancing measures.

We attended the commemoration held every year in Vitez on 10 June to mark the deaths of eight children killed by a shell fired from ARBiH positions. We participated in White Armband Day in Sarajevo, which marks the start of the persecution of Bosniaks and Croats in Prijedor, when they were ordered to wear white armbands in public and mark their homes with white sheets.

We are always welcomed when we visit sites of memory and sites of suffering in minority communities because people who feel unsafe and vulnerable immediately recognise that we bring a message of respect and peace, recognition of their pain, and hope that life without hatred is possible, and we also convey an added feeling of security. This was also true during our commemorative visits to sites around Prijedor where Bosniaks and Croats had been the victims. We visited Briševo and Zecovi near Prijedor, and later Korićanske stijene in Kneževo/Skender Vakuf Municipality, the

Ćanino Polje near Jajce, 2019
Paying respects to fallen soldiers

site where many civilians from Prijedor and a smaller number from Kotor Varoš were killed.

At the start of 2020, we hoped that in addition to other actions, we would finally manage to organise a visit to Mostar, the first in Herzegovina that would not be connected to a commemoration.

And so in late summer 2020, we got our wish and visited Bijelo Polje near Mostar where we brought together veterans from all three sides. We visited sites of suffering on all three sides and involved the victims' association, as well as representatives of all three religious communities, the local community and cantonal representatives. It was the first time that delegations of veterans had visited sites of suffering and sites of memory belonging to others in Herzegovina. The key to implementing this action was that our local partners were people of high credibility in the local community thanks to their past as defenders, prison camp survivors and post-war peace advocates. One of the two people who helped bring this encounter about was a Croat officer who had attended our training for veterans nine years earlier. In the meantime, due to lack of support, he had given up on trying to help us establish cooperation, but nine years later, the time was ripe and he was there for us. For me, it was very emotional to meet him again after so many years, because we had established a relationship of uncommon understanding, warmth and respect.

National reconciliation

The next day, after the visit to Mostar, we brought together a smaller delegation to attend the commemoration in Grabovica. We noticed that this year, as opposed to the year before, when we had discreetly voiced our criticism to a local associate, warmongering songs were not played from the loudspeakers. Was this our doing or not? We'll never know, but we were pleased. Such songs should not be heard at commemorations.

During our meeting in Mostar, we had prepared a video of support for commemorations in Croatia, in Varivode and Gošić, which was posted in advance; the commemoration itself was attended only by a smaller delegation of CNA representatives and veterans due to the pandemic. In 2020, the Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia attended the event marking Operation Storm and then representatives of the Croatian government and the president of the country attended the commemoration in Grubori, a Serb village where crimes were committed against the local population. Explaining his participation at the event marking Operation Storm, the Croatian

Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević, a member of a minority Serb party, said: "I want the spiral of hatred to stop so that the horrors of war are never repeated." The Croatian Minister of Veterans' Affairs Tomo Medved said at the commemoration for the murdered Serb civilians: "Croatia mourns all those killed and it is our duty to honour the victims." In 12 years, from receiving death threats for trying to organise a visit (eastern Slavonia in 2008) with veterans from the Serb side in Croatia, step by step, **in a sequence of seemingly unrelated moves** and with the support of courageous and sympathetic public office-holders, **we reached a historic turning point**, reflected in the statements of solidarity and mourning over lost lives made by high-ranking political representatives from these two communities. It takes so little, and yet it is so difficult and so important for people to understand that the war is over. At least for a day. Even back in 2008, we knew that our failed attempt had not been in vain. From our mistakes, we learned that we must pay attention to every detail of the preparations made by local partners. In this specific case, mistakes were made because we failed to address resistance to the idea, instead of using open dialogue to achieve at least recognition and understanding, if not support. We learned that impatience can work against us and that we should take small but steady steps instead of trying to jump over obstacles. Ultimately, the path we had taken together with our partners in Croatia was then pursued by representatives of the Croatian government who symbolically introduced reconciliation into the political discourse. Of course, everything that is built must be maintained; nothing is achieved forever, because over time nationalist pressures can erode some of the progress, but major step was undoubtedly made.

2021 was the second year of the pandemic, which dictated what was possible and what was not. As a result, our activities were either limited to smaller groups or postponed until the summer months when the risks of infection were significantly lower.

During our visit to Brčko, we attended two commemorations: in Boderište and on the bridge over the Sava River in the city itself.

In Boderište, our local partners were our long-time associates. The commemoration is held on 8 March in memory of fallen members of HVO. Our associate Mirko Zečević-Tadić, a veteran of the 108th HVO Infantry Brigade from Brčko, said at the commemoration: "Today, we honour the defenders who laid down their lives defending their homes and hearths. We also mourn the victims on the other side who were killed that day at Boderište, and on all other days until the end of the war. I cannot hate the people on the other side and we should forgive all people, no matter what side they were on. We should try to continue living together, and if it is at all

Zijemlje, Istočni Mostar, 2020
Paying respects at the monument to fallen soldiers

possible, we should continue this path towards reconciliation and better coexistence and finally continue to live here together, so that in some ten, 20, 50 years, we don't have another war." We had also planned to visit the neighbouring Serb village that was commemorating its dead on the same day, but the hosts did not confirm our invitation as the date drew near, so we had to cancel. Still, Mirko's statement included references to the lost lives of former enemies.

In Laništa near Brčko five years earlier, we heard the priest leading the service refer to the mixed group of war veterans, saying this was "the path we should take" and thanking them for expressing solidarity and compassion in mourning the dead. **This year, we heard a war veteran publicly express mourning for killed enemy soldiers.** Reconciliation in words and actions.

While we are still not welcome at some commemorations for the Serb population, things could not have been more different in Bradina, a village near Konjic in the Federation of BiH where the Serb population is not in the majority. On 25 May 1992, more than 40 local civilians were killed; some of them are still counted as missing, and some were imprisoned there afterwards. During our visit, we did not hear inflammatory nationalist speeches calling for hatred, revenge or hostility. After the service, the priest said of our attendance: "Thank you for coming, for showing interest. Your support means a lot to us. Your support is also a demonstration of interreligious dialogue and brotherly love, because by visiting sites such as this in each other's communities, we express brotherly love and understanding. It is often easier to visit places where members of our own people were victimised, but it is more difficult to go where 'others' suffered." It was touching to see the gratitude of people who feel abandoned and alone, as if no one sees or recognises or respects their victims. It is sad when someone decides that support, compassion and friendship are not welcome, because they feel powerful and they think that's how things should be done. Fortunately, in Bradina in 2021, things were different.

We had attended the commemoration in Vitez with a small delegation the year before, but in 2021, we arrived with a larger group. On 10 June 1993, eight children were killed by a shell and no one has yet been held responsible. The commemoration is organised by the parents themselves, without politicians or representatives of associations from the past war, because, as they say, they will not allow manipulation of the victims. They also say that all people of good will are welcome to join them in prayer to remember the innocents killed. Our presence was a way to express our sharing in their pain. It was only in 2022 that we managed to attend this commemoration with a full group. This is important as an indicator that these actions must be approached

with a great deal of patience and taken step by step, because fear of commemorations being misused for other purposes is often present.

No one has been convicted for the crimes committed in the Mostar area in 1992, in the settlements of Uborak and Sutina, where 114 Bosniak and Croat civilians were killed by Serb military and paramilitary units retreating from Mostar. We attended the commemoration marking the 29th anniversary of these crimes with a larger group of war veterans. Again, no one objected to the participation of war veterans from the Serb side; we were all welcomed because people recognised our sincere intentions and the message we brought.

In January 2022, we again organised a visit to the commemoration in Skelani, Srebrenica Municipality, this time with a larger group of war veterans. The organisers were not prepared to mention that veterans of ARBiH and HVO were in attendance, and we were instead announced as the Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo-Belgrade, but the people we had met two years earlier came up to greet us. Fear of taking political responsibility for inviting the "enemy" was still present.

This was followed by actions to mark the anniversary of the closing of the "Silos" detention facility near Hadžići where we established direct cooperation for the first time with the Serb association of prison camp survivors. We then took part in actions to honour the victims of Trusina and Stupni Do, the commemoration for children killed in Vitez, and the 30th anniversary of the crimes in Sjeverin near Priboj. We also attended the "Four Silos" action to commemorate civilians killed in Lozje near Goražde and the commemoration for victims in Rogatica.

The visit to Trusina and Stupni Do, places in Central Bosnia where Croats and Bosniaks were alternately victims and perpetrators, was special because it was the first time that representatives of these two communities and members of victims' families visited both monuments together, with a group of war veterans and CNA activists also present, and honoured the victims on both sides. Dragica Tomić, President of the Konjic Association of Families of Fallen, Deceased and Missing Croatian Defenders in the Homeland War, played a major role in making this idea a reality, continuing the genuine cooperation with her association that dated back years, as did the organisers of the commemoration in Stupni Do who decided to take this brave step. Mustafa Kamenjaš, a family member of one of the victims from Stupni Do and a war veteran of ARBiH, said on that occasion: "Today, we have come to Stupni Do as part of an action for peace. I was glad to accept the invitation and I will always readily join visits to such sites, so that they are not forgotten and so that we somehow show people that it was all senseless. We need peace; we need human dignity. I need to be able to feel at home in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo. I hope

initiatives like this one will yield results. I hope they will grow and that this work will be recognised for how important it is."

The "Four Silos" action entailed cooperation with prison camp survivors' associations of Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs during a two-day action to visit unmarked sites of detention and sites of suffering, and symbolically mark them. War veterans and peace activists also took part in the action, as did a small group of reporters who covered it. We visited sites of detention in Tarčin near Hadžići and Kaćuni near Busovača, former camps in Žepče and Derventa, and finally the site where prisoners were killed in Doboj. During the visit, there were tears, struggling with memories of suffering, touching mutual care and gratitude for recognition of pain and suffering. There were moments when it seemed unreal, such as the spontaneous reaching out of a hand from the other side to a former prisoner who had testified about the suffering. One bizarre moment that I remember is a question asked by a German reporter: "Is this staged?" No, it was not staged; the tears were real, the trembling was real.

After visiting these sites, the prison camp survivors and peace activists from BiH and the region issued a joint appeal:

Appeal by prison camp survivors and peace activists

Deeply convinced that all victims deserve equal respect, with our joint visit to sites of suffering, including former detention sites, we want to express human decency, share in the pain, and provide encouragement and support to each other. By jointly visiting sites such as these, we hope that they can become places of encounters, dialogue and learning for future generations, places where we will come to remember the wartime past, not to incite hatred or revenge, but in order to warn about the tragic consequences of war that span generations. Remembering the suffering of all, whatever their ethnicity, prepared to equally condemn every crime, no matter who committed it, we want to stress the importance of respecting every victim as a path towards building the sustainable peace we want to live in.

We invite our friends, neighbours, fellow citizens and all people of good will to join us on this path of remembering all victims and recognising all human suffering. Without denying our differences, we believe that mutual respect and understanding, based on these principles, can create space for dialogue where we can hear each other with open hearts, and learn about each other's difficulties and needs that are so often similar.

We know that many sites of suffering, including detention facilities, have not been marked to this day, while former prisoners, survivors and families of those who were killed are often prevented from accessing these sites. We call on the authorities, especially those at the local level, to provide support to victims fighting for their right to remembrance, not to put up

obstacles, but to enable access and permanent marking of sites of suffering. We want to make sure suffering is never repeated.

We cannot make up for the lives lost and the suffering endured, but we want to do everything in our power to build relations of mutual respect and trust that will stand as a dam against the threat of hatred among people from different communities serving as grounds for new injustices and violence in the future. We believe that the right to freedom and peace can only be achieved by working together, across the borders that have separated us since the war, and by learning from our painful past.

Unstoppable activism

The most visible aspect of working with war veterans were the public actions. These were preceded by dialogue workshops/training events that reinforced the foundations for working on difficult issues and empowered people to deal with public appearances and to face the pressures they would meet in their communities from those who oppose peacebuilding because they believe this is a way to continue the war and defend themselves from the enemy.

However, different forms of cooperation developed over time, including:

- the participation of war veterans in documentary films, both those produced by us and those externally produced based on our recommendations; public appearances in debates, radio and TV shows, as speakers at conferences, participation in study trips and international exchange workshops; assistance and support for us at CNA in gathering material for researching sites of suffering and sites of memory in BiH;
- joint organisation of the "War of Memories" exhibitions where veterans often spoke at the openings;
- cooperation in gathering information about unmarked sites of suffering and in actions to symbolically mark these sites, where veterans often served as guides in areas that were not secure;
- individuals continued their social activism and developed their own programmes (small groups of war veterans visited secondary schools as part of the KUVI dialogues organised by Pravi požar from Derventa, for example) and included other members of our broad informal group;

- they went with us to meetings and negotiations when planning actions with distrustful representatives of associations, contributing their integrity as a guarantee of security on our behalf;
- they participated as guests in workshops and training events and acted as a resource so that participants could ask questions.

Turnabout – taking responsibility

In rare cases, individuals underwent a personal process of transformation in a different framework, but even then, it was in an environment where people from the other side were present, usually people from other communities that shared a similar wartime experience (the loss of loved ones or torture during detention).

In some places, we were not welcomed if we wanted to visit sites of others' suffering, but elsewhere, it was the representatives of veterans' associations who called for the deaths of their wartime enemies to be mourned. The process of transformation we went through together with veterans was slow and uneven, with many ups and downs, but when we compare the situation at the outset and today, more than 20 years later, a long and difficult journey has been made. Throughout the process, we were committed to following the needs and level of readiness of the group of veterans we were working with. When we realised that if we stepped back, the work would not continue, we took on a leading role, becoming the ones to suggest, encourage and organise in constant communication with the veterans, checking in on their needs and their readiness to expose themselves to potential criticism because of their courageous actions. However, at no point did we engage in trade-offs, and we never tried to persuade anyone to do something they thought was a risk to themselves. We always accepted that everyone changes at their own pace, which sometimes meant taking steps backwards, as the group expanded and new people joined the actions. We also did not shy away from disagreements and what came out of them: we did not avoid conflicts and we never wanted to create a sense of forced harmony. As a result of building relationships, mutual respect and support, we always tried to show solidarity and foster it within the group of war veterans. It should be noted, because it does not go without saying, that we also fostered equality. We did not accept being pushed into a subordinate or supervisory role. Among veterans, we did not accept the transfer of hierarchies from military ranks, and the few attempts to impose authority based on military rank were rejected outright as inappropriate to our civilian life in freedom and without war.

Kaćuni near Busovača, 2023
Former camp inmates and war veterans in front of the building of the former camp

How we made the steps to find a more just relationship to the past was important; how we got there was more important than knowing exactly where we were going. For the veterans, the goal was to make that journey together, towards a better society, to keep checking each other and self-correcting. They did not have a clear vision of individual changes that needed to take place in a logical sequence, or a clear idea of a sequence of actions that needed to be implemented. The process of envisioning and planning was mostly done within CNA and was agreed with the veterans, with their suggestions and ideas constantly being adopted to create the final form of the actions we implemented. In one sense, it is strange to have this absence of vision about social change, yet at the same time, it is not, because individually we all seek peace with ourselves and the society around us. We pursued a process where we would feel true to ourselves and useful to society, and we recognised it together.

The text we use to explain to people what our intentions are and why we do what we do (we use both the Latin and Cyrillic versions)

We come in peace, in memory of those killed, as a warning against history repeating itself

War Veterans Together in Action

Joint commemorations of those killed on all sides in the war are part of the process of reconciliation, abolishing hatred and conquering a new space of freedom in our societies. This process is all the more relevant and symbolic when it is carried out by former soldiers and war veterans. The reconciliation process does not entail forgiving the wrongdoers, because forgiveness is a personal act and we cannot forgive on someone else's behalf, but it does mean standing up to the systemic blaming of whole groups or nationalities. Reconciliation in society at large means stepping away from hatred, distrust, discrimination and prejudice.

Working with war veterans to establish dialogue between former enemies and build peace is a cornerstone in the activities of the Centre for Nonviolent Action, tightly intertwined with other areas of peacebuilding and dealing with the past. From our work with war veterans, we draw motivation, knowledge and inspiration that help us seek ways to meet the challenges of peacebuilding in order to reach as many people as possible without marginalising anyone.

From the very beginning of our work with former soldiers, it was important for us to foster communication and trust, but without saying what we think people want to hear.

All victims of war deserve respect, both civilian and military victims. Paying our respects to all those killed does not mean approving of their aims, if any, but is instead an expression of decency and mourning for the loss of human lives. For the veterans themselves, the idea of jointly commemorating those killed is, on the one hand, close to their hearts, but also invokes anxiety over the risk of being misunderstood and denounced as traitors in their own communities. Denouncing and lack of understanding happen precisely when the community wrongly assumes that respecting the victims of others means denigrating one's own victims and approving the war efforts of the other side. By going to all commemorations, we send the message that we respect everyone and that the aim is not to denounce some while recognising others, but that our common ground, that which brings us together, is mourning for the loss of each human life, united in our determination never to let the war, its injustices and killings happen again.

Organising joint visits by war veterans to sites of killing of former enemies is a significant step towards reconciliation. The challenge facing us now and the direction we are taking are joint visits to official commemorations organised regularly by the authorities and veterans' organisations to mark important events from the past war, most often dates of massacres. The idea of former enemies attending such events together with the host veterans has the

same character and sends the same message as when we visit a memorial or site of killing independently. The message is one of honouring the victims and showing the living that we are no longer enemies, that we see them as people, neighbours, that we understand their pain, suffering and the sorrows brought on by war. When we visit sites of killing, we come in peace, in memory of those killed, and as a warning against history repeating itself. We attend commemorations only at the invitation and with the support of local veterans' associations from the town or region. We are open to dialogue and criticism, and we are prepared to re-examine our actions and views.

Visiting sites of killings is not easy; it fills us with anxiety and sometimes apprehension. We fear being misunderstood and our act interpreted as desecration, provocation or animosity. That is not our aim.

We live in societies where it is "normal" that empathy does not cross the line between "us" and "them". That is why a joint expression of empathy encourages a re-examination of the "usual" modes of memory and remembrance. We are aware that our presence may cause others to feel uncomfortable, not understanding why enemies would come to pay their respects at the site of killing that they are "to blame" for. The truth is that these individuals cannot be simply blamed, nor are they the perpetrators of the wrongdoings, even when the wrongdoings were committed in the name of their ethnic group. Just as wrongdoings were committed in the name of our ethnic group, and we are not to blame; what is more, we are disgusted by those wrongdoings.

The anxiety we feel is overcome with the conviction that we are doing the decent thing by paying our respects to all the victims of the war and that this is the basis of all our dialogues, cooperation and joint lessons in our recent and difficult history. We have faith that uniting around our common humanity is crucial for creating life in peace, mutual respect, security and dignity.

Times of War and Its Aftermath: Combatants' Experiences

Ivana Franović

How did get people into the war, what did they experience, and how did they manage to survive this period? With the aim of collecting original experiences of ex-combatants, we interviewed 29 war veterans who are part of the group that often participates in peace activities organised by CNA, and who were in different armies at war with each other during the 1990s. The interviews were conducted in 2021. They were held in places where the veterans live (Brčko, Mostar, Daruvar, Glina) or at one of CNA's two offices in Belgrade or Sarajevo. Among the interviewees there were 27 men and two women. Some of them were barely adults when the war started; one was a minor, the rest were adults. More information about the interviewees is available in the second section of this book, in the chapter "Who Are These People? Profiles of Ex-Combatants". The interviews generally lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, although some of them were much longer, due to the great need to talk.

Veterans' wartime experiences testify to the absurdity of war. That is why we decided to ask them a series of questions about the wartime period: in addition to how old they were when the war started, we asked why they participated in the war, what they fought for, what their wartime days were like, what they found most difficult in the war, whether they fondly remember any moments from the war, what the end of the war was like, and whether they remember the situation when they found out it was over. Furthermore, we asked them what were their hopes, was it difficult to readjust to peacetime living, and what are they most and least proud of. They were very responsive and their stories were decidedly anti-war because they

show how much misfortune war inflicts on ordinary people. At the end of the day, whatever conflicting interests and ideological constructs we use to explain the war, it is always waged against the population. However, experience has shown that those capable of leading people into war usually don't care about the populace, either *ours* or *theirs*.

Why did people take part in war?

In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, there are established opinions on why *the others* went to war against *us*: they wanted revenge for injustices dating back to the Second World War and/or its aftermath, they wanted to finish what was left unfinished in the last war, they wanted to get rid of us so they could take our land, to destroy Yugoslavia, because they hate us, because of one ideology or another, because of blindly following their belligerent leaders and because they were brainwashed with nationalism. Sometimes warlike behaviour is explained by what are perceived to be ethnic traits (e.g. *a genocidal people*). These notions are intermeshed with official and dominant narratives about the war that are served up every so often, whenever there is a need to raise tensions or create feelings of insecurity and fear. These feelings are particularly useful in the run-up to elections or when attention needs to be diverted away from some newly uncovered official wrongdoing.

However, if we were to ask war veterans why they took part in the war, we would get a range of answers, all quite different from the established dogma. Almost all say they were defending something – defending their lives or their families, their village, their city, their homeland, defending their people or their state: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Yugoslavia.

Fikreta from Bihać says her reason was survival, for herself and her family, her brothers and sisters. Suljo from Goražde says he wasn't fighting for any ideology, but for his life, for his friends and his city. Mirko from Brčko says he fought to save himself and his loved ones, his younger sister and their parents, and to stay alive in his home. Đoko, from a village near Šamac, also says he fought to stay where he was living, to not be forced out. Those who were expelled fought to return home, or to protect or find their family members.

Some persons from this group were mobilised, some felt a sense of duty and volunteered, some found themselves doing their regular military service when the war broke out or were active soldiers in the JNA. We should also bear in mind the strong influence of culture, the patriarchy and the widespread expectation of men

to be *defenders*. Krešimir from Daruvar points out that he was never interested in weapons and that he ended up in the war more out of shame than fear, going on to explain: "How could I go back to my village without having taken part in liberating my village? In saving my house? That shame made me overcome my fear." Siniša from Šamac talks about what can or could be heard from many who were doing their regular military service in the JNA: "I had sworn an oath to Yugoslavia, and I was a soldier of the JNA, doing my duty, defending the Serb people in that part of the country, defending anyone who was in danger, not just the Serb people, but the soldiers who were there, getting killed, all sorts, not just Serbs. At some points when we were in battle, I was most concerned that no one should get killed. I wasn't thinking about myself. I wanted to make sure my men were protected, that my crew was protected."

Only a few interviewees mentioned the detrimental influence of the media and irresponsible leaders in fomenting the war, such as Marinko, who says:

> "At that point, the national rhetoric was such that anyone hearing it felt they had to go to their flock. There was talk about the atrocities committed by Muslims, the atrocities committed by Croats; the Muslims were probably talking about the atrocities of the Serbs ... There was talk that as soon as this democracy and multiparty system got established, it would be better for all of us. Communism, socialism, these were blamed for everything, they were the spectre that was killing us. But when democracy came, war came along with it. Meaning that we chose it ourselves at the elections, no one else, you can't go blaming anyone else. Most Serbs voted for the SDS, most Muslims for the SDA, and most Croats for the HDZ. Which means that we divided ourselves according to what these nationalist leaders were saying. And then it all just took its course."

Saša from Daruvar, whose hometown is located on the so-called "Šešelj line", i.e. "on the imaginary border that exists in some people's ideologies (the borders of Greater Serbia, Virovitica-Karlovac-Karlobag)," says that what prompted him to volunteer for the Croatian Army was precisely what he saw on TV Belgrade and heard in the speeches of Serb politicians across Croatia, particularly that of Jovan Rašković, "the most prominent ideologue of Greater Serbia in Croatia", who spoke in the centre of Daruvar:

> "His speech was so full of hatred and he was calling the Serb part of the populace to arms. From that moment, there was no doubt in my mind and I went straight to volunteer to defend my homeland. Rašković's aggressive rhetoric threatened all the ethnicities in our multiethnic community. At that time, calling all Croats

> Ustashas, denying the possibility of coexistence, introducing fear, strife and distrust among the people in the city and its surroundings ... Every day, Serb radio stations broadcast information about non-existent large military units of the Croatian Army dressed in black and preparing to attack Serb majority areas. We locals knew these forces did not exist, we knew the actual situation in the field, but I can imagine what was going through the heads of the Serb part of the populace."

Milorad from Novi Grad in Bosnia and Herzegovina remembers how in his town, all the people, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, watched the news about the war in Croatia together and believed nothing like that could happen in BiH. However, when he saw a news report about the killing of Serb prisoners on the bridge near Karlovac, he says something inside him broke and he decided to enlist. He also predicted the war would come to Bosnia. He remembered his family history and the Second World War and told himself he would not be caught unprepared. On the other hand, Zoran and Stana from the vicinity of Mostar went to war to defend their people and help to create the Croatian state. Stana, who has since become a peace activist and has managed to open many closed doors in working to build peace, told us self-critically that waging war is insane and he couldn't believe how he used to think back then. As an example, he tells us that when his own brother told him he cared more about his wife and children than the state, "At that moment, I thought of him as a traitor."

Edin from Prijedor didn't think it was his war. He thought that because he didn't want to go to war, the war would pass him by, but that's not what happened. After his father, brother and numerous relatives were taken to a camp and he and his mother were expelled, he became a fighter. He fought to be able to return home. He further explains his motivation:

> "While we were fighting, we had the illusion of truly fighting for a noble cause: that we were attacked, that we were fighting against evil, which was really manifest in many ways, the plans to seize parts of the country, the mass displacements, everything that was happening. I felt we were standing up to evil itself. Most of us believed we were in the best place in the world and we were most directly standing up to something that was pure evil."

The story of Mirko from Brčko also differs from dominant narratives:

> "I can never say I went to war so that Yugoslavia would disappear. I didn't care about it either way. It's not like it was a thorn in my side, so I had to carve it up into seven or eight states. That meant nothing to me. But I also didn't go to war to fight for Herceg Bosna or for the kind of state BiH is today. I love BiH as a country, more than anything, but for me that country of BiH does not exist

> because the people running it won't let normal people live their lives. That is my view. I went to war, I was forced, ultimately, just to save myself and my loved ones. That's what I've noticed with most veterans. Going to those places, to the commemorations … When you talk to the people there, who live there, they mostly all say: it was hard for us, they attacked us from here. No one says I went over there to do something to them. These attacks happened, whether by individuals or groups or units that were instructed to cause havoc among the population just so it would spread."

Several veterans told us how after a while, they lost all motivation to keep on fighting.

Life during the war

The reports illustrate that there is nothing romantic about war. Some keep it brief: "It was horrifying!" Mesud is sure that his war days were the worst period in his life. Milan from Rogatica describes life during the war: "Everything was hard, everything was frightening. The whole war, you've got nowhere to change, nowhere to wash. You don't have this, you don't have that, you don't have anything. You've got a bit to eat, the basics. Nothing to wear on your feet. There's nothing anywhere. Everyone was suffering and fighting."

Đoko talks about how people are capable of adapting to abnormal circumstances: "In Šamac, life went on during the war. People who lived in the villages tilled their fields. There was a levee here, the Sava flowing, us planting cabbage by the levee. From over there, there was shooting from the bridge over the Sava, bullets whistling about, and we're planting. You become numb to it; life has to go on." Sometimes, they would go for a night out in town. Mirko from Brčko tells us: "In those moments when you were free, you weren't on the front line, then you could go to a cafe, maybe even somewhere further off. We'd go to Tuzla which was some 70 kilometres away. So we tried to give our minds a rest for a day or two, to spend our leave like normal 18- or 19- or 20-year-olds." Saša from Daruvar remembers how when they were going out to town, the first thing to do was to see where you could take shelter if the shelling started.

Amer's whole extended family left town and took refuge in a village nine or ten kilometres away from Zavidovići. The town was the front line. The soldiers had shifts: "You spend 12 hours on that line, then they pull you back to rest for 12 or 24 hours, then you go back for a 24-hour shift. In my time off, I'd come home, have a

rest maybe, then walk the nine or ten kilometres to see my folks, and then go back to the line again. And my neighbour Mira Momčilović would greet me, make me coffee; she hadn't fled."

Most of the veterans we spoke to vividly remember the lack of food during the war. Enes from Zavidovići remembers how a family of four would get two decilitres of oil and 500 grams of flour per person per month. There was no electricity, no firewood. They'd burn acrylic glass they'd take off buildings. "Acrylic glass burns longer, but it gives off toxic fumes, so you have to keep the children away. I said it back then and I say it again today: thank goodness a ceasefire was agreed." Marinko tells us about the food shortages: "It's a bit overstated that as the Serb Army of RS, we were left with JNA stockpiles. It wasn't like that, all the stockpiles were gone, maybe even sold off. When I remember what I ate, a dog wouldn't eat that kind of food, but we had to eat." Siniša remembers vividly that one night the people from the surrounding villages brought the soldiers cured ham sandwiches and a small bottle of cola each; he says he never had such a good sandwich in his life. Edin also told us about the hunger and how they would dig potatoes out of the frozen earth or gather apples. They would also go scavenging in abandoned houses where you could always find some left-behind pasta or a tin of something. This one time, it was foggy, and he went up to some abandoned houses with a fellow fighter who went inside to look for leftover food while Edin stayed outside to keep watch. As he was waiting, he spotted someone in the yard picking apples. Another figure approached with two buckets. Enemy soldiers. Unarmed. He took cover and aimed his rifle at one of them: "I was close enough to shoot him in the eye," and he saw that his comrade had aimed his rifle at the other soldier through the window. When the two enemy soldiers noticed them, one just dropped his bucket. Edin's comrade shouted at them, "Go on, get out of here!" Neither of them opened fire. Edin says: "We were out looking for food, pasta. I wasn't looking to kill a man." They quickly gathered up the little leftover food they'd found, because they expected the place to be shelled soon, since they'd been discovered. But not a shot was fired.

While the men were on the battlefields, at the front lines or in command posts, it was mostly the women who were left to take care of the children and the elderly. Enes says he often thinks about what it was like for his wife during the war and how she managed to feed their two small children: "I ask myself how she managed it, with two of them, because I would come home from time to time, for a visit, and then I was gone." He had to go back to the war. Marinko also remembers the burden that fell on his wife. Their little girl was two and a half at that time and when they would take shelter in the basement, his wife had to bring the little girl's favourite blanket

and her potty. One time she forgot the potty and went back to get it under a torrent of shelling.

This statement illustrates that men and women suffered during the war, but in different ways. Women had to bear the burden of taking care of everyone's survival, of looking after the children and the elderly, and they didn't get a war pension or a medal. A whole book could be written about that.

What was most difficult for them during the war?

We asked all the veterans we spoke to what was most difficult for them during the war. Many spoke about losing loved ones, family members, civilians, fellow fighters, then situations when they had to tell the family about someone's death or injuries. They talked about attacks on civilians, the lack of food and the hunger, being away from their families, worrying about their children or parents, the uncertainty, the fear.

Mesud from Goražde had many difficult moments. First, he had to face the fact that war had broken out and that he would be in a situation where someone would come to kill him, or he would have to kill someone, that someone would wound him or he would wound someone else. He said that before the war, he used to think the worst thing that could happen was for you to get killed or wounded, but during the war he realised there were worse situations: seeing the dead and wounded around you, being hungry, having nothing, and the uncertainty. "For four years, every day, you didn't know what would happen tomorrow. It was horrible."

Fikreta from Bihać was 23 when war broke out and she tells us how she was haunted by the question: Why? She felt powerless to do anything and kept waiting for it to end. She tells us how before the war, there were Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats living in her street, that she grew up with them. The Serbs and Croats left overnight. She says she got up one morning and they were gone. She felt betrayed, because they'd always shared everything.

Krešimir from Daruvar says: "I saw many people die. It was horrifically traumatic. I'd already started having nightmares. Later you just go numb. I can tell you, the war makes even the sanest person start to lose their mind."

For Enes from Zavidovići, the hardest period "and the hardest survival, the hardest emotions, mental state, physical state, the hardest battle situation was when the conflict between HVO and us started in the municipalities of Zavidovići, Žepče

and Maglaj. This was the period from 24 June 1993. In that period, you went through so much in those nine or ten months, things you couldn't have imagined ever happening to anyone. So you can't imagine it: one day, you're functioning normally with someone, working together, planning, him and me sitting and discussing HVO activities and those of my unit, because we're both stationed in town, and then the next day, suddenly there's shooting from their positions at the rest of the town … You call to ask: what's this about? 'We were ordered to go to war with you.' And that's it."

For Drago from Živinice, it was hardest when enemy forces targeted civilians and civilian buildings: "I don't know how anyone gets the idea to target a school, or to target a hospital, for example. That was the hardest thing for me in the war. And I couldn't forgive my own side if they did such things, not my enemy and not my friend. As far as I'm concerned, and as for my defence line, we went in there to fight, man to man, with whatever we had, but to shoot at someone behind the lines, the women and children who stayed home … to this day, I'll never understand that there are people who can do that."

For Jasmin from Bihać, the most difficult thing was coming home to find his child had nothing to eat. A sack of flour in Bihać cost 500 marks. It was also hard for him when his friends and brothers were killed. He adds: "And you know that daddy's boys aren't going into battle, they're not being sent where it's worst. They just send in the lads who have nothing."

Edin describes how difficult it is when you lose fellow fighters: "The people in your unit, your platoon, you don't have such relationships in civilian life, not with your spouse, or your sibling … Here, you literally spend every minute with those people, you see everything they see, you eat what they eat, hear what they hear So we all become one organism, because we're connected and we rely on each other in crises. And then any loss of anyone … it becomes very painful."

Nazif from Jajce talks about a situation that was very hard for him. He had moved his wife and children to his childhood home in a village where it was safer and where they made a dugout to serve as shelter for his brothers' children as well. And this one time, from town, from his command post, he saw a heavy shell had been launched at the village where his family was. He didn't report to anyone, he just jumped into his car and drove to the village under the shelling. He arrived to find a harrowing scene.

His family was safe, but there were several wounded in the village, and one woman had been killed. Nazif also tells us about other difficult moments: when his cousin was killed, then his friend, when the Army and HVO went to war against each other, which in the midst of a blockade of Central Bosnia made the situation almost

impossible, with severe food shortages and famine. But he says one moment that he'll never forget is when he had to tell the father of a police officer that his son had been killed on the line of defence, serving in a police unit under Nazif's command.

Zvonko from Slavonia (and Glina) singles out the following: "Younger casualties … we would go to their funerals and then … it would be very hard. I think there's really no greater trauma than a parent having to bury a child. It is so brutal and that is where you truly feel the war in all its tragedy."

Suljo from Goražde remembers: "I was 35 years old, and that whole unit was younger than me, lads in their twenties. A lot of those young men got killed on my watch. And the hardest thing was going to their parents to express my condolences."

Marinko from Novi Grad tells us how it was difficult not seeing his sister through the whole war, because she lived with her family in Kiseljak. He also found it hard to deal with all the disinformation: who got killed, which of his colleagues and friends was fighting "against us". He remembers when he heard that his best friend and neighbour had been wounded in Krupa and that they couldn't get him out. Enemy fire was unrelenting and they had to wait for the cover of night to take a boat across the Una River, but it was still 12 hours until nightfall. He adds: "This was in 1994. I was 30 years old at the time. Overnight, when I went to shave in the morning, I saw my hair had started turning grey." He tells us how he and his wife helped their Muslim/Bosniak colleagues and neighbours, brought them food. He remembers the attack on Novi Grad in 1995, when the civilian population was evacuated. His cousin and her two sons, one was 15 and the other 11, were killed during the evacuation. Their car was stopped and they were killed by the road.

Zoran from Bijelo Polje near Mostar speaks with a lump in his throat: "There were difficult moments, losing loved ones. My father died in my arms … I can't describe it … The way he looked at me … and it keeps haunting you, whenever you talk about it. And sometimes it just appears out of nowhere. For me, remembering his eyes is the worst. Several people died in my arms. It's a difficult feeling, their bodies going cold, the life going out of them, and that's it."

For Asim from Zavidovići, one of the hardest moments was in 1995, when his son was just six weeks old and his wife couldn't breastfeed. It was extremely difficult to get baby food, but he managed to get some through Caritas so his son would survive.

Milan from Rogatica, who was expelled from his home, tells us about the time he thought he smelled smoke, so he asked a colleague: "I said, could you go look, I think my house is burning. 'What do you mean, what house?' 'Just go look, please, I have a feeling it's burning.' It's like some kind of sixth sense, something just tells you. He

says: 'Damn it, let it burn, we'll build another.' Tears just started streaming down my face."

Stana from Mostar tells us how he lost two people close to him. One was his friend, a Serb who was captured and killed by Stana's army. That friend's mother called his mother to ask what happened, because she believed Stana would tell her the truth. The other was his cousin, who was killed by a Serb shell. He explains: "I can put them together in pain, because I loved both of them. It has left a scar and I always carry it with me. I can't ask for forgiveness because I didn't do anything, but I can't not feel guilty when one of my own people did that. I rarely mention it; I'm not always strong enough to say anything, because it upsets me. I wish everyone knew how sorry I am."

Amer tells us: "People you were fond of from the neighbourhood getting killed, I mean that's normal that you find it hard. But I had this one situation where my neighbour Saša Petrov who was a police officer with HVO, he was killed. His brother stayed with their mother Mira, she was a Serb from Kragujevac, their father was a Croat from Bosnia, and I knew he had been killed, and I'm coming home, the shelling is still going on, I'm coming back from the front line ... His parents and his brother, their apartment was hit by a shell. I knew Saša had been killed and that I have to go to them to express my condolences, but I felt such shame, as if I was responsible. At the end, it was them comforting me, because they saw how difficult it was for me."

Edin tells us in vivid terms about the fear he felt at the beginning, on his first night in an unknown area when, as the youngest, he was left to keep watch: "I was so afraid ... I know I dropped my rifle several times, my hands were shaking so much. It was raining, there was a house burning, the sounds were terrifying ... I almost died of fear that night." And then he adds: "But instead, it was like my fear died that night. I completely stopped feeling fear." Zvonko also tells us about fear: "I think I was most afraid of being captured during the war; that seemed like the worst trauma that could happen."

Adnan from Sarajevo remembers many difficult situations, but when asked what was the hardest part for him, he says: "Well, that it wasn't my war."

What do they remember fondly?

We knew that the great majority of veterans we spoke to survived unspeakable horrors, but we couldn't explain how they managed to bear them, how they survived, how

they found the strength to go on. That is why we asked them what they remembered fondly from the time of the war.

Avdija, Marinko and Đoko didn't miss a beat and said right away that their daughters were born during the war, and Ivo, Asim and Jasmin said their sons were born in the war. Marinko added: "But when my daughter was born, then I started thinking about how to make it out of the war alive and well, so that I could put that child through school, give her a start in life."

Edin didn't find it strange we were asking this question and he replied: "In these extreme conditions, you have this fullness of life ... food in the war ... one meal is worth a thousand meals in the best restaurants. The satisfaction of getting food that was nowhere to be found, how sweet are those mouthfuls, and just that full feeling of everything ... Also, the feeling when it's over, when it quietens down, and you've survived, you and your loved ones, that feeling of contentment and joy, you can't have that in normal life. Of course, you go through such horrors beforehand, but at the same time, the fullness of life in war ... I'm not happy because of what I'm saying, but what fills you up, I guess that also enables people to keep participating in the war, they're not spent over those three and a half, four years."

Most of the veterans remember friendships and getting close with wartime comrades. Amir tells us how some of the basic things in life brought joy: throwing a party, having a cigarette, having a good meal, and he adds: "Then I was glad to see how united people were in all this trouble, in good and bad, people were generous. They cared for each other. Now, when I look at my city, my country, now I see people gnawing at each other, whatever their ethnicity, people have become distanced, like love has died. There's no more friendship. In hard times, people become great friends." Veroljub also likes to remember how people formed strong bonds, how they worked together, even in the worst situations, how they took care of each other, kept each other safe. Mesud tells us how he often hears people saying we were better people during the war, kinder to each other, we showed solidarity, helped each other out, cared for each other and spent time together, and he tends to agree: "In the war I had this enduring hope that once it was over, if I made it out alive, that everything would be better, more beautiful, more just. Both I myself and a lot of other people were bitterly disappointed, because the very opposite happened." For Zoran, wartime friendships brought some of the best moments in his life: because of their honesty, fairness, integrity, there was nothing underhanded, no swindling, people were there for each other: "Especially those of us who were in the special forces ... That friend means more to you than a brother, or your father, your family, and losing them hurts more than losing a loved one. To this day, whenever we meet, it's always ... we've

thrown out all the bad things, forgotten them, we've kept the good things, and there were some really beautiful moments. And then, also, that period was a time without chores. You don't have to worry about bread, farming, crops, you have no chores, you just have this thing that has brought people together."

Adnan had a lot to say:

> "Well, there was, there was a lot of joking, lots of good friends, people I met. I remember Cova from the village of Jabuka near Foča. He came to us through the woods, all alone in the world, he lived somewhere in the area, had some kind of shack, a mild and humble man, a peasant, a more beautiful soul I never met. I was prejudiced against him, I was all cool, and he was just this honest, warm man who cared, he would leave you, without you knowing, a cigarette, heart the size of a mountain. I remember him, others like him. He wasn't the only one like that. Or here in Sarajevo, all the hanging out, during the siege, hanging out with friends was fantastic. The best concert of all time was Rock Under Siege. Friends of mine were playing and they sounded like, I don't know, the Clash. It was really cool, there was this spirit. Then the theatre plays ... I ran into Miki Trifunov the other day, he came from Vojvodina to study here in Sarajevo and stayed his whole life. What a character! A real true artist. I remember he did a play in the middle of the war. So I tell him, you have no idea how much good that did for me. In the sense that, at that moment, it pulls you up, it gives you meaning. I don't even remember what play it was. There were all sort of goings-on, the parties, the concerts, the drama academy, I loved all of it ... And I read a lot during the war, I finally started reading books in the war. Up until I was 18, I'd only read books when I really had to."

Fikreta was happy when she could see her loved ones every day, seeing them coming back from the front unharmed, having them all together; she says: "That was my greatest joy."

Đoko likes to remember how people who were captured were exchanged and came back alive. That was how his cousin came back, much to his joy. Jasmin was happy when coming back from an action without having lost a single soldier.

Enes says he often remembers how happy he was to receive a package in the middle of the war from friends, Ivan and Slavica, a married couple from Slovenia, and in the package were children's clothes, sweets and 100 German marks to buy something for his son and daughter. Enes will never forget how much that meant to them.

Perica tells us how on the eve of the war his girlfriend moved to Germany because she got a job there. He didn't want to go, he didn't believe there would be war in

Bosnia and they broke up. When he was wounded in 1992, she found out about it and came back to visit him. That's when they made up.

Zvonko has a very special story. He was sent to Mostar, first to the 123rd and then the 1st Guards Brigade. He says he always tried to be a soldier and remain professional. They were stationed at Heliodrom, which was also a camp for Bosniaks. He tried to protect his colleagues as much as he could, and the thought of harming someone never crossed his mind. Near the end, when an agreement was reached between the Croat and Bosniak sides and when it was known that the prisoners would be released, one of them told him: "Listen, I have nothing else to give you, this is from me ... We'll be leaving here soon." And he gave him a cigarette holder he'd fashioned himself from a piece of willow as a way to thank him. Zvonko was surprised by the gesture and wondered how the man had managed to carve the gift under the conditions in which the prisoners were kept, without tools, without anything. He says he was touched by the gesture and it made him feel proud. Zvonko had an opportunity to speak with several other war veterans at a public forum in Mostar. A man from the audience who had been detained at the Heliodrom camp recognised him and came up to him after the event. As Zvonko explained to us: "For me, it was a confirmation that I did the right thing back then, as difficult as it was to retain your humanity. I think I managed to get through it so that I don't have to hide from anyone now, including from my own side, and I can also go to Serbia and to Bosnia, anywhere. I think a lot of my colleagues avoid me for those very reasons."

The long-awaited end to the war

Exhausted by the horrors of war, the uncertainty and poverty that it brings, people were longing for it to end. Đoko summed up what we heard many times: "When we went to war, we thought it would last 10-15 days, maybe a month, and that would be that. But it stretched on for four long years, or three and a half, and people had had enough."

The Dayton Peace Agreement officially ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was named after a town in the US state of Ohio where in November 1995 a conference was held with the main participants being the then President of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović, the President of the Republic of Croatia Franjo Tuđman, the President of the Republic of Serbia Slobodan Milošević, and US officials. The Agreement was officially signed on 14 December 1995 in Paris.

We asked the war veterans whether they remember the moment they found out the war was over, and how it felt to them. Milan tells us: "Well, I was thinking it had to end sometime. I don't know, that it would end. The presidency went, Alija went, Milošević went, the rest of them, they took them all to Dayton. They put pressure on them, and then they signed. And then the sun finally came up." A few of the veterans remember shots fired into the air in celebration, including Milorad who says: "I was in the village of Arapuša near Bosanska Krupa. The Federal troops started shooting into the air first, they found out before us that it was signed … the line just broke. And then it was radioed to us that Dayton was signed and the war was over. There was no one happier, we were all overjoyed."

Marinko also remembers the gunfire and celebrations:

> "We found out; those of us who were in communications were the first to find out. We had these generators, and back-ups, to listen to the news, hiding the TVs, so we found out, we'd been following the Dayton Agreement all night. It was like the battle to end all battles when peace was declared. When the Muslims started shooting into the air and when we started shooting into the air, it was on fire for an hour or two, it was like we were attacking each other out of joy. It was like fireworks. Which means we were all sick and tired of the war."

Mirko remembers seeing that everyone was happy, everyone was smiling, "as if a great weight was lifted off of all of our shoulders." Đoko remembers visiting relatives and friends for the feast day of St Michael when they got the news that the Dayton Agreement had been signed. He says everyone was happy and they all raised their glasses in a toast.

For Svetlana, the war had ended earlier, when she finally returned to Serbia in July 1992. She remembers her shock when she saw that her colleagues of the same rank in Serbia led completely different lives, going home on leave, wearing their ceremonial uniforms, and she hadn't been out of combat boots for two years. She tells us about her shock: "First, when we crossed the Rača Bridge and just knowing you were going somewhere where there is light, a normal life, water to drink …"

Adnan says:

> "Oh, I'd been waiting for it! You could feel it in the air before it was signed that it was coming … The worst thing for me was that they called me up in September 1995 to go to Mount Treskavica, where you were liable to get killed. I refused, I wouldn't go. First, because I was angry, I'd spent 57 days in those woods and then you're sending me up there again because I'm the youngest, or what, the stupidest. So I go hide at a friend's place. The military police came looking for me once. And a month later, I came back. I was supposed to get

sanctioned, but nothing happened. A friend told me: go up to the loony bin, tell them you're crazy, on drugs, you'll get a certificate. You really could. And so I went on sick leave, and then when I came back, taking the papers to my commander that say I've got PTSD, psychopathy, addiction, whatever. He looks at me and says: 'You mean to tell me you're crazy, is that it?' I say: 'Hehe, well, yeah.' He says: 'Well, that's just the kind we need, no sane person would do this, man.' I went back to the front line for a bit, just a couple of days. And then I managed to get sick leave again. I really had no motivation. I'd lost all motivation for war back in 1994."

Amer remembers:

"It was joy. Haris, he'd been in three different armies, he was first in the JNA, the only army he hadn't been in was UNPROFOR. We were up on some site, on Mount Ozren, a hill, Gradina, forward position, trench number five. He had a transistor radio and it was on the morning news. There was this negotiation process and I remember it was decided that the Army of BiH and VRS would pull back two kilometres, along with all the weapons. We'd been listening to all of it and then we're waiting for breakfast. But there was no breakfast. After a while, we go around the line, but there's no one around. Then we gathered our things and got on our way. There was a command outpost where the troops would usually gather, where there were medics ... When we got there, they were like, where did you come from? We were up on the line, where is everyone? Everyone was ordered to pull back. They were all on the trucks. They'd forgotten us."

At the end of the war, Veroljub was recovering from his injuries and says there was no one happier than him: "I'd already finished with it, I managed to survive, but I was happy there would be no more dead and wounded, no one would have to go through what I went through." Amir was also recovering, at the hospital. Perica, too, was recovering after being wounded. He was happy there would be no more shells whistling overhead and dropping on the city, but he was also starting to panic because everything had been destroyed. His city had two dozen companies before the war that all did good business, but all of that was gone now.

Siniša thanked God the war was over and adds: "So that we could go back to normal as much as possible. Because, actually, the war wasn't over. Signing that paper meant no more shooting, but we all brought the war back home with us, in a way."

With the official end to the war, expectations were high, and so was hope. Today, dissatisfaction has set in.

Zoran tells us about his dissatisfaction, about the war not being over, just continuing by other means, as he says: "I thought Dayton, seeing as the Americans had drafted it, I thought it would be more honest, fair and equal, that it would be based on an agreement, that there would be no one above and no one below anyone else. And that we would start a new life, build everything we had neglected over those five years." Amir hoped the proverbial pie would be shared equally.

Marinko remembers: "Wages were very low after the war, but you could manage. My wife wasn't working, but I had a job. Our second child was born in 1997. Everything fell on me, and my salary was around 100 marks. So we lived and survived on 100 marks. In terms of me hoping for something, I wasn't hoping for anything. I knew nothing would ever be like it was before."

Jasmin expected things to get better, "that we'd get what our commanders had promised us, and they had promised we would be eating with golden spoons. We didn't need any golden spoons, we just needed enough to eat." Ivo was hoping everyone would be able to go wherever they pleased as free people. Stana was hoping the wounds would heal, the crimes would be prosecuted, the recovery would be faster, new businesses would start up. Saša was hoping things would go back to normal sooner:

> "From the economy, transport, connections, commerce ... But you get a bit of a wake-up call when you realise that while people were getting killed in war-affected areas, others had made the most of it. At the end of the war, you started noticing certain developments that had been going on in Croatia while you were off on a battlefield, preoccupied with your basic survival instincts. And you see what had been done in the background by those who were urging you to keep fighting ..."

Zvonko expected a free, secular state: "I thought we would be getting a state worthy of the name, a state that would treat all its citizens equally. I think we have an elite of people who are extremely privileged. There are no institutions ... If you want to destroy a society, that's how you do it, you distribute some meagre benefits and tell people they don't have to work any more."

How difficult was it to readjust to peacetime living?

Edin was also happy the war was over, but he faced a big dilemma: to stay in the army or go back to being a civilian. He says he changed his mind seven times that day: "The main thing was, when I left the barracks, what would I do about lunch, about dinner?

The army organises all that, you don't have to worry. When there's shortages, that's just how it is, we all go hungry, but you always know where you'll be getting your meals ... Your clothes too are military fatigues. You didn't have to think about any of that. Now, I had this fear of civilian life. I was being pragmatic, as in what would I do about dinner?"

We asked all the veterans how difficult it was for them to readjust to peacetime living. We received different answers; for some it was harder, for some easier.

Fikreta says she kept listening for the air raid sirens long after the war was over. She says even today, when they sound the sirens as part of a regular drill to test the system, she gets flashbacks to the war and her heart starts beating fast.

Amir, who lost his leg in the war, briefly replies that it was difficult to adapt to living with a disability. Aleksandar, who suffered a similar fate, tells us:

> "It was hard, very hard. You know, everything happened so fast. From a normal life, youth ... I was always on the go, I was never home ... And then I got wounded. I was bedridden, in hospital, for so long. You feel cut off from society even when you lose touch for a month and you're not up to speed, let alone two or three years. And when I got home after several surgeries and when my friends came to visit ... I had no idea what to talk with them about. I don't know. So we talked about my injuries or the war ... The hardest thing was figuring out how to go back to normal life. We got a Sony PlayStation, played video games, to give our minds a rest. We'd tuned out of reality."

Adnan says: "After the war, I had a serious case of PTSD, I can say that now. I mean, the doctors told me so, and I was doing really badly, I was on drugs, and drinking ... I wanted to study psychology. I went to university, tried to listen ... I realised I would not be able to keep up. At least at the time, I couldn't. I couldn't concentrate enough to follow the lectures, let alone get through a textbook."

Milorad sums up his answer in one sentence: "For years, I tried to get back to normal, and it was hard to readjust: I came home the first day and everything was getting on my nerves. It's hard to get used to civilian life ..."

Svetlana talked about how difficult it was to process everything people went through during the war:

> "At the time, you react emotionally; you're not in a position to function normally. First, because the whole time the war is going on, and second, when you emerge from the hell that is war, you want to forget everything as soon as possible. And you don't want to keep going back to it in your thoughts. You don't want to talk about it either. A lot of time had to pass, a lot of water had

to flow down the Morava River before I could start talking about many of these things. And some have still remained untold ... But in time you learn to forgive, to overcome your initial emotion, to overcome your anger and consider that things may not be as they seemed in the moment. But it takes time. It's true that time heals."

Suljo says it wasn't hard for him to readjust to peacetime living: "It's easier to accept what is good. We got used to it right away ... It was only ten years later that Goražde was overwhelmed by PTSD; a lot of people had mental health issues. So we set up an organisation called "Svjetlost Drine" [The Light of Drina] and we organised these courses. A lot of people got better through this association, but now they're facing a lack of funding."

Đoko remembers:

"It wasn't hard for me to get used to peacetime living. It was hard for me when I was wounded, then I came to Belgrade, to Karaburma, and then the first time I went home. I arrived sometime in early August, and the first time I asked for a weekend to visit home was in September. My dressings still needed to be changed, but I asked to be let go, the village was getting together, I missed my wife and child, my mother and father. So they sent me home for the weekend. And my first time out of the hospital, down by the Seminary where the tram turns, I went down there and when the tram's brakes screeched, I threw myself down on the ground. Mentally, I was in a bad way; it reminded me of the sound of a shell, and I threw myself down, crutches and all. It all happened so fast. I look around, see high heels walking by, it was summer, women in skirts, people were stopping, looking at me, and it was only then that I realised I was in Belgrade, I wasn't in Šamac ... When the war was over, the people were all eager to work, to fix things. Because there wasn't a single house in the village or in town that wasn't damaged by shelling. So everyone was fixing things, facades, windows, new panes, every day someone was getting glass panes for their windows, or you put up foil, thinking there's still trouble to come. It was still a distrustful peace. It doesn't just happen overnight: the peace was signed and that's it, but there'd been shooting for three and a half years, after all. There had been ceasefires before, and people would still get killed during those ceasefires. And when Dayton was signed, there were casualties, the next day and the day after that. For a week, there were still casualties. The distrust lasted for almost a year. Until there were no more casualties and people re-established communication."

Dražen explains why it wasn't hard for him to get used to living in peace: "I'd never gotten used to the war and I never saw it as any part of my identity. For me, it was just an episode that, luckily for me, passed without any adverse consequences."

Marinko also says it wasn't hard for him:

> "Well, it wasn't hard for me to get used to the peace, because I'm one of the people who never wanted to go to war, I couldn't wait for it to be over. But I know some people who weren't too pleased about the peace, because in the war they achieved what they could never achieve in peacetime. And I know they had it better in the war than in peace. In peace, you have to earn a living by working, now that ... When someone, if I can express myself colloquially, someone who used to bum cigarettes off of us is now a big boss, and those of us who did an honest day's work before the war are barely making ends meet, that's what it's like now."

Zvonko recounts a situation for us:

> "That one in the commission will surely remember me, when I showed up after a year asking for a certificate to get training. Several thousand people had gone through her office in the meantime. When I showed up, she said: but you were wounded twice, you have the certificate, and based on your documentation here, you can retire. I asked her, what will I do in my retirement at 35? The woman couldn't believe her ears; she thought I was a fool. Here they were all grasping, bribing, buying, trading, and then there's this fool who won't retire. But I always thought work was the answer and I still think so today. And I think for the population of veterans it would have been far better if they'd stayed in their homes, if they hadn't dragged themselves into the cities, getting flats and all that. If society were organised with jobs and work, it would be a lot healthier. What we have now is a brutal Western consumerist system that will just trample us underfoot."

As much as they differ in terms of how easy or how hard it was to readjust to life without war, depending on the reasons they went to war in the first place, where they live, in rural or urban areas, whether they have jobs or are retired, which of the new countries they live in, they all share a feeling of dissatisfaction with the general state of society. Or, as many of them would say: "What was I fighting for?!"

Proud moments

We also asked the veterans what they were most proud of since the start of the war until today, and whether there was anything they weren't proud of. Most often, they replied that they were proud of having behaved humanely and honourably. For example, Đoko puts it like this: "I can look everyone in the eye, I haven't wronged anyone, and, thank God, I can walk with my head held high." Avdija says that in addition to being proud of retaining his own humanity, he is also proud of his pre-war friends from school, from sports, youth actions, who are all of different nationalities and often still get together today to celebrate holidays, even to sing.

The next most frequent answer is that they are proud of having defended their country, their people, their city or village. Suljo is proud that they managed to defend Goražde, that the city did not go the way of other cities in eastern Bosnia, such as Višegrad or Srebrenica, and that he himself was one of the key figures in the defence of the city. He is also proud of getting involved right away in helping those suffering from PTSD. Ivo is proud of his fellow defenders for their sacrifice, for having the strength to bear it all, for resisting and remaining steadfast and, as he says: "I think many of my fellow defenders and me, we were honest and honourable and we are not responsible for any wrongdoing. I would always say to the guys during the war: this war will be over one day, so let's keep our humanity, let's not turn into beasts. That's what I'm proud of."

Perica is proud that at 24-25, he was already a platoon commander. Saša is proud that he had no casualties among the troops under his command; he says that makes his life a whole lot easier. Zoran is also proud of his fellow fighters: "Because we did things hundreds and hundreds of others didn't even dare imagine. These were great people I was with. We never hung one another out to dry. There were losses, people were wounded, all sorts of things, but we were always honourable. Honourable warriors."

When asked what they're not proud of, most refer to war crimes committed by "their side".

Aleksandar says:

> "Both: I'm proud and I'm not proud of having taken part in all that. On the one hand, I felt a moral obligation to go into the army, to go to war, in the sense of defending the country and the people, but when it was all over, the first few years I felt really uncomfortable about having been part of it. I don't know how to explain it. Of course, all sorts of things were going on ... I'm not proud of belonging to a people that is apparently to blame for everything

that happened in the past 20-30 or however many years. I don't like that at all. Let me be clear, I'm not ashamed of being a Serb, I'm ashamed of Serbs being blamed. But there is some truth there ... When I come to Sarajevo, for example, or somewhere in Kosovo, in Croatia, somewhere where they see me as a Serb, not as a person first, that makes me feel ashamed. Because I know members of my people committed crimes there that have been proven. But we know exactly who committed them. Then I feel uncomfortable. I feel like I am somehow to blame for the crime, even though I had nothing to do with it. I carry this responsibility and this burden of shame and I don't know ... I don't know how I would describe that feeling."

Marinko is not proud of having gone to war, but he is proud of having stayed in his town with people who are farmers and workers, that he didn't leave: "I was in the war. I wish there had been no war, but I'm proud I stayed and I can say I was here, I defended this here ... I stayed on my homestead where my ancestors have lived for centuries." He is proud of being valued and of having helped many he shared bread with, of not doing any wrong to anyone, whatever their religion or ethnicity. He doesn't justify the crimes committed in the villages around his city.[1]

In response to this question, Perica related a special story:

"At the start of May 1992, 16 civilians were killed near Šamac.[2] I was there when they were all buried on the banks of the Bosna River. After the war, I met a man, unfortunately now the late Marinko Baković from Gradačac, who worked on finding the remains of soldiers and civilians from the war. I personally showed him the location and the remains were exhumed and returned to their families."

In his answer to the question of what he is not proud of, Dražen goes back to the time before the war:

"I regret not taking part in anti-war efforts before the war started. Now, when I read about all the wise and courageous people who were working at the time on preventing the war and the efforts they were making, I am moved to tears. But I didn't have that awareness back then, nor could I imagine where it would lead. The range of human nature and the human ability to commit harrowing crimes under certain conditions were completely unknown to me at the time."

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1 This refers to the war crimes in the villages of Ekići and Alići where on 22 June 1992, 27 Bosniak civilians were killed after being abused. To date, one person, Željko Novaković, has been indicted and another 12 people are being investigated.

2 This was in the village of Crkvina near Šamac. The local stadium and a warehouse were used as detention facilities for Bosniaks and Croats. In the night of 7 May 1992, 16 civilians were executed.

Taking Part in Anti-War and Peace Activities

Ivana Franović

When at the end of 2001, we decided to try to focus on veterans and involve them in anti-war and peace activities, we were not sure how much interest there would be. We already knew a few war veterans with high levels of motivation to meet with the *enemy*, so we believed there must be more and it was just a matter of finding them. If shortly after the war, our colleague Adnan could go with a friend from Sarajevo and cross the "demarcation line" to visit a bar on enemy territory in order to meet people and ask them "How did we end up like this?", and if our colleague Amer could start up a friendship with an enemy soldier in the middle of the war, then surely there were others who would be prepared, now that conditions were more secure, to meet with former *enemies*. We had the right idea, but the search took time and effort, and neither the work itself nor the results were visible for quite some time.

After 20 years of working and cooperating with war veterans and running a large number of activities, from public forums, dialogue meetings, training courses and reciprocal visits between veterans, to joint visits to sites of suffering, going together to attend official commemorations for those killed in the war and marking unmarked sites of suffering, we decided we should present at least some of that work in this book. The veterans from this group certainly deserve this. An important part of the overall picture is how they see this work themselves.

In the interviews with veterans, we asked them what it was like to participate in various anti-war and peace activities. But first we asked what made them decide to take the step to meet with enemies. Because I would say this is the biggest step you can take and it can build a strong enough foundation for all the demands of peacebuilding and dealing with the past. I believe this motivation can be useful as a

reference that will help peace workers from other troubled regions in the world find their bearings.

Meeting with former enemies: Why did they get involved?

In addition to asking what made them decide to meet with their former enemies, we also asked the veterans how it all seemed to them in the beginning: what were their expectations and concerns? The great majority of them said that the reason they got involved was curiosity. They had so many questions: why did the war break out, why did we do this, why did we start hating each other, what was happening in other places and environments? They also wanted to ask their former enemies why they took part in the war, to hear what others were thinking. Some wanted to use the opportunity to tell others their truth. Some got involved because they believed these kinds of conversations were necessary to make sure similar things would not happen again. Some didn't need much convincing; it was as if they had been waiting for an invitation to take part in something like this.

Suljo decided to join in because he saw *the mixed composition* of CNA: "Your level of civilisation is reflected in your attitude towards others. You have excellent relations and I like that and that is why I'm here with you." Nazif had heard of CNA, that it was an active organisation, and he wanted to contribute to truth and reconciliation because he believed that as long as there was disinformation and lies, there would be no reconciliation.

Đoko was at a meeting with the president of his veterans' organisation where CNA activists presented their work with veterans and invited them to join these activities. He says that the organisation's president told him afterwards: "I'm not going, but you go if you want to." It was curiosity that made him say yes. Saša was invited by a friend from a veterans' organisation to go along to the meeting where CNA announced the first visit to Pakrac and Daruvar. He thought about joining, but he says he was really curious and instead of having to ask around to find out how it went, he decided to attend himself. He says he was very nervous:

> "But in the end, it's not so scary. I tried to explain it to friends who haven't done anything like this ... You can't explain how important it is, after all these years, to sit down and try to communicate openly with people who 'only yesterday' were your sworn enemies. I'm not saying everyone will be satisfied with such dialogues, or thrilled, but they will hear information and different experiences, first hand. It's all very interesting. I came along, I met people, it was a valuable

experience and I learned something new. Thank you, CNA team, you've passed the test."

Jasmin hoped that through the meetings and conversations, he would find information about his missing brother:

"And I really saw through talking to people that we're not such great enemies, that we were deceived in that war ... I attended the commemorations, and as hard as it is to go and see them, you find out a lot of things and when you talk to people, believe me, it gets easier. There, see, sometimes I even cry."

Fikreta says that it was her husband Jasmin who joined in first. When he came home, everyone was asking him how it went. She had expected him to come back in a bad mood and that he wouldn't want to say much, but he was calm and he told them all about it: "And then I was thinking, man, two of his brothers were killed, how can he sit with them, how could he do it, you know? Look, if he can do it, then so can I. I'll go along too. And so I signed up as well." She says that at the first meeting, she was distrustful, thinking who is this person, who is that. That lasted for the first hour or so, but after that: "I didn't see them as enemies."

Krešimir was curious:

"I knew for certain that these people were not wrongdoers; they didn't commit any crimes. Now, the fact that they'd been my enemies; oh well, there's always animosity in various circumstances. You get into a row with your wife, with a neighbour, but there is always a point when you work things out. I'd heard a bit about it and I was very interested in seeing these people for myself. I wasn't expecting any monsters, I was expecting normal people. At our meetings, we didn't talk much about wartime operations, battles, who killed who, who won which victory, who destroyed a sniper's bunker. We just talked about normal things, ordinary things, about reconciliation, coexistence, freedom of movement, feeling free."

Perica is another veteran who got involved because he was curious. He recalls the first time he came to a dialogue workshop for war veterans that we organised and he confesses he thought it was some sort of sect, with everyone sitting in a circle: "Dear God, what have I gotten myself into! But I'll just sit tight." Veroljub says he didn't know what to expect, and that he was afraid people would be hostile, or he would be shunned because of his Serb identity, but he encountered people of all nationalities...:

"... Sitting down and talking normally and honestly, from the heart, spending time together, discussing where to go. It was incredible ... and then you can't

> wait to get back home to tell everyone that this really exists, to show them photos, to tell them who said what and how it all works. Because living in a monoethnic environment ... we simply didn't have a chance to hear a different opinion, and then you could conclude that someone always uses a situation, an ethnicity, to say this one's like that, that one's like that. The first time for me, I was so confused."

Marinko liked the fact that members of different armies were hanging out together. For him, these are ordinary people who for whatever reason had to go to war; they're not criminals. He liked the joint actions, visits to sites of suffering, as difficult as it sometimes was: "Being able to go along, to learn. I didn't know about some things, because there was this blockade, and you only ever heard one side of the story. But when you go to the other side, then you see there's another side to the story."

Svetlana decided to get involved in the meetings of war veterans after she attended a CNA training in peacebuilding:

> "That training in dealing with the past was very useful for me. In this very specific way, the people running the training got me to face myself and that really transformed me ... You think you know everything about yourself, that all your stories have been told, that there's nothing there that can surprise you, and then you realise that the whole time you've been waging a battle with yourself ... And I really wanted to get involved and was very enthusiastic, but also scared. I have to admit I was scared of meeting with these people. I wasn't scared of the people as people, I was scared of how I would react."

Aleksandar explains the discomfort he felt:

> "I didn't feel any dislike or hatred towards them. I understand they went to war for the same reasons I did and ended up in uniform. Everyone, when he looks at it from his side, did the right thing for his country, but we were just marionettes in reality ... I talked to them normally. I was more afraid of what I would find out happened than of what they might ask me. I was just afraid of hearing about what happened at the sites where people were killed, innocent people, you know. Because people have different reactions to that, and when you tell them you're from Serbia, it's a bit different ... And it's not right to generalise, to proclaim a whole people guilty of a crime. Every crime must have a first and last name. We have to know who did it or who ordered it. I feel guilty anyway. No one needs to accuse me of anything ... I feel guilty for not preventing it."

Zvonko was so motivated to get involved that he wasn't deterred by the conundrum of how to get to Ulcinj where our first meeting was taking place, or the fact that he had

to take five or six different forms of public transport. There was no public transport from Dubrovnik to neighbouring Montenegro, so his friend drove him to the border, but wouldn't drive him any further. He was not deterred by how difficult that first meeting was, even unsuccessful in CNA's opinion. He says that what meant most to him was meeting people like the late Novica Kostić, a veteran from Vlasotince, Serbia, people who weren't trying to hide anything, who spoke honestly. Zvonko still readily accepts invitations to take part in actions and events.

Novica, who is sadly no longer with us, used to say: "I think anyone who was exposed to wartime trauma, anyone who took part in the war will at some point want to talk to the others, the ones on the other side. That's how it was for me. I felt very strongly that I needed to talk with people from across the former SFRY."

Some of the veterans, especially those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, had opportunities to meet with *the enemy* even before CNA's initiative. They would meet for regular business reasons, but also because they were curious and wanted to talk. These encounters often took place in bars. Some even met their enemies during the war, on the front lines, as vividly recounted by our colleague Amer in his interview and also in a previous chapter of this book that he wrote. It is typical for these "chance" encounters that there is no talk of the war, its causes, the responsibilities involved, the different narratives. Instead, people usually stick to easier topics or safe ground, or they might assign blame to some third – or fourth or fifth – party.

Avdija had already had an opportunity to meet and cooperate with former enemies through his veterans' association. He does not conceal his pride when he recounts how in Brčko, the associations of disabled war veterans from all three sides worked with the local authority to have a law passed on special rights for families of fallen fighters and shaheeds, and disabled war veterans, which ensured that all veterans had equal rights.

Some shared with us sad experiences when members of their families ended up being the enemy because they happened to find themselves on the other side. Svetlana's first meeting with what could be termed her "enemy" was, in fact, with her cousin who had been in the Croatian Army and who, just like her, worked in logistics. His older brother was killed by Serb forces; he had gone missing and was found in a mass grave. They gave him a proper burial ten years after his death. She speaks with sorrow about how it was easier not to talk about some things in the family. Unfortunately, it is not much better today. Walls of silence have gone up.

Siniša's uncle, who was a Croat, was taken prisoner by the Serb army in Šamac. Many Croats from Šamac and the surrounding area were taken prisoner. Siniša recalls

that only a year earlier, many of them had attended his leaving party before he went off to do his military service. He was friendly with these people, neighbours and relatives. He took food and cigarettes to his uncle. He would get into arguments with the police officer who would call the prisoners Ustashas: "How do you know who's an Ustasha, have you been to his apartment and seen the U? Did he point a gun at you? I spoke openly. Because these people were civilians, thrown out of their homes." Siniša says he never wronged anyone and is proud that after the war, no one turned their head away from him.

Fikreta's cousins also found themselves on the other side. She saw them only after her aunt died, when she went to the funeral:

> "We were sitting down for the traditional meal, and when he saw me, he just put his knife and fork down and we just looked at each other and kept looking at each other. And then I extended my hand ... And he took it ... We had been looking at each other for a long time, waiting to see who would be first to reach out a hand, and then I decided to do it, I don't know how or why, but then we embraced and there were tears in my eyes and in his. But we didn't talk, we didn't ask each other anything. I guess he saw everything in my eyes, and I in his."

Stana, a great peacebuilder who is sadly no longer with us, had a very simple answer to our question why he decided to meet with former enemies:

> "That's what I wanted to do: show the human side, that ordinary people can make a human story. Yes, we were warriors, but we are also people. And to honour the victims from among others, I think it's the most positive thing I've done after the war. And that leads to trust. This should be in the media; these statements should be broadcast to say that war is not an option. War is the defeat of civilisation and should never happen again."

Veterans on taking part in anti-war and peace activities

In looking back on their participation in peace activities, the veterans told us how much this work means to them, what they think it achieves and whether it should be continued. Since talking about the war took up a lot of time, most of the responses to these questions were shorter.

Most of the veterans first referred to what was emotionally the hardest: visiting sites where victims of war crimes were killed, especially when the victims included

children and young people. They didn't expand much; they just said that it can be extremely difficult.

Many pointed out that it was particularly difficult in cases where the perpetrators were *from their side*. For example, Veroljub says: "In my experience, it was much more difficult going to sites where members of your group were the perpetrators." Zvonko says: "I felt dreadful when we were in Daruvar, where my side had done wrong. And to come to Bosnia, where my people, so to speak, in uniform ... They're not mine, let me be clear, when someone does something like that, they can never be mine. But I think that was always most difficult for people ... Those encounters are never easy. There's always discomfort, a lump in the throat."

Still, as emotionally draining and uncomfortable as it may be, these veterans generally don't refuse to participate in these activities. On the other hand, it is precisely these situations, which were difficult for some or all of them, that contributed to building mutual trust, with the veterans growing closer together and becoming stronger as a group. Out of all the events and experiences from the actions, Avdija singles out the following situation:

> "The message that the veterans are sending is very clear. For me, the strongest message was ... what touched me deeply, not as a Bosniak, but as a human being, was when Perica came to Srebrenica. And the man turned around ... I felt sorry for Perica, I sensed a deep pain in him, compassion, even shame. Perica, who had done nothing wrong, feeling ashamed ... These are big things."

Mirko explains why he thinks it's important to visit sites of suffering:

> "I'd passed through Bradina a hundred times, two hundred times, who knows how many. Believe me, I never knew it was a Serb village, that Serbs lived there. When I heard that so many people were killed that day, as many as 88 people were killed, over a day or two, that's a huge number, and I had passed through there. And when you hear from the people that this happened, and you didn't have this information, then you wonder: what was the war like in truth? I was in the war in this area, where I was under attack and I was defending myself. But then I see that in other areas troops from my HVO were the ones doing the attacking and killed these people. That makes you wonder: where was I then? I was in the war, I should have known about everything, but actually, it is only now, 25 years later, that I discover some of the things that happened. Perhaps I will never find out everything in my lifetime, but we need to attend these commemorations."

Visits to sites of suffering should not necessarily cause uncomfortable and difficult feelings, as Zoran says:

> "I personally felt serene, I felt at peace after visiting the memorial in RS. I know a lot of those names, I know who they were. I'm glad I went. I cannot describe this feeling of overcoming … But I think it is a big step, at least that's how I felt. And I left with a full heart, with no bad thoughts. And I think that anyone who experiences something like this will find a bit of peace. Something. I can't put it all into words."

Fikreta has mixed feelings, of both pride and sorrow: "When I go these sites of suffering, I feel a kind of pride, I feel honoured to be able to contribute something myself, to pay my respects. It's not always the same, but I always have an emotional reaction. I feel grief for them, whoever they were. I recite the Al-Fatiha, whoever they are … The more we visit these remembrance sites, the closer we are to achieving greater peace, it seems to me."

Krešimir sums up his experience with peace activities like this: "Thank you for accepting me. I really see great potential in what you're doing and I'm honoured to be part of it. That's why I have no reservations. I'm completely on board."

Perica singles out the following:

> "I can say I am proud of having taken part in what we did in Velika Kladuša. We literally reconciled those people. I saw then that they had two mosques, two schools, two graveyards, and that was difficult. I felt sorry for them … I once even said: I've come to depend on you. Really, I like this calling, especially when you're the ones calling. I've gained a large circle of friends, all kinds, of course. I wouldn't have believed that I'd go all the way to Daruvar. I was also in Kruševac, we went all across BiH … It makes me so happy to be part of this group and I will always join in."

Ivo emphasises the atmosphere among veterans:

> "We're always glad to see each other. When we're parting, we always wish each other luck and promise to stay in touch. I think that's good. It's very good and if only more people thought like this … I would like it if I as a veteran, a defender, could contribute to making sure the war does not repeat itself. That's why I say: I have three children, we all have children, so let's leave them something purer, clearer, to make sure this is never repeated, for the sake of their future."

Suljo does not refer to specific activities, but gives a general assessment and proposes expansion:

> "You know what I like about you? You plan everything well, it's clear who, what, where, when, how, like the army, and I like that we get to reflect on the action and analyse it afterwards … This should be rolled out, we should have networks

> in all the cities, strengthen organisations everywhere, so that we can have more influence on public policy, on education. If we could just go into the schools and have our members or team leaders give lectures, forums in the schools ... First in the places where it's possible, then roll it out."

Should this work continue?

All the veterans we interviewed, 29 in total, agree that this work should continue. This even includes two who have pulled out of these activities (temporarily, they say). For example, Đoko says:

> "We should continue with this work, in order to build trust between people, so that people as individual parts of this society can unite in this struggle that remains after the war. Because the politicians who are in power now, and who have been in power until now, have done nothing to make people's lives better, to restore normality. They all keep up tensions that only they benefit from. But I don't even think it's good for them. Because in our state of BiH, politics is the biggest business. Currently."

When asked if the work should continue, Drago answers briefly: "For us, coexistence is the only solution."

Several veterans said the work should be expanded. They especially pointed out that the media should be involved more. Marinko says of the media: "You know how hard it is; at first, there was no media coverage at all, then a few reporters showed up, but there was nothing on the radio or TV. Now we at least get a few statements out on TV and radio and the radio stations do interviews with veterans, with you guys from CNA. It's slow going, but you realise it won't go any faster. It will go step by step, but when the time comes, it'll be a normal thing."

Jasmin adds: "For the younger generations, we have to get into the media ... so the younger generations see what it is. That we were misled, that this war didn't lead to anything. That no war ever does."

Some pointed out that it was important to involve young people "because there's a lot of radical youths". Nazif stresses that we should all put in more energy and effort. It is clear to him that a lot depends on available funding, but that we should do bigger actions more often, involving more people, because that will have a greater impact and a broader reach. Because no good will come of the nationalist parties in power. Mirko also had an important insight: "I think it's very important to get more

people involved, because we are slowly getting fatigued." Working on dealing with the past, as useful and effective as it may be, takes its toll. Most of us are aware of this fact, but we tend to forget it.

What is being achieved?

When asked what was being achieved with this kind of peace work, the veterans had several insights. Zvonko believes that veterans serve as an example to others:

> "On a personal level, I wanted to lend my support because I really think this is a great idea. Because if anyone in this war was at the height of hatred, opposition, then it was those of us in uniform. And now, if those of us who were such enemies, and so hostile to each other, if we can sit down together, why can't everyone else?"

Asim says:

> "People who used to shoot at each other are establishing relationships. I never would have imagined myself talking with commanders from the other sides. I can now talk with people seriously and openly, without holding back."

Aleksandar talks about what he got out of this work. He says it was food for his soul: "It expanded my horizons ... And there's no politics, nothing like that. It's pure humanity." Zvonko also mentions being enriched by the experience: "It has helped me in the sense that I felt uplifted. And being together ... it has torn down fences. I think I have learned a lot."

Đoko tells us what he has learned: "One truth comes to light, that it wasn't just my people who suffered, that there are victims on the other side too, and that my side was not the only righteous one."

The veterans also talked about what they found out about the war through peace work, about war crimes they hadn't even heard of before. This sets them apart from the majority in their societies. People in the Western Balkans don't know anything, or don't know enough, about the crimes committed against members of their own ethno-political group, let alone the crimes committed by *their own side*: those are taboo. Information is available to the public. However, in order to see the bigger picture, it's not enough to follow just one or a few media outlets; it takes more effort and research. With so many people struggling to make ends meet, few can afford to make time for this. These conditions are an ideal ground for manipulation and generalisations.

Dražen talks about how the presence of a mixed group of veterans at an official commemoration affects the locals and the families of the victims:

> "It seemed to me on several occasions, when talking after the commemoration, that people living in areas that are still steeped in poverty and distrust see us as saviours from another planet, hardly believing something like that is possible. As if for a brief moment, but maybe with lasting effects, we put the sparkle back in their eye and they can believe that a better world lies ahead."

Official commemorations are often unpleasant. In most cases, they are ethnically homogeneous and are not so much about remembering the dead as they are about making sure everyone remembers who our enemies are. They are also used to promote political messages and to reinforce ethnic identity, which can only be firmly established if it is opposed to another. Either way, it is uncomfortable to listen to speeches and interpretations at most official commemorations because they can be hostile and even incite hatred. The attendance of "enemies" at official commemorations is quite unusual.

When we asked Mirko what he thinks is achieved with this work, he said what struck him most was the effect of the presence of a mixed group of veterans at commemorations. He said that at the commemoration in Laništa, which is in his neck of the woods, the priest had a prepared speech, but when he heard there were war veterans from across the region present, he put his notes away and spoke from the heart "as it should be done". At the end, he thanked all the guests. Mirko says he saw this happen several times in various places. The priest in Bradina also spoke from the heart and gave the veterans a warm welcome. Edin says that after our visit, the commemorations "were not the same any more". He explains that the very presence of war veterans at a commemoration takes away the possibility to hate all *the others*, because if someone has shown up to pay their respects to your victims, you cannot hate them and you cannot think of that whole group as the enemy. He also points out that in such situations, there is a change in the vocabulary; there is no more mention of Chetniks, Ustashas, *Balijas*, because it would be inappropriate to spread hostility and prejudice when these people are present: "In Bosnia and the region, we have these rules of hospitality: whatever your guest is like, you have to be a good host. That changes the vocabulary. These situations where someone from the other entity comes along for the first time, and it is even more striking when that someone is a soldier … this pushes boundaries. Then, afterwards, everyone feels relieved." Edin believes it is particularly important to attend commemorations in small communities where no one goes and nothing gets through. A visit like that means a lot to victims' families, because they are often neglected by everyone. So even if someone "they don't like

very much" comes along, this changes attitudes, because even *their own* don't show up, and here's an *enemy* coming to show them respect. He says that in his area, in Zecovi, it was really important for people that VRS veterans showed up.

It's interesting that none of the veterans mentioned the change of climate in their own communities about the idea of meeting former enemies. They were not taking credit for it.

What do they hope for?

When we asked veterans what they hoped for, almost all of them complained about the overall political situation, the pervasive hopelessness and injustice, and the fact that people, especially the young, are moving abroad *en masse*. Most of the veterans' own children are either already living abroad or preparing to go. It is hard to maintain hope under the current socio-political circumstances.

Mesud hopes his child will come back to his town: "I see my child every year and I hear how hard it is to be away from home and I know how hard it is for me, and I see thousands of cases like ours all around me … Every day, I see it getting worse."

Jasmin says his only wish is for us to try to get the young people back, so they don't leave any more: "Although I've said I want to leave and I can't stand watching this injustice here. It has made me ill, my wife too … and if I can't even get us all the medicines we need, well, then …"

Ivo also complains about the overall socio-political situation and then says: "Who's to blame? Well, maybe I'm to blame. Maybe it's my fault that I didn't manage to get young people to stay here. I bear part of the responsibility, but so do people around me. And that right there is the problem, that there is so much disappointment, that young people are leaving. Bosnia is becoming a country of old people."

Fikreta also hopes for a better future for young people: "I hope my children make it in life. I say this as a mother. I hope all these young people will make it and that it will turn out much, much better than it did for us. And that they'll never even think of taking up arms."

Marinko hopes education will be valued again and that people will get jobs based on education and knowledge, and not political affiliation. He says there are currently more people around him who "bought" their diplomas than those who earned them.

Suljo also hopes that young people will stop leaving, because that will be the only way to preserve this region. He too complains about the situation: "Them over there

imposing their views, this one here wants an Islamic republic, that one there wants to secede, the other one is making a new state in Herzegovina, they con people into voting for them. They avoid talking about the economy and they just make everyone poorer. But I believe the poor will rise up and say enough's enough, one day."

Milan says it was much easier before; there was more understanding, more of everything: "Now the politicians are different, they are all focused solely on their damned elections. They promise you the world if you vote for them, but once the elections are over, they'd just as soon dunk us all in the Drina, or any river, and then go fishing for us again when it's time for the next elections. These are terrible times; ordinary people have it hard, barely making ends meet."

Zvonko hopes to get a free country, not a party-owned country, but one where education, healthcare, the justice system and other basic services will be functional, because now, everything is upside down. Mirko thinks the most important thing is to change people's outlook so they become more accepting of others, with less prejudice, so they can live together.

Aleksandar also rests his hopes on the new generations: "I hope our children and grandchildren will not have to do what we have to. That they will live a normal life. That people will be tolerant towards everyone. That everyone will take a stand against these crimes, that they will be condemned publicly, discussed openly, so that they never happen again."

Stana, a hopeless optimist, says he would like to keep his answer brief: "When you do things properly, then the future is bright."

Community Reactions

Ivana Franović

Initially, when they embarked on their peace activism, some of the veterans experienced a fair amount of unpleasantness. Individuals or groups from their communities did not approve of their meeting with enemies and couldn't understand what it was about. One of the veterans woke one morning to find his car tyres slashed, another received anonymous threatening phone calls, some of them were called traitors by people from their community, people they knew, some received threats when they tried to organise a visit by the mixed group of war veterans to their town, and some didn't dare visit sites where members of their army committed crimes for fear of reactions back in their community. Some, however, received support. That is why when we were interviewing veterans for this book, we asked them about the reactions from people in their immediate and wider environment to their peace work, what kinds of messages they have received, how they deal with the reactions and where they find support to continue.

Aleksandar from Kruševac says:

> "Our group is really quite tight-knit. We look out for each other. But when we come back to our communities, where we come from, there's a strong impact on us. Some support us, some are opposed. As in: why do you go there to be with those people? I try to explain they're not "those people", they're just people like us. Now, whether they are Catholic or Muslim, that doesn't matter to me if someone is good people. Some support you and say: bravo, that's the way to go, we don't want our children to be pulled down by those roots in the future. But others can be radical and even offensive and vulgar. I try to avoid arguments,

conflict, it won't do any good if I haven't already proven to someone that this has human value and that it makes sense, which he obviously lacks, seeing as he can say something like that to me."

After Krešimir and his colleagues hosted a visit by war veterans from the region to Daruvar, he experienced a series of unpleasant situations: "Suddenly, from being Ustashas we became Chetniks, though I was never either. Some people listened and understood what we were doing, some didn't, some never will. War turns a person upside down." But he proudly tells us that when he got involved in peace activities with war veterans, his daughter, who was studying psychology at the time, said to him: "Well done!" His family was a great source of support.

Asim tells us that he no longer has any issues in his community because he receives guests from everywhere, veterans of VRS or HVO, the Croatian Army or the Yugoslav Army, but that there were problems before. However, he says that even back then he had the authority to protect the people coming to visit. No one said anything to him directly, but he had heard from a friend that there was talk about him collaborating with the enemy side, being a traitor, that kind of thing. He didn't set any store by such comments; he says he's not afraid of anyone, that he has good people who trust him and support him, and that the great majority support peace activities.

Mirko also confirms that in the beginning, there were many more negative comments and all sorts of situations: he was called out for having gone to Serbia, there was intolerance against other nationalities … But he had a lot of support from his immediate surroundings, people who said what he was doing was very good. He also received support from those who believed they didn't have it in them to participate in such activities, but they supported him in continuing. He adds: "There are more and more people who support this. More and more people. Believe me, I didn't expect there would be this many, so many, but there are fewer and fewer people trying to call me out for taking part in this. Because they see I'm doing this in my own name, which means I'm acting from the heart."

Milan also says it was very bad at the beginning; he was called all sorts of names, people said he was a traitor, this and that, but he overcame it, he moved past it and carried on.

Đoko's story is much the same: "There were tensions in my community. Even today, I'll still get into a discussion with someone about why I'm doing this and for what. There are many people who are just incredulous: they wounded you, and you're going over to talk to them. I always have a reply: I also wounded someone, I wasn't exactly chucking pebbles, we were shooting at each other. There are a lot of doubting

Thomases. I get support from my children and my family. Whenever I come back from a gathering I've attended, they want to hear all about it."

Suljo tells us:

> "When I was getting ready to go to Belgrade, some people said: traitor, you're this and you're that. I tell them: I am no traitor, I wouldn't know how to be. I'm going there for the right reasons. I am going to be with people who think like I do and I will probably feel good in Belgrade. Yesterday was a wonderful evening, I visited Skadarlija again; I remembered it from my student days, and I felt free in this Belgrade."

Milorad spares few words for this topic: "The great majority support me. Some grumble and say, what are you up to over there with them? But I tell them: you should come see what we're doing and only then can you have your say. Though I'm pretty short with them … How dare they talk to me that way!"

Nazif from Jajce says that as time goes by, and especially after the big and very visible visit by veterans to Jajce that they organised, people have gotten a better idea of the overall aim. And many talk about it now and regret not coming to the gathering.

Zvonko says that at the beginning a lot of people kept their distance: "What does he know, the fool?" But he wasn't afraid, because he's not dependent on anyone, he's retired. He says he would go on and on to his son about what he saw in the peace actions, but he had the feeling that he was "talking to a wall". However, a few years later, his son would go back to some of those stories and start asking questions, to which Zvonko said: 'You gave no indication back then that you were even listening, let alone understanding what I was talking about!' So I think our work also functions on that level, that a lot happens underneath the surface and there's more to it than what is visible at the moment, so I think it all makes sense."

When he returns from a peace action, Veroljub from Kruševac first tells his family all about it, and then his friends and the wider community. He says his environment is monoethnic and quite different from Bosnia and Herzegovina where coexistence is a given, so people are more aware of the situation. Meanwhile, people from Serbia who took part in combat operations and then went back to their homes are still steeped in hatred or are in a state of ambivalence; they're not sure if it's over or not, if it's still war or peace, because they don't get to meet other people. And he says they are then surprised when he tells them who came from where and how they all sat together.

Mesud from Goražde says that the great majority of people patted him and Suljo on the back and congratulated them on what they were doing. There were some

who called them traitors, but when people talk seriously, in most cases, they have a positive view. They ask them questions, they're interested in how it happens, with whom, what and where, and they ask if there are ever any conflict situations. "I tell them: never, but we do have these open discussions that always end well, on a friendly note. That's the kind of question we get, also in the local cafes and bars."

Svetlana says:

> "Well, for example, they ask me: *what do you talk to them about?* My brother asked: wait, first of all, who are these people? How can you go sit with them now? Were you really enemies? Things like that. I mean, these questions are more about curiosity than opposing anything. But most of the people I know from my activism, even from the military, are very positive about veterans coming together. I really haven't heard a single negative comment. They're curious, because a lot of people don't know, like I myself didn't know about some things. It wasn't until 2018 and the veterans' association that I found out about Prijedor and what happened there. Even though I'm someone who had some links to that time, and that region, and who might have heard about it. I didn't hear about it or know about it. So what can you expect of people who were focused on making a living in Serbia, raising children, working as carpenters or in school kitchens ... how would they know about anything?"

Saša admits he was more surprised by the positive reactions from people who said to him: "Bravo, well done, I'm proud of you," than the threats he received for a while through social media. "And, you know, when they see that the veterans of all the armies can be together, and I'm talking about those of us who were directly involved in the conflicts and took part in operations where people got killed ... If we have gone through all of that and yet we are able to overcome bitterness and hatred and sit at the same table, then why can't everyone else? I believe a lot of it depends on how you were raised, if you're open-minded, if you're able to see the big picture and resist the pull of nationalism or tribalism, religion, whatever." He says there were sceptics who were needlessly worried about ulterior motives, like reviving some sort of new Yugoslavia: "What Yugoslavia, my God! The guy sitting across from me is from Serbia, another is from BiH, and they don't have the slightest intention of ever being in some kind of Yugoslavia, and neither do I, it's completely unrealistic. It is completely wrong to think that behind these gatherings there are hidden political interests. It's tragic that politics plays the nationalism card whenever it needs to steer attention away from real economic problems, livelihood problems."

Jasmin says he doesn't have any problems in his community, although, he says, the son of his deceased brother asked him: "But, Uncle, how can you?" And I said,

"I just can. I go to talk to these people, we just talk, so you see, one of these days, maybe some of them can help me find out where your father is buried." He says that people from his community regularly ask him how it's going, where did he visit: "They're interested in what it was like there during the war. Because we were in one pocket and they know what it was like here, but they don't know what it was like in Derventa, or Zavidovići, and they don't know what it was like on the other side. And then when they hear the other side of the story, the other truth, they're interested."

Fikreta says that lately she's heard only positive reactions, people telling her it's great that she went, being proud of her, and wanting to hear about it in detail, asking how many people were killed in some place, how many civilians, were there any children among the victims? But she says that at first, there was condemnation and disapproval: "At the beginning, everyone was so angry."

Marinko gets positive reactions from the people who know him, but outsiders are suspicious of why he is working together with Croats and Muslims: "I don't hide anything, I tell them: I was in Trusina, in Mostar ... My support is that I know I'm right. I believe it's right and the people and the team I work with know it's the right thing to do. And those who are against it, they are against everything, but they never do anything themselves. They are these so-called professional critics who just criticise everything. But they are a minority." He says most people are surprised that suddenly veterans from different armies can be friends:

> "I tell them, it shouldn't be surprising, I wasn't a soldier because I wanted to be one, nor were they soldiers because they wanted to be. We were soldiers because we all thought it was our duty to defend our people, I thought it was my duty to defend my people, and we did so honourably, we have no hatred towards each other ... I think this honest approach is better for future generations, to prevent future wars, than pretending it's all brotherhood and unity and hiding what was done. Or *don't say anything, you mustn't say that*. Here, at least we honestly say what we think and we know where we stand and we hope that in the future, it will get better."

Enes says:

> "You get the most insults or suspicion and criticism for being a traitor, supporting this or that group, from those who want to run for government or public office, because this is the way they remain in power, maintaining this absolute division into three components, three peoples, three armies, three truths, three histories, and I can't function like that. You feel better when you talk to people who are interested in what we're doing. When they hear about it, most people ask: did our side really do that? Well, yes, I was there, I saw. Go

search through the indictments, read them and see what was done. Because it's not normal, people can't accept that one of their own did something like that."

When they talk about the reactions in their communities to their engagement with peace work, veterans actually testify to how the social climate is slowly changing. And it never changes on its own; it takes their kind of courage to get involved with something that wasn't recognised as socially acceptable, as well as their sense of honesty and justice that is so strong that nothing could dissuade them. They didn't keep silent and hide. They paved the way for peace work to reach many more people than we could ever have hoped for.

Fighter Turned Peacebuilder – What Will People Say?

Amer Delić

Smokers stick together

I realised early on, in the autumn of 1993, that I would soon be sitting down and talking with the people who were shooting at me and I at them. What we had in common back then, my enemies and I, was a ceasefire that had been announced during yet another round of pointless negotiations between the political leaders of our warring sides. We also had in common the sky above Dubravice, the cold nights and mornings, hours of boredom we spent like animals in burrows. What I didn't have, but they did, were cigarettes. Going crazy from lack of nicotine, I screwed up my courage and called out to one of the "Chetniks". Did he have a cigarette for me? Trusting him and taking him at his word that he had some and would give them to me if I came over, I went over and got some. I also got to see my enemy up close. In those ten minutes, we managed to overcome our initial nervousness, and we managed to get to know each other enough to stop seeing each other as bloodthirsty butchers. It was as if smoking gave us a moment of shared peace in the midst of war. We agreed on a special whistle to serve as a password for when we would meet again. And we met a few times, brought along our fellow fighters. We talked about football, girls, going to the beach in the summer … almost nothing about the war, just that it would end one day and we had to preserve our humanity. We understood each other, we got on well, so why this desire for destruction?

To be clear, these encounters took place after a bloody summer when the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) jointly surrounded us and attacked us. They didn't spare us, and I didn't spare them. I was always ready. Any moving silhouette was just a target that needed to be taken down. I watched them pulling out the dead and I didn't pity them. They were just uniforms with enemy insignia. There was plenty to pity around me; of the 35 of us from the first platoon of the third company, only 23 able-bodied men were left. Every time I went home on leave, I dreaded hearing about someone else getting killed. That summer, I kept hearing such news. The landscape also changed, as if Zavidovići had been attacked by a virus manifesting in burned roofs, bullet-ridden facades and graveyards of cars. It was spreading uncontrollably. It reminded me of the streets of Beirut from the footage I'd seen on the evening news as a child. I didn't look at the death notices attached to walls, I just waited for the whisper that I feared: *Have you heard who else got killed?*

After I met my "enemies", I revived my faith in ordinary honest people who don't go to war on a wave of hatred, but are manoeuvred in their units to places indicated on a war map by some military hand. I thought about these people. I found it easy to identify with them. No human being deserves to be left out to freeze, get rained on, starve, and all the while fearing that he might get killed. What good is reason? What good is the ability to speak? What is it that makes predators of people, and how can people be inspired to empathise with others? Questions swarmed in my head. I knew very little about politics and ideologies, ethnic divisions and territories. I was only 20 years old.

Then spring 1994 came, when the VRS units retreated from their positions close to Zavidovići. Until the end of the war, I would see their soldiers captured and being led away, or dead. I felt sorry for them in both cases, for them and their families. I imagined myself in their place, and I knew the sound of a mother's cry when she is told her son has been killed. I'd witnessed that pain and horror on my own side, but it didn't stay there. That first cigarette I smoked with Mlađo probably opened the door to my soul and said, welcome, there's room here for you too, my enemy. We never got to smoke and talk again. But I knew the day would come, if I survived. And if there are willing interlocutors.

People in my community knew about that period and those encounters. There were fears that the black market smuggling that had become widespread would lower fighting morale due to the informal contacts with the enemy and ultimately lead to us losing ground and being left in a hopeless situation. Many got rich from smuggling, some paid with their lives, but today people say that it prevented mass

casualties, that many lives were saved, because there was less shooting. We later joked that smoking prolonged our lives.

Encounters out of uniform

When I was asked if I would meet with former enemies and talk about the war and the potential for peacebuilding, I had no qualms about responding promptly and in the affirmative. That was in 2003, but I had already been visiting Žepče and Doboj since immediately after the war, meeting people, hanging out, cooperating, trading … except we never talked about the war. I'd been waiting for this kind of opportunity – to actually talk about the war – for some eight years and I was very excited at the prospect. I had no idea what to expect and I shared this sense of befuddlement with my friends, telling them only that I would be meeting with participants in the war from all sides. *You go, then you can tell us all about it when you get back* was what they usually said. They were noticeably surprised, as was I, that something like this existed at all and that someone was organising it. I took a few days off work, saying I was going to attend an educational seminar. I went to the Peacebuilding Training for War Veterans on Mount Bjelašnica, organised by the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), determined to open up in front of strangers, and expecting them to do the same. That first meeting out of our uniforms that would have made it clear which people were *mine* and which were *theirs* was quite confusing. Some of them embraced me as soon as we met, as if we were old school mates who hadn't seen each other for a long time. I thought back to the tactic of hugging the enemy that we used during the war to get as close to them as possible, so they wouldn't be able to hit us with artillery. Now we were hugging again, but this time peacefully, as if to say: *What's up, brother, how did we ever fall out?* When I heard their names and accents, I could more or less identify who they were and where they came from. There were people from BiH, all three armies, Serbia and Croatia. Veterans of the wars in Croatia, BiH, SR Yugoslavia and Kosovo, or of just one war from 1991 to 1999, as some define it. Volunteers, conscripts, professional soldiers. Many people, many life stories. When you see someone who has lost a limb, you know there's deep trauma there, but when you talk with someone seemingly unscathed and hear about the cocktail of medicines he takes or that he goes to bed at night and wakes up in the morning with a bottle of brandy, you realise how much damage was done and you start recognising its effects in yourself. We usually shared these personal stories in our free time. After all, the reason we had come together was to see what we could do

to ensure we don't go through war again, not us and not the generations coming after us. Discussions about the character of the war overlapped with the workshops, and we didn't reach a consensus about it. The connective tissue between us was grief over lives lost and the many people made to suffer hardships because of the war. What we had in common was condemnation of war crimes; we rejected those committed in our name, felt them as our shame. We used these as foundations to build trust and establish cooperation.

When I returned home, people asked me who I'd met, what they said, where they were from, whether they knew about the wrongs they had done to us? I tried to explain as best I could that I had met good honest people, that there were no criminals among them; at least that's the sense I got, that they cared about the evil never being repeated and felt saddened by human suffering on all sides. I mostly got support for myself and the idea of cooperation. People felt it was important to get things moving. Of course, there were also sceptics who said that the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation depended on those who caused the war – the politicians. They thought it wouldn't work without them. And there were those who opposed such meetings, feeling that our people and our country were victims of pure aggression and that cooperation can only start after the criminals are brought to justice and the other side apologises and shows remorse.

The support I received, from friends and from my family, was important to me. I didn't care much about the sceptics and critics, I knew there would always be some. I had a vision that we'd started something valuable for the general good, because all the other experiences from Europe and the world were difficult to apply in our region.

We had to start from scratch and learn as we went along.

World War Three in my hometown

Cooperation between us veterans developed through joint visits to memorials where we got to know the context of the war as it is perceived and interpreted at the local level. What was special about these visits was the readiness to speak about war crimes on one's own side. Wherever we went, we knew that, in parallel with official memory policy, all these places also had events where others were killed, which were not being talked about, except in courtrooms and on remembrance days organised by returnee communities. And then the time came to visit Zavidovići.

Three and a half years of war in the territory of the municipality where everyone had clashed with everyone else. HVO and ARBiH became allies in 1992 under the

framework of a newly independent BiH that was *defending itself from Greater Serbian aggression*. The VRS, helped by the JNA, sought to preserve *centuries-old Serb homesteads* at the expense of others' homesteads in the Krivaja Valley and Gostovići, which were proclaimed the Serb Municipality of Zavidovići with powerful army strongholds. This lasted until June 1993 when we started seeing the HVO as an *aggressor* and *Greater Croatian*, and we saw the new alliance formed between them and VRS as a natural progression of steps aimed at destroying Bosniaks and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. But then in March 1994, with the Washington Agreement, we Bosniaks *made up* with the Croats, and they in turn *broke up* with the Serbs, who were then once again our common enemy. The Zavidovići battlegrounds were a war zone that saw clashes between units from Zavidovići, Žepče, Maglaj, Teslić, Doboj, Prnjavor, Zenica, Bijeljina, Banja Luka, Jajce, Kakanj, Tuzla, Gračanica, Banovići, Srbac, Živinice, Lukavac ... As if we didn't have enough of our own troubles, parading through our area were also units under the command of an Englishman, an Albanian, the Zengas, Abu this, Bin that .... then the HOS formations from Imotski and Herzegovina, paramilitary formations from Serbia, Russian volunteers with Cossack atamans and the mujahideen detachment with volunteers from the pan-Islamic Afro-Asian world stretching from the Maghreb to China. UNPROFOR units patrolled between us in their transporters; we started calling them *smurfs* on account of their *blue helmets*, and near the end of the war, NATO forces spiced up this *Bosnian pot* with air raids on VRS telecommunications centres on Mount Ozren.

With the help of the Army of RBiH, Bosniaks survived in this region and celebrated some major military victories, but paid the highest price with their lives. The multicultural nature of the area is pointed out with pride, and supported by examples of Croats and Serbs who stayed and shared the fate of the townsfolk, as well as the preserved Catholic and Orthodox houses of worship in the town. What remained as a burden that presses down on the legacy of the defensive-liberation war and our understanding of it were the brutal actions and killings of captured VRS members on the Vozuća battlefield during the summer and autumn of 1995. You will rarely hear anyone say that Serbs and Croats were expelled from this area; a few would even go so far as to say they fled. Mostly, people agree that they left at the behest of their military and political leaders at the time, who therefore bear the responsibility for their leaving.

This would be a summary of the war period, albeit in my subjective interpretation, which is given here to provide a sense of the kind of environment where cooperation between veterans' organisations and political representatives was to be established and where peace actions were to be organised.

Veterans' organisations: We have nothing against it, but ...

It was a particular challenge to make contact with veterans' organisations, or the people who represent them. I didn't know these structures and I didn't have any recommendations, so I just went from one to another and tried to get them interested in peace actions. I ended up visiting them one by one. Something that worked in my favour was that I mainly ran into people I knew, former commanders who would recognise me, which made it less awkward and easier to start a conversation. We would chat and laugh about amusing anecdotes from the war, but when I got to the purpose of my visit, the smiles faded from their faces and were replaced by concern. No one was ever openly against cooperation, but it always ended with them promising to think about it, saying they would propose it to the presidency and membership of their organisation and let me know ... and then nothing would come of it. That was until I made contact with a member of the Disabled War Veterans (RVI) Organisation Zavidovići '92. His reaction was positive right away; he liked what we were doing and offered to help with anything we wanted to organise in our town. He was also convinced there were others from his organisation who would like to join us. He told me about examples of good cooperation among clubs of disabled war veterans competing in sitting volleyball, and how in addition to the tournaments, they have time to socialise and also work together in campaigns against the production and use of landmines. He talked about how they got to that point, how there was nervousness at first, even fear, when it came to playing an away game in a previously hostile area, but today their encounters are relaxed and the only fighting is to win points in the match. I asked: *Do you talk about the war, the crimes ...? Not much, he said, it's mostly everyday topics we have in common and things we agree on. Talking about the war doesn't really sit well with us, we know what it is, we are its products, but it wouldn't be good to start pointing fingers and accusing each other. What you're doing is interesting; we have to talk about the war too, and about how to make sure we never repeat it.*

Joint actions: How things developed and changed

The first visit to Zavidovići was organised in 2008. With our hosts from RVI, we visited some of the former battlegrounds, the central memorial to fallen ARBiH fighters and civilians, but also the site of the former camp and at that time the unmarked site where Serb prisoners of war were killed, the "13th Kilometre". These were the very beginnings of joint visits to monuments and sites of killings. We didn't even lay

flowers at that time, and the media didn't show much interest – no one showed up apart from a reporter from the local radio station. The biggest achievement of this visit was that the hosts, in addition to talking about the war from their perspective and the sacrifices they made, also talked openly about the crimes committed against the Serb prisoners of war. VRS veterans said that this meant a lot to them and helped to build trust within our group and strengthen cooperation.

During that visit, we also met with political representatives of the municipality and submitted an initiative for a memorial to be placed at the "13th Kilometre" site. Our visit was welcomed; the mayor at the time said it was a positive step for our society to have veterans promote peace, and he said he would forward our initiative to the municipal monuments committee for consideration. But apparently, the initiative never reached the committee. Through later contacts and conversations, we heard about the obstacles to having a monument commemorating members of the opposing side. Arguments that *these were soldiers, there were no civilians, and they were killing our civilians, we don't even know if they were killed – there are no bodies, and what did they expect after what they'd done to us* ... I tried to explain that the crime had been proven and prosecuted, that the list of those prosecuted would grow, that taking a stand against a crime committed by members of our side and showing respect to other victims did not diminish our victims, nor did it require us to denigrate our wartime engagement and contribution to defence efforts. It was all in vain; at the time, there was no good will for this initiative.

In the town itself, the visit was not remarked on much. What I felt personally at the time was pride that I had contributed to something like that, that it all went well and for a while afterwards I enjoyed retelling the events of that visit in bars. Anyone who happened to hear me would express support for the action.

We came back to Zavidovići on 28 June 2014. By that time, I was already a member of CNA. At the invitation of the RVI Organisation, we came with the group to attend the commemoration at Site 715. The people at the commemoration, several hundred of them, knew our group was a mixed group. They came up to ask who was from where, to meet the group, and truly not a single harsh word was spoken to us. The president of RVI was in charge of the protocol and that is when he met us. He apologised beforehand because he would *have to* use *harsh* terms for the enemy side, *Chetniks*, *aggressors* ... After the official programme, he approached us again and apologised once more, saying things like that just *had to* be said at these kinds of gatherings. But since that day, we have never parted ways; he has supported us at every turn and become a regular member of our team, always participating in visits and commemorations on all sides, wherever we went.

Our next visit to the Zavidovići area was for a commemoration organised by the Zavidovići Homeland Association based in Doboj. These are Serbs who fled the area during the war, mostly from Vozuća and Gostovići, and who now mark the *Days of Exodus* on 10 September in front of the memorial church in Stog near Vozuća. Once again, we were welcomed and for me personally, it was important because I met people who had known my father and sent their regards. It is a strange feeling to meet people from your own community who are now living elsewhere and visiting their homes as if they were guests, and with a police security escort of at least a hundred officers. Many would say the security was over the top, but the security agencies did their assessments. It makes you think about the kind of society we live in.

During this visit as well, even though they were not the organisers of the event we attended, members of the RVI Organisation made sure we felt welcome in the town. They took our group to see their offices, including a prosthetics workshop, and the *Stone Spheres*, a natural geological formation near the town. There was not a single criticism about the reason we had come, and they helped us decompress, because commemorations are always stressful and need to be processed.

We organised another visit on 6 July 2017, when in addition to the local RVI Organisation of ARBiH, members of the RVI Board of VRS and the Zavidovići Homeland Association from Doboj joined in as co-organisers. We visited memorials to killed civilians and soldiers belonging to all three ethnic groups and all three armies in Zavidovići Municipality. Representatives of all three religious communities also joined the visits. This time, we laid flowers, and we attracted much more media attention. Once again, we pointed out that the site of suffering called the "13th Kilometre" remained unmarked. We had an opportunity to meet with representatives of the Zavidovići local authority, including the mayor, and we were also joined by the mayor of Doboj at the time. At that meeting, we again indicated the need to have the "13th Kilometre" marked in a dignified manner. The visit itself went well; I heard positive comments from several people, and I asked the president of RVI about reactions in the town, how they fared. *There were objections from a few individuals who accused us of collaborating with the Chetniks. I don't know what they want, for our children to continue the war? What matters is that we have the support of our membership and our assembly, and see, even the mayor supported us.* He said it like it was, and I was glad to hear it. And not two months after this joint visit, more precisely on 28 August, a memorial plaque was installed at the "13th Kilometre". We don't know how important our influence was, but I believe we raised awareness about the need for a memorial and may have been the ones to put political representatives and the victims' association in contact. Some person or persons unknown expressed their

dissatisfaction with the memorial plaque by damaging it shortly after it was installed, but it is important that having learned that the plaque had been defaced, the mayor of Zavidovići condemned this act of vandalism on the official Zavidovići Municipality website and called on the authorities to conduct an investigation and identify the offenders. Representatives of the RS Organisation of Families of Captured and Killed Fighters and Missing Civilians were also dissatisfied with the location of the plaque, because it was far from the road, but what can you do? Even like this, it was a step forward. Hopefully there will come a time when remembering someone's suffering will no longer lead to someone else's frustration and when monuments will not be seen as deliberate provocations.

We also organised other activities in Zavidovići, such as exhibitions and study visits, and in most cases, our hosts were the local war veterans. The idea to build a joint memorial at Site 715, although it still has not been made a reality and the process itself has stalled, shows not just the depth of the cooperation achieved, but also the limits we were unable to surmount. For now, at least.

This article shows that much can be done in a local community if there is good will and commitment from people who are prepared to act in order to build a stable peace and a prosperous society. This readiness also includes the courage to take certain risks, such as the risk of being called a traitor or being exposed to political manipulation and blackmail that could bring your livelihood into question. Although I was often worried about such risks, members of the RVI Organisation assured me they had given this community everything they had during the war and it was unlikely anyone would now stand in their way or attack them. The only thing I ever heard from them was how the most difficult task for them is having to tell the local association of victims' families about the arrival of our group and explain who is in it and why. But they were well-respected, so there was never an issue of an association withdrawing or attaching conditions to their support. I understood them completely.

About me and mine

I would never have been able to participate in peacebuilding without the support of my family. My wife has stood by me and says it's easier for her when I have to go away from time to time, because she knows I am doing something I believe in. It's hard for me to be separated from her and the children, but we're managing and persevering.

Few people in town knew what I was doing, but as our actions became increasingly present in the media and on social networks, I had people come up to me to express their support. Especially after a few appearances on television – I even had strangers coming up to talk to me. For some, what I was doing was what mattered, while for others, it was that I was from their hometown and they saw me as their representative in the capital, not necessarily bothering to find out more and probably assuming I was a politician. I never experienced any unpleasantness or accusations. Even today, I still run into a man whom I know in passing; I know that during the war he was in a unit that had strong religious leanings, and whenever he sees me, even if he's driving, he will stop his car and come over to speak to me. The most important thing for him is that I don't neglect our victims and our suffering, while he supports everything I do, because he trusts in me.

And my father, a wise man of 80, whenever I come back from anywhere, sits me down as if I were still a small boy and wants to hear all about it, down to the last detail. When he sees I'm having a hard time and feel discouraged, he says: "Read books to ease your mind. What you are doing is immense; you are calling people to good and to peace, like Jesus and Muhammad did." He tells me this even though he's a sworn communist and outspoken atheist. And then I do feel better.

Peace and Harmony? Some Conclusions, Challenges and Next Steps

Nenad Vukosavljević

Bringing together people who were once killing each other, sometimes literally because they were fighting on the same battlefields, or who witnessed the same events from opposite sides sounds impossible at first. Many people might assume that such meetings will inevitably feature physical violence between the participants, but our experience has shown the very opposite, because nothing like that has ever happened. Ex-combatants do not have an above-average tendency towards violence.

Their motivations for meeting former enemies are specific to each of them and stem from their individual life experiences, but one thing they all have in common is the direct experience of war. Everyone processes this experience in their own way, but what is again common to all of them is that their lives have been permanently marked, irrevocably and fundamentally transformed by their experience of war. This is quite evident for those who were directly affected by the atrocities, but also for those who managed to avoid them by leaving their hometown or homeland.

Some shared the feeling of being curious and wanting to test assumptions about the enemy in real life. Others – especially after enduring a longer period of war – felt a strong wish "to tell them how they wronged us". Beyond the need to express this, there was also the idea that the enemy should recognise and respect you as an equal, to put an end to the wartime desire for destruction and re-establish a feeling of relative security. What usually follows is not just a readiness to listen and show respect, but also a readiness to empathise. And empathy leads to a readiness to hear

and understand. This chain of events is launched not only because you are no longer capable of being consumed by hatred, because that can happen, but also because at heart you know that not everyone is the same; even when they are a threat to you, you know that you have before you a person, and not a monster.

Few will recognise in themselves the need to be liberated from the burden of hatred, but that is what I see as the main driving force behind these encounters; it is there like intuition, a guide through states of disquiet, doubt and hope. It is there even in those who unknowingly draw from their environments patterns of behaviour and nationalist attitudes seen by others as threatening and disrespectful, and in those who have gone through the process of self-reflection and have constructed for themselves a new safe space that does not make use of wartime shorthand (using offensive terms for others or glorifying wartime commanders who others see as convicted war criminals) but opens the way for building friendly connections.

It is often assumed that war veterans are conservative in mindset, quick to judge and jump to conclusions, and not very open to reconciliation. But they are not a homogeneous group. The wartime experience of trauma, survival and living day to day has taught most of them to understand human weakness in a way which is not common in society at large. The readiness among the group of war veterans we have worked with over the years to understand the causes of addiction, mental health issues or simply human fallibility is certainly greater than mine was before I met them. Their readiness to show solidarity and help each other out in times of trouble is something that goes without saying. Conflicts over political attitudes and interpretations of events from the past are an integral part of the process and cooperation. However, in the dialogue workshops, there were no taboo topics. They had an opportunity to ask each other various hard questions and share their experiences, forming an important base for the relationship they were building. This does not mean, however, that conflicts never arise, over posts on social media that some like and others find offensive, for example. Discussions about such controversial issues were needed at regular intervals, even among people who had already been active in peacebuilding for a while. Some withdrew because they didn't want to be in a group with people whose attitudes they found unacceptable, but didn't have the energy to call them out on it.

And yet it wasn't necessarily different interpretations of the past that caused conflicts, because these would necessitate a firm and grounded attitude and a strong conviction that it was right. Much more often, the conflicts among veterans arose because someone supported a nationalist attitude or took a photo featuring nationalist souvenirs that others saw as fascist and unacceptable. However, such situations were

mostly caused by carelessness and a lack of awareness that forms of socialisation in your ethnically homogeneous environment contain "folklore" with elements of extreme nationalism that is so ubiquitous that it doesn't occur to people that it might bother anyone. For example, posting a photo of a Chetnik symbol, will be seen as aggressive and offensive, even though this was not the intention. Communication about how people on the other side see such things is what contributes to change. But such instances sow distrust and not everyone will be willing to discuss something they deem to be self-explanatory. We have regularly encountered such situations over the years, and the best way to respond and prevent them is to create a space for people to enter into dialogue and communicate about situations that bothered them. It might sound banal, but it is effective.

Different interpretations of the past are usually not something that lends itself to agreement between people who went to war against each other, but what is possible and important to ensure is that proven facts about wartime events are not disputed. In practice, this means, for example, that those who fought on the side of VRS will never accept an interpretation they find insulting, namely that they were the aggressors in the war (and others were defenders), but they can and will accept proven facts about the number of people killed by their own or any other army. Accepting facts, as difficult as it may sometimes be, is the common ground, as are individual culpability for war crimes and common responsibility for the society/state we live in. There were, of course, individuals who, instead of accepting facts, advocated an approach of "forgetting the past and looking to the future", but as a rule, there almost always turned out to be very specific personal interests in advocating for the past to be forgotten. Either way, forgetting past suffering has always been and remains completely untenable, which can be seen from how it is unsuccessfully promoted by various political elements whose aim is to avoid accepting responsibility for injustices that have occurred.

Sometimes I felt that with regard to gender aspects, our cooperation operated on difficult terrain. This partly stems from the fact that it was almost exclusively men who served as soldiers in the wars in BiH, Croatia and Kosovo; as a result, war veterans form an almost exclusively male group with its own dynamics that can easily turn sexist. And most of the veterans who cooperated with us were male. It was challenging to work on getting veterans to cooperate with former enemies when sexist jokes are common ground that they use to deconstruct fear and distrust and establish a relationship. Our ability to argue with them about this issue was limited in the initial stages, which made these periods mentally exhausting for us. Deconstructing this macho atmosphere came later, slowly and gradually, first through building

trust towards CNA, then by including women in the team that conducted veteran activities, and then through meetings with representatives of victims' associations, through the inclusion of the few female war veterans, and with female reporters covering the war veterans' activities. It is possible that the macho atmosphere shifted to narrower subgroups out of sight of CNA and that we are unaware of it. In any case, it should be kept in mind that most of them grew up in a patriarchal environment where men have a range of freedoms and few restrictions on proving that they are "real" men. Those restrictions which are imposed upon them include the expectation that men should never show their feelings or any weakness, especially not in front of women. That is why building trust is easier within a homogeneous male group than in the presence of women, because it involves sharing thoughts and feelings and recognising vulnerabilities, or rather the humanity of your interlocutor. In an already established group, the presence of women has a different function, and they are recognised as equal members contributing to a common goal.

So we had the great opportunity to share the experience that cooperation among ex-combatants is possible. Together, they are able to transform themselves into peace activists and to cooperate with people who refused to actively participate in the war. Twenty years ago, my presence, as someone who refused to serve in the military and take part in the war, would often elicit suspicion or worse. For most veterans, being a "deserter" was the worst thing they could imagine. For them, a deserter was someone who had betrayed them and left them without support in their righteous struggle, instead of joining in to defend what was important to them, be it family, friends, a community or country. Very rarely, and never in a larger group, would they ask me why I had refused to serve in the military and go to war. The assumption was that deserters were cowards who had left their friends high and dry and asking them why they did it would be awkward. To that extent, their reluctance to ask questions could be seen as a way to avoid making me feel uncomfortable because I would have to confess to my own weakness. Fear of getting killed or wounded was ubiquitous during the war and was a given. It took a lot of strength to overcome it, to suppress it, not to let it overpower and paralyse you. But there is also a question that I never asked in a larger group, and very rarely even in one-on-one conversations: Were you afraid of killing? Were you afraid of having to live with taking someone else's life? That was my fear, and that is why I would not be capable of going to war. It is the fear of living with that knowledge and the burden it represents. My fear may be a luxury, because most of them were not asked what they thought or what they wanted: they were given uniforms and rifles and they didn't think they had a choice. But having spent days, months and years with many of them, I know they carry that struggle

inside, the struggle with themselves and their own responsibility. That is why it seems important to me to mention it, although you will never hear them talk about it. There are two sides to the fear of death.

Cooperation with war veterans is conducted through their associations where some of them have leading roles and thus need to act in a cautious and very diplomatic way in a sensitive political context. However, many of these persons lost their fear of making public appearances. This initial fear has been replaced by the desire to be heard as widely as possible. The state of distrust towards non-governmental organisations has been replaced by complete endorsement of inviting human rights activists to participate in some of our joint actions. Fear of pressure from political leaders is still partially present, but there is also an awareness that the power of their own credibility can protect them from potential attacks. What was almost unimaginable 20 years ago is the current situation where the identity of peacebuilder has become so important to veterans that they fully embrace it, saying they are peacemakers, members of CNA, that they are fighting for peace. What has been most helpful is that the content of our peace actions is something we are all proud of and that binds us together in wanting to keep it going. The support and gratitude we receive for our actions, the astonishment that former enemies have come together to advocate for peace, that they do not hesitate to confront those propagating hatred, all of this makes all of us proud. In a way, both we ourselves as peace activists and the veterans who have stepped out of that identity into peacebuilding have gone through a process of emancipation, liberating ourselves from imposed expectations about what we can, should and are allowed to do with our identities.

What we have and have not achieved – Challenges and next steps

From where we stand today, 21 years after starting our cooperation with ex-combatants and 28 years since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, it is still hard to see lasting and sustainable peace within our societies. There are many things we would like to have achieved. There are towns and regions where our invitations to join in the cooperation were refused by veterans' and/or war victims' associations. Nothing can be taken for granted. But there are also examples of successful cross-border cooperation, not just between war veterans, but also involving victims' associations, which have surpassed our expectations. Resistance to peacebuilding from political elites has become blunted, and today we are usually at least tolerated and no longer actively prevented from doing our work.

We have dreamed of creating a precedent where the cooperation between groups that were once enemies would produce a joint site of memory, a monument for all those killed. A site that would not just be a reminder of the threat posed by our neighbours, that would not just retell simplified war "truths" about the righteous war waged by our own side, but a site where together we would learn to mourn all the lives lost and to see our enemies as people. We are not there yet, and it doesn't even matter if we make it. What matters is that individuals in society can find the strength to look beyond imposed borders and confront our societies with this, one way or another.

The fundamental process of transforming the social role of war veterans, which was not always one they chose freely, from being former participants in violence, convinced they were contributing to the protection and betterment of their own community, to peacebuilders is just a new form of acting for the good of the community. That path of change involves searching for inner peace, re-examining your own responsibility and the collective responsibility of your community, and the desire to ensure yours is the last generation to experience such suffering.

Seeing your former enemies as human has a fundamental place in that process, and the friendships developed between former enemies are just the individual and not the only possible expression of a restoration of humanity. The series of steps you make to reconcile with yourself, to stop hating, to return to unconditional respect for human life is challenging, sometimes arduous, but always liberating. It emancipates soldiers who act on orders and turns them into free people, it re-examines given "truths", and it does not seek to replace old enemies with new ones. As a result, we are freed from hatred, we open up wider prospects of freedom for new generations, and we relinquish post-war images of collective guilt and collective innocence.

Some call this series of steps reconciliation, some a quest for peace, some an end to the war, and some call it freedom. And they are all right.

The next ten years or so, as long as our energy and health last, are what we have to complete our work in this area, to achieve what we can, to leave as deep a trace as possible and ensure that war is not glorified, that its casualties are not justified but mourned, that children are taught cooperation and understanding, not hatred and domination. We can and should do this primarily where we live, but we should also communicate what we have learned beyond the borders of our countries. Some of our efforts will be devoted to sharing our experiences with people in countries undergoing similar processes, where the lessons we have learned can be of use.

And maybe one day, when we hear that large groups of people are being called a threat, described as less worthy or as monsters, maybe we'll be able to take a moment and recognise that it is the very same thing that led our society into catastrophe, resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, and left a permanent mark on us survivors. Can we do this? Of course we can.

II
Who Are These People?
Background Information

War Veterans in BiH, Croatia and Serbia: Definition, Numbers and Legal Status

Nedžad Novalić

Who is a combatant?

The legal definition of a combatant in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia is used to clearly define war veterans recognised by the state and assigned a certain status, and also to define the *enemy*, either by clearly stating who the enemies were, which currently makes them ineligible for veteran status, or by ignoring them in legal provisions specifying who can be considered a combatant, based on which s/he or his/her family can enjoy a certain status and rights.

When it comes to disabled veteran protections in BiH that fall within the competences of the entities (Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska), the current legal provisions have resulted in a situation where the status of a combatant can be enjoyed only in one part of the territory of BiH, i.e. in one entity. Thus, the Federation of BiH recognises members of the Army of RBiH, the Croatian Defence Council and the police forces as veterans, whereas former members of the Army of Republika Srpska, even though they were or still are residents of FBiH, cannot access their rights. In Republika Srpska, the law recognises as combatants persons who took part in the war on the territory of SFRY from 17 August 1990 to 19 May 1992, members of the Army of Republika Srpska, and veterans of the Second World War irrespective of whether they served in Partisan units or the *Serbian, Montenegrin or Yugoslav Army*. Former members of the Army of BiH and HVO are in an identical situation as former

members of VRS in the Federation of BiH: based on the relevant legal provisions, they cannot access their rights through the institutions of Republika Srpska, even though this is where they have their permanent residence.

Since members of the National Defence of the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia, who were led by Fikret Abdić, had already been defeated during the war and did not take part in the Dayton negotiations, former members of these armed forces are unable to access their rights anywhere in BiH and their fallen fighters are registered as civilian war victims. There have been several initiatives to remedy this situation, most recently in 2017, but the law still does not recognise members of the National Defence as combatants, with the result that their fallen fighters, disabled veterans and their families remain outside the scope of the law. Those who oppose granting combatant status to National Defence veterans argue that this would amount to *equalising the warring sides*.

By contrast, Brčko District is a specific administrative unit within Bosnia and Herzegovina that does not belong to either of the entities and whose territory was under the control of all three sides (ARBiH, HVO and VRS) during the war. Brčko is thus a unique example in BiH where veterans of all three armies have equal rights, and the District allocates equal funding to associations of veterans from all three armies.

According to the legislation in the Republic of Croatia, a Croatian defender from the Homeland War is defined as a person who participated in an organised manner in defending the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia. As well as defining Croatian defenders, the legislation in the Republic of Croatia clearly states that these rights cannot be enjoyed by *members, accomplices or collaborators of enemy military and paramilitary units who took part in the armed aggression against the Republic of Croatia, or by members of their families based on their death*. This effectively excludes veterans of the Serbian Army of Krajina from accessing veterans' rights, as they are unable to gain combatant status either in Croatia or anywhere else because they were Croatian citizens during the war, which is problematic, for example, for recognition of their status in Serbia where most of them live today.

The preamble of the law also includes provisions that can be seen as the legal codification of the war narrative. For example, it specifies that *the foundation of the contemporary Republic of Croatia as an independent, sovereign and democratic state is the victory of Croatian defenders of the Homeland War and the Croatian people in the just, legitimate, defensive and liberation Homeland War; the fundamental values of the Homeland War are the establishment and defence of national sovereignty and*

the territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia, which was achieved mostly thanks to the Croatian defenders of the Homeland War who were led by patriotism to stand up and defend the freedom, democracy and unity of the Croatian people, upholding the highest level of ethics in war and the principles of humanitarian law; and Croatian defenders of the Homeland War successfully defended the Republic of Croatia within its internationally recognised borders from the armed aggression perpetrated by Serbia, Montenegro and the Yugoslav People's Army with the armed insurrection of part of the Serb population in the Republic of Croatia. This kind of legal definition and codification of fundamental values are not found in the legislation of other countries.

At the start of 2020, Serbia adopted a new law that introduced certain changes to who can be recognised as a combatant and who is eligible for social benefits. The new law confirmed the equal rights of Partisan fighters and those of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, i.e. members of the Ravna Gora Movement, which, when the previous iteration of the law was being adopted, had caused heated debates over the character of the Second World War.

In the context of the 1990s wars, the previous law had limited the status of combatant to persons who had performed military or other service of interest to national security until mid-April or May 1992, but the new law removed this restriction, thereby equating volunteers and those drafted into the army.

Zoran Đorđević, the Serbian Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs at the time, stated that the new law introduced a new category of beneficiaries that had not existed under the previous law, this being the combatants who had participated in "armed actions" during the 1990s. Đorđević explained that under the new law, persons who had fought in the conflicts of the 1990s would now have the right to veterans' benefits and special length-of-service status for the purpose of retirement, and would be awarded medals and special uniforms.

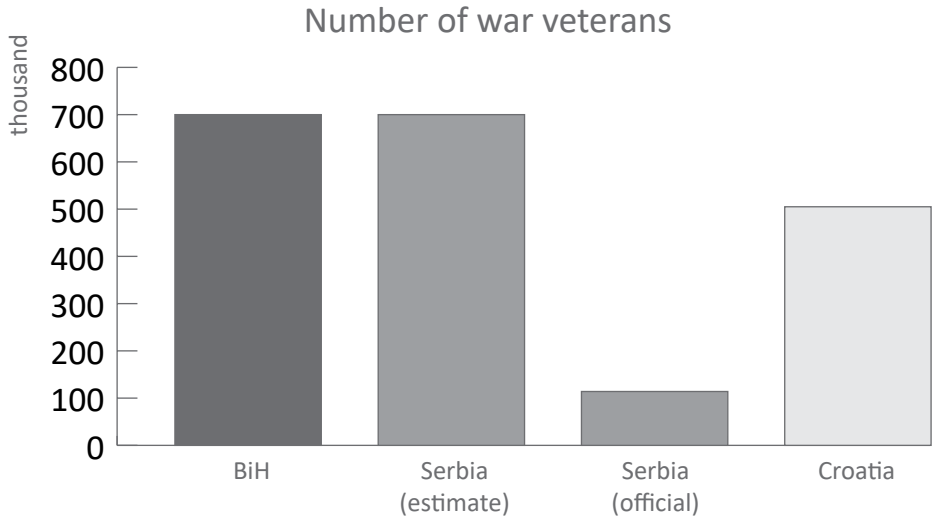
"This remedies the injustice towards combatants of the last war and, as already pointed out, improves their status in society," Đorđević told the Serbian Parliament when explaining the need for this new legislation.

Number of veterans

One of the most controversial issues relating to war veterans in these three countries is their number. Publishing a register of combatants, in order to make it possible to determine precisely who has gained the status of a combatant, is a highly contentious

political issue. In 2010, a register of defenders was published in Croatia by a person or persons unknown on the grounds that this was necessary to stop the constant increase in the number of defenders after the war. When the SDP won the elections in Croatia in 2011, the new Minister of Veterans' Affairs Predrag Fred Matić proposed changes to the law that would enable the register to be published; these changes were subsequently adopted by the Croatian Parliament. In December 2012, the Register of Defenders was published, showing that some 500,000 persons had the status of defender at that moment in Croatia. The published register was easily searchable by anyone interested, which was often criticised as breaching privacy or making important wartime service information available to foreign persons and states. After the HDZ returned to power, the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs stated in 2017 that the public availability of the Register of Croatian Defenders was not achieving its purpose, so in order to protect the dignity and privacy of the defenders, the Register would no longer be publicly accessible and it was recast as the Records of Croatian Defenders whose data could be used exclusively for official purposes. The Records are used in procedures to secure status rights administered by the Ministry of Croatian Defenders and other competent authorities.

Similar to Croatia, the Federation of BiH published a unique Register of Combatants in 2020. The Register was published following changes to the law that had entered into force. Making the Register publicly available in order to determine whether some had gained the status of combatant undeservedly was one of the main demands of mass protests by veterans that had gone on for several years. As of



mid-2020, a total of 490,917 combatants had been entered into the Register; 341,551 were members of the Army of RBiH, 149,252 were members of HVO, and 114 were members of HOS. In addition to members of the RBiH Armed Forces, disaggregated by components, i.e. Army of RBiH, MUP RBiH, HVO, this number also includes members of supporting units such as civil defence and the war industry. Another demand was to separate the so-called active combatants from the non-active group in order to get a clearer picture of how many persons in FBiH had the status of combatant.

Digital records of combatants in Republika Srpska were meant to be made public back in 2018, but this had still not occurred by the end of 2020. The number of combatants in Republika Srpska is estimated at around 200,000. During defence reforms in BiH, the documentation on the number of veterans was transferred from the former RS Ministry of Defence to the RS government, which has been working on cataloguing these records.

"The project has been ongoing for two years in order to have records of veterans in digital format and all in one place. We have all the combatants' medical records and this will enable us to have in one place all the information about where each combatant was deployed, for how long, and what injuries s/he sustained. The register of combatants will include all the names of combatants, as well as their medical documents," said Milenko Savanović, the then Minister of Labour, War Veterans and Disabled Persons' Protection of Republika Srpska, in 2017. The register was announced again in 2018 and 2019, but it has still not been completed or made available to the public. The publication of the register is supported by the RS Veterans' Organisation (BORS) as well as by other associations linked to VRS. In 2019, BORS President Milomir Savčić said he believed many had acquired combatant status unlawfully and this situation needed to be rectified.

"That is the case because they were issued with certificates of some sort for one reason or another, which do not reflect the actual state of affairs when it comes to participation in the war, and especially not the time spent in active combat zones," Milomir Savčić, the then President of the Republika Srpska Veterans' Organisation, told RTRS.

Serbia does not have a unique register of war veterans either, so the public is left to speculate about the total number of war veterans today. Dr Olivera Marković defended her doctoral dissertation on the *Social Position of War Veterans in Serbia: A Case Study* at the University of Belgrade. Marković points out that there are no official records of the number of citizens who took part in the wars of the 1990s as members of the military, or of the number of killed, wounded and missing. Referencing research

by other scholars, Marković notes that it is estimated that more than 700,000 people had been mobilised into the army in several waves during the wars of the 1990s. When a new law on the rights of veterans was being adopted in 2020, the Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs Zoran Đorđević stated that there were 114,000 people in Serbia documented as "class one to three combatants" with proven eligibility for "double length-of-service".

"This law is unique in that the term 'combatant' had not been recognised previously and did not even exist in the previous laws. This government and this ministry are the first to propose this law so that all those who fought for our country and who will, God forbid, fight for it in the future have the status of combatants. The precise figure of those registered as combatants is not available," Đorđević said, according to N1. He also said that a register of combatants would be adopted, and that the state was obliged to have a register. It would then be known how many combatants there were in total. By the start of 2021, however, the register had still not been completed. The significant discrepancy between the number as speculated about in the public and the number used by government institutions indicates that there are inconsistencies in the data, but potentially also different methodological approaches to categorising someone as a combatant. Institutions rely on the legal definitions described above, which prevent a certain number of persons with combat experience from acquiring the status of veterans, such as Serbs from Croatia who fought on the side of the Republic of Srpska Krajina and who have been living in Serbia since 1995; this can result in lower numbers of war veterans.

Associations

In order to access certain social rights, participate in campaigns to improve their status in society and meet other needs through social engagement, war veterans have organised themselves into various associations. Through these associations, war veterans provide assistance to their fellow fighters, raise issues with the authorities and mark significant dates from their time in the war, etc. As self-organised citizens' associations, they can be classed as part of the third, i.e. the non-governmental sector. However, given the specificity of the groups they represent, these associations often have special status in society, including in relation to government institutions. As with the uncertainty over the total number of war veterans, there is no precise record of the number of associations representing different groups, such as the disabled, among the veterans' population.

According to unofficial data, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are some 1,600 associations of veterans, disabled veterans, fallen fighters, etc. In 2019, some disabled veterans blocked major thoroughfares and voiced a number of demands, which included not only the publication of a register of veterans and veterans' benefits, but also more transparent funding of these associations, because there was a general feeling that some politically well-connected persons were using these types of associations to siphon off public funds. A Draft Law on Veterans' Associations of Special Significance has been passing through Parliament for the past four years. This law stipulates that an association would receive the status of special significance if at least 55 per cent of its members belonged to the category it represents, or in the case of demobilised combatants, a minimum of 30,000 members for demobilised combatants of ARBiH and at least 10,000 for demobilised combatants of HVO. Currently, there is no minimum membership requirement, so in practice, it only takes ten or so people to establish an association, creating fertile ground for various forms of manipulation, both political and financial. The Center for Investigative Reporting has published a database on the financing of veterans' associations that shows significant budget funds flowing to these associations.

Generally speaking, veterans' associations in FBiH can be divided along two lines. The first relates to the branch of the military in which their members served (Army of RBiH or HVO), while the second relates to the specific category they represent, such as demobilised combatants, disabled war veterans, families of shaheeds and fallen fighters, or recipients of special war medals. Although there have been attempts to centralise this diffuse network by establishing umbrella veterans' associations or an overarching federation of disabled war veterans, complete decentralisation remains the essential characteristic of veterans' association in FBiH.

The situation in Republika Srpska is very different: an umbrella veterans' association has been present in this Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity since 1993 when the Veterans' Organisation of Republika Srpska (BORS) was founded. BORS defines itself as *the unique social organisation of combatants, disabled war veterans and families of killed and imprisoned combatants of the Defensive Liberation Wars of the Serb people*. BORS has three main categories: disabled veterans, demobilised combatants, and families of killed combatants. Its Statute stipulates that a member of BORS cannot hold concurrent membership of another veterans' organisation, but it does allow for the possibility of *collective* membership, i.e. organisations bringing together veterans at various levels can join. BORS is organised hierarchically from the municipal and regional levels up to its central bodies – the Assembly, Presidency

and BORS President. BORS is funded from mandatory membership fees and budget allocations from various levels of government.

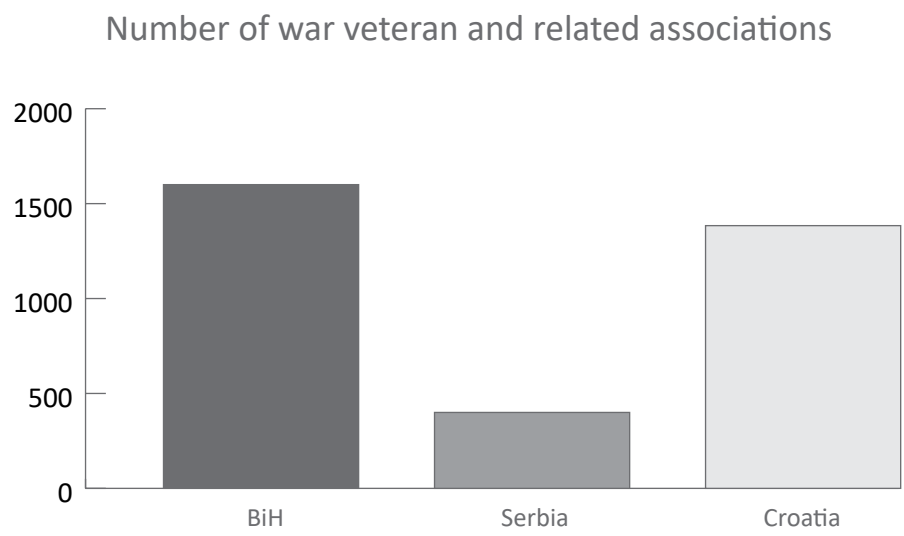
There are no legal barriers in Republika Srpska to prevent the activities of other veterans' associations, so associations such as "Veterans of Republika Srpska", the Organisation of Leaders of the Army of Republika Srpska and others, have been active for years. Still, in terms of membership size and the importance accorded to them by government institutions, these associations are less significant and less influential than BORS. Based on a 2007 Decision of the RS government, BORS was proclaimed an *organisation of special interest for Republika Srpska*. Also, the legislation of Republika Srpska, i.e. the Law on the Rights of Veterans, assigns to BORS certain competences in the procedure for obtaining the status of a veteran, whereby the competent body of the municipality concerned decides on the status based on an opinion obtained from BORS. Thus, BORS's role could perhaps best be described as a *governmental non-governmental organisation*, with a monopoly status that other organisations have tried to challenge – unsuccessfully, in most cases. Perhaps the most obvious example was the unsuccessful application by the Organisation of Leaders of VRS to the Constitutional Court of RS in 2019, when it tried to challenge part of the BORS Statute prohibiting simultaneous membership of another veterans' organisation.

War veterans organise in similar ways in Croatia as well. According to the official central government website: *As a Croatian Homeland War veteran, you can join one of the Homeland War associations where you will connect with other Croatian veterans through joint program[me]s and activities. Associations from the Homeland War were founded to protect the rights and interests of their members and their families. Their projects and programmes preserve the moral dignity of the Croatian people and all the inhabitants of the Republic of Croatia who participated in defending its sovereignty, promote the values of the Homeland War and, in cooperation with the state institutions, contribute to raising the quality and efficiency of care for Croatian Homeland War veterans and their family members.*

Homeland War associations can receive financial support for their activities by responding to calls for applications published by various levels of government, from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans down to lower tiers of government that are obliged under the Law on Croatian Veterans to provide funds for projects and programmes of Homeland War associations registered or active in their territory. The Ministry of Croatian Veterans keeps records of all veterans' associations, and registration with the Ministry is a precondition for the establishment of an association.

The register of veterans' associations itself is not publicly accessible, but the media have reported that, according to information from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans, there are 1,384 veterans' and victims' associations in Croatia. How many of them are truly active is difficult to say, because registration is an easily completed formality that does not necessarily mean the association is active. Associations are not obliged to make the number or names of their members public, so it is impossible to determine whether there is overlap in terms of membership. Associations are formed for various purposes, from those that bring together war veterans from a specific military unit to those that connect veterans interested in a sport or pastime, such as bocce. According to data from 2016, veterans' and victims' associations received a total of around seven million euros in public funds. The actual amount may be higher, because a significant number of municipalities and cities did not submit their financial reports for that year.

The most powerful and politically most influential veterans' association with the largest membership is HVIDR-a (Association of Disabled Veterans of the Homeland War) which consists of 164 associations that form a national network and which, according to media estimates and some leaders, brings together around 30,000 members across its branches. However, HVIDR-a itself has not made public or available the number of its members or a list of their names. Since 2004, HVIDR-a has been led by Josip Đakić who has also, throughout that time, been a Member of Parliament from the HDZ, the most powerful political party in Croatia. His



simultaneous membership of a political party, the country's highest legislative body and the most important veterans' organisation has often made him the target of criticism.

Veterans' associations in Serbia are established in the same way as any other citizens' association. The law stipulates that *for the purpose of improving protection of veterans and disabled veterans, nurturing the tradition of Serbia's liberation wars and cooperation with similar national and international organisations, associations and federations of veterans, disabled veterans, disabled civilian war victims and beneficiaries of family disability benefits, and those working to nurture the tradition of Serbia's liberation wars may be established, in line with the Law on Associations.*

The law leaves open the possibility for the government of Serbia to grant the status of an association of special social importance at the proposal of the minister; more detailed criteria on which associations would be eligible for this status – to be issued by the government at the proposal of the minister – were still awaited at the end of 2020.

In her research study, mentioned above, Olivera Marković notes that *just as there are no records of veterans, or records of killed and missing members of the military, i.e. nationals of Serbia who were killed in the civil war, there is also no data on the exact number of veterans' associations*. Furthermore, Marković notes that the majority of associations, 80 per cent of them, do not have a single employee, while the remainder generally hire people for specific projects as required.

Dušan Vukojević Mars, the Vice-President of the Association of Disabled War and Peacetime Veterans of Serbia, said in an interview that there were more than 400 veterans' associations. There are also umbrella associations: the Association of Disabled War Veterans of Serbia, the Association of Combatants from the Wars since 1990, etc. The question remains how many members the umbrella associations have and how much capacity is needed to be truly impactful.

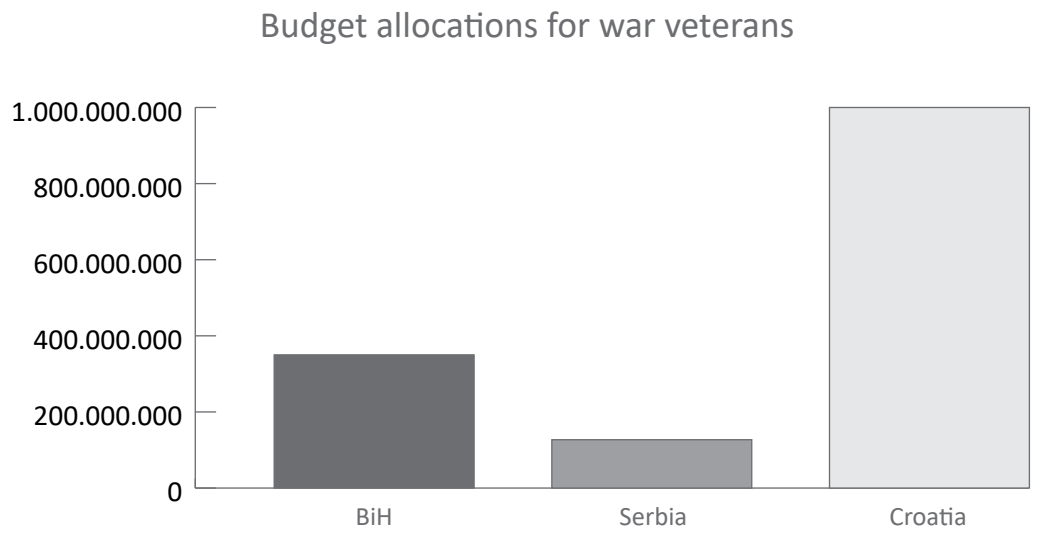
Social benefits

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia allocate significant resources from their annual budgets to fund retirement, disability and other social benefits that directly relate to the wars of the 1990s. These financial burdens are impossible to pin down precisely for a number of reasons. The main reason is that war veterans are funded from different government levels, from the state, entity and cantonal levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina, down to local government levels that also allocate funding to this

group. The other reason is that the different categories of war veterans fall within the scope of different institutions; for example, benefits for demobilised combatants are sometimes funded by the Ministry of Veterans and in some cases by the Ministry of Social Affairs, while benefits for disabled war veterans are partly funded by the Ministry of Health, etc. Significant funding is also allocated to war veterans from extra-budgetary sources, such as pension insurance funds. Analysing the budgets can only give an approximate picture of how much the post-war societies of BiH, Croatia and Serbia allocate for this purpose.

Given that war veterans in BiH fall within exclusive entity and cantonal competences, their funding comes from entity budgets, as well as from cantonal budgets in FBiH. An analysis of 2019 budgets shows that some 190 million euros was allocated for this purpose in FBiH (160 million from the FBiH budget and 30 million euros from cantonal budgets). In Republika Srpska, 144 million euros was allocated in the 2019 budget to fund veterans' pensions, pensions for families of killed combatants, disability benefits and special social benefits known as the veterans' supplement. This does not take into account funding from local authorities, but it is safe to say that allocations for this category of beneficiaries in BiH are not below 350 million euros annually.

Out of all the countries, the most generous funding for veterans is definitely allocated by Croatia, which also results in Croatian veterans having a far better status than their counterparts in BiH or Serbia. In 2019, the Ministry of Croatian Veterans



had budget funds in the amount of 190 million euros. However, most of the funding comes from an extra-budgetary source: the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute (HZMO) allocates 820 million euros annually for pensions disbursed to veterans, disabled veterans and families of killed combatants. Together with allocations from the Ministry of Veterans and from local communities, the annual funding for this category in Croatia amounts to at least one billion euros. According to data from the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute, in 2019 veterans' pensions in Croatia were disbursed to 113,807 Croatian defenders or members of their families. In addition, there were 6,782 veterans of HVO.

Serbia allocates around 125 million euros to protection of veterans and disabled veterans; the 2019 budget included an additional one million euros for *nurturing the tradition of defensive-liberation wars* and 640,000 euros to support the work of associations.

How do veterans live?

The social status of war veterans depends on many factors. Many veterans returned to their regular jobs after the war or found new employment, with the result that they were no longer eligible for social benefits based on their veteran status. On the other hand, a significant number of veterans, especially those who were wounded in the war, could not return to their regular jobs. There is also a third category of veterans who, although not wounded, could not return to their regular jobs after the war as these jobs no longer existed due to wartime destruction and general economic collapse. Many of them never managed to find new employment, so the social security system recognises them as unemployed demobilised combatants.

Croatian defenders who were rendered permanently or partially unable to work due to injury or capture have the right to disability pension benefits, while unemployed defenders who cannot access old-age retirement benefits also have the right to the minimum pension benefits. Disabled veterans in the first category are entitled to disability benefits in the amount of around 520 euros[1], but those who are unemployed and not collecting retirement benefits or earning other income can count on an additional 260 euros. There are also supplementary care benefits

1 For reference, in 2021, the minimal consumer basket for a family of four in BiH, Croatia and Serbia cost around 1,100 euros. The average salary in 2021 was highest in Croatia, at around 900 euros, while in BiH and Serbia, it was around 650 euros. Due to inflation in 2022 and 2023, veterans' disability benefits (nominally) increased, but costs of living rose at an even higher rate, leading to negative real growth.

ranging from 300 to 520 euros and an orthopaedic supplement from 40 to 150 euros. First category disabled veterans are also eligible for a paid carer, who has the right to a salary of 520 euros and paid taxes and contributions. The amount decreases in proportion to the decrease in the degree of disability. Family disability benefits amount to 260 euros per beneficiary, and if the veteran is survived by multiple beneficiaries (mother, father, spouse, etc.), the amount is increased. The minimum benefit for unemployed Croatian defenders who have no other income is 150 euros, but that amount is increased depending on the number of days spent in the war and can reach as much as 250 euros. According to the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute, Croatian veterans on average receive around 755 euros in pension benefits. Some veterans receive retirement benefits recognised under the general rules for all workers, but with legal privileges amounting to 340 euros on average. Families of killed combatants receive around 950 euros per month, while the benefits for disabled veterans depend on their level of disability, with average monthly pensions for disabled veterans amounting to 800 euros. In addition to retirement benefits, their income, again depending on the degree of disability, includes disability benefits and care supplements, as well as paid care. The law also ensures a host of other rights, including the right to housing, a passenger car with modifications, the right to shares in the Croatian Homeland War Veterans and their Family Members' Fund, the right to be assigned shares, priority status when renting commercial premises, and the right to travel expenses. The law recognises some 50 different rights for Croatian defenders, killed, missing or disabled veterans and members of their families.

In BiH, benefits differ between the entities. In RS, veterans under 60 years of age receive an annual supplement in the amount of 75 euros, while those over 60 receive around 40 euros a month. Personal disability benefits for wounded veterans and those for families of killed combatants are calculated by multiplying the degree of disability with a base amount determined by the RS government. In 2019, that base amount was 300 euros, meaning that a first category disabled veteran could receive maximum benefits of 386 euros in addition to the allowance for care and assistance by another person of 260 euros for the highest degree of disability. The amount decreases sharply with lower degrees of disability, so a category four disabled veteran receives disability benefits in the amount of 120 euros, even though this degree of disability is such that it significantly reduces the ability to work. An orthopaedic supplement ranges from 20 to 85 euros. Disability benefits for family members of killed combatants range from 170 euros (for one family member) to 320 euros (for four or more family members).

In 2019, following mass protests, veterans in FBiH managed to win the right to a veterans' supplement. This supplement is paid to unemployed veterans over 57 years of age in the amount of 2.5 euros for each month spent in the war, which means that it can never exceed 120 euros. In the Federation of BiH, category one disabled veterans had the right to a pension of 440 euros in 2019 and an additional 440 euros for care and assistance provided by another person. As in RS, monthly benefits fall sharply with lower degrees of disability, so a category five disabled veteran has a pension of 140 euros and is not eligible for the allowance for care provided by another person, while the orthopaedic supplement for an amputated limb ranges from 75 to 125 euros. Benefits for families of killed combatants range from 190 to 300 euros. Pursuant to an intergovernmental agreement, HVO veterans living in BiH also fall under the care of the Republic of Croatia and can claim similar rights to veterans in Croatia, which significantly improves their position.

In Serbia, the law recognises the following social benefits: personal disability benefits, family disability benefits, care allowance, orthopaedic allowance, disability allowance, monthly monetary allowance, family supplement and veterans' supplement, while disabled veterans also have the right to rehabilitation treatment, privileges when importing a car, etc. The base amount is determined on the basis of the average monthly salary in Serbia for the previous month, which in 2020 was around 500 euros, while the veterans' supplement for veterans over 60 years of age with no other income is based on the lowest pension, which in 2020 was around 120 euros. Personal disability benefits and the right to a care allowance and an orthopaedic allowance are calculated according to the degree of disability, so a category one disabled veteran has the right to 188 per cent of the base amount, while the lowest category disabled veteran has the right to 19 per cent of the base amount. The care allowance for category one is 188 per cent of the base amount, while it is 24 per cent of the base amount for a category five disability. Immediate family members of a fallen fighter have the right to monthly disability benefits in the amount of 116 per cent of the base amount, or around 550 euros. Generally, veterans' associations in Serbia report that veterans – especially the disabled – are satisfied with the new law. However, even disabled veterans face various bureaucratic obstacles in accessing the rights guaranteed to them by law. Civilian war victims, who also fall within the scope of this law, are dissatisfied because many of them are still unable to obtain that status and rights.

Information is often relayed to the public about the difficult position of war veterans, especially in certain categories. Many demobilised combatants never found employment after the war, and with a veterans' supplement of some 100 euros per

month, they are barely making ends meet; many are barely surviving. Also, many veterans find it difficult to deal with the complex administrative procedures and therefore miss out on benefits to which they are legally entitled. In order to make savings, governments have resorted to decreasing the degree of disability or the amount of veterans' benefits; proving that you suffer from PTSD because of the war is increasingly complicated, while widows lose their right to receive benefits if they remarry or if their children are no longer in education and they themselves have not reached retirement age. At the same time, governments have occasionally introduced new categories non-selectively, especially in order to ensure peaceful social relations or attract voters; however, such measures have neither reduced the pressure on the budget nor improved the social status of veterans and disabled veterans.

Who Are These People? Profiles of Ex-Combatants

Compiled by Ivana Franović

Introducing some of the war veterans who participated in the peace activities, commemorations and visits to sites of suffering organised by the Centre for Nonviolent Action

Adnan Hasanbegović

Adnan is a native of Sarajevo, born in 1973. He was shocked by the outbreak of war in Croatia and then in BiH. He was 18 when mobilisation began. He enlisted just so he could get the papers to walk around town. He was first assigned to the kitchen in the barracks, with no training; a few months later, he was sent to Mount Trebević, to the front line. There he had training on the spot; he learned how to load a rifle in the trenches. Luckily, there was a better trained fighter with them, from the special forces, and he taught them how to dig trenches and how to get out of the line of fire. Adnan says he saved their lives. He has this to say about the war:

> "It was a shock. You go literally from secondary school, from being a teenager to sitting in a trench with a rifle. It was like a film, like someone was joking with you. Like, we're at war with the Serbs, and like, I'm supposed to be a Muslim. I could never reconcile myself to that. I mean – going to war with anyone, but especially them. I had no idea, my foundations were built on our common Yugoslav identity. I took it real hard when some friends left, young men and women, my girlfriend. Thank goodness, I don't hold a grudge about it, but back then, it was just … I just watched them leave …"

When asked what was most difficult for him in the war, he says: "Well, that it wasn't my war."

Very soon after the war was over, he made efforts to establish contacts with people across ethnic lines and to participate in various peace initiatives. He also became a devout religious believer. From 1999 to 2020, he was part of the Centre for Nonviolent Action and one of the pioneers of cooperation among peace activists and war veterans.

He has a daughter.

Adnan Hasanbegović

Aleksandar Sokolović

Aleksandar was born in 1972 and grew up in Kruševac. He was still a boy when his parents died, so he and his little brother went to live with their grandmother.

When the war in Kosovo started, Aleksandar expected to be drafted because he had managed to avoid going to war in Croatia and BiH. When his draft papers arrived, many people tried to dissuade him from going, including his girlfriend at the time, who is now his wife. There were rumours at the time that someone from each household would have to join the army. Since his brother was five years younger, he thought it best to report for duty himself, so his brother wouldn't have to go.

He was drafted in May 1999 and sent to Kosovo. He was 26 years old. Four days later, on 13 May, he was seriously wounded when a NATO fighter fired an A-10 "tank killer". Another 12 soldiers were wounded that day and seven were killed. Today, Aleksandar celebrates that day as a second birthday. He never really saw any combat action, apart from the experience of being pulled out after he was wounded.

When asked about his time in the military, he says:

> "They literally put me on a bus, gave me some old uniform, these were civilian buses, we had no weapons, nothing, they just took us away. You had no idea where you were going, no idea what was in store. I ended up in the village of Vitak, this was somewhere around Kosovska Mitrovica. In an engineering unit. Luckily, I didn't get to see much, but what I did see, it was all terrifying. This was guerrilla warfare. We were being fired on from the air and soldiers were getting killed in ambushes, stepping on landmines and the like. It wasn't a shootout like in Bosnia where you see some enemy over there somewhere. It was just someone running out behind a bend in the road, firing a rocket, or you step on a landmine, just like that. The war as such, as everyone imagines it, I didn't get to see it. It was like I was away on a military exercise. That's all I remember of it."

His recovery took a difficult three years. He says that's when the war really started for him.

Before the war, he worked as a security guard at a public enterprise. Today, he lives off a meagre pension and disability benefits.

Aleksandar Sokolović

Amir Mujkić

Amir is from Zavidovići, Bosnia and Herzegovina, born in 1968. It so happened that just before the war, he was working in Belgrade, working in construction and as a cook. He was not burdened by the goings-on in society. For Eid in 1992, he came home to visit and then he couldn't go back to Belgrade to work, because of the barricades around BiH. He says he had no idea what war was like and knew nothing about weapons; he stumbled into the war in his running shoes.

When asked if there were any moments from the war he remembers fondly, Amir replies:

> "I like to remember ... some of the ordinary things from normal life: having a party, smoking a cigarette, having a good meal, these were some of the joys of life during the war. We really suffered through 1993, when there was no food. My family had a farm outside the city, so we had food, but there was such scarcity. And when your friends are left without food, you have to give them some, that's how it goes. Then I was glad to see how united people were in all this trouble, in good and bad, people were generous. They cared for each other. Now, when I look at my city, my country, now I see people gnawing at each other, whatever their ethnicity; people have become distanced, like love has died. There's no more friendship. In hard times, people become great friends, but after the war, all these moral values died."

Towards the end of the war, in September 1995, Amir stepped on a landmine and lost his leg. After the war, he got a job at a transport company to make a living and then retired after 17 years. He is involved with disabled war veterans and demobilised soldiers of ARBiH and is the president of the municipal disabled war veterans' organisation. He has taken part in peace activities since 2012.

Amir Mujkić

Asim Parlić

Asim was born in Hajderovići near Zavidovići in 1965. He completed the Military School and Academy in Belgrade. Working in the military, he lived in Priština for four years, where he was head of a unit.

In April 1992, when the war started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he left the JNA at his own request. He says: "I could not imagine leaving all my relatives to fight on their own, what with all my knowledge and skills. I figured I could help with my knowledge and experience from Priština." When he returned to Zavidovići, he was appointed deputy commander of a detachment deployed in the very area where he was born. He says the city had a front line of some 50 km with VRS, which increased by another 25 km when war broke out with the HVO. The city was targeted by heavy artillery and all manner of weapons, and the positions overlooking the city were held jointly by VRS and HVO. They called them "mixed meat". He says one of the units from VRS was manned by 90 per cent Bosniaks and adds: "On the other side, we have HVO, VRS and the Bosniaks. For me, it was abnormal; there's a lot about that time that I still don't understand to this day."

When asked what he found most difficult during the war, he says:

> "I had the hardest time in 1993, over those 40 days: there was not a single day that I didn't have at least one wounded or one killed. These are terrible losses. The moment that triggered my condition later: a shell exploded in front of me … Lines of communication were often broken, so we had to send young people to be couriers between me and the units. That shell, when it dropped, it hit three young men standing in front of me, but they were still alive. The human losses are terrible. After 40 days, we retreated. Afterwards, I couldn't fall asleep for four days and four nights. That's when I went to seek professional help in Zenica."

He talks about the war in Zavidovići almost without taking a breath: Zavidovići had over 9,000 people mobilised, 100 of them women and minors. There were over 3,000 wounded, many disabled war veterans. Over 500 people live with severe mental health problems. He adds: "All of us who were in the city during the war came out damaged."

His son, who now lives in Sweden, was born during the war. After the war, the first thing Asim wanted to do is provide a home for himself and his family. He managed this only 12 or 13 years ago, because as he says: "After the war, no one needed me and that was that."

Asim Parlić

Avdija Banda

Avdija was born in Bijelo Polje, but grew up in Brčko. Before the war, he was a mechanical engineering technician. He talks with pride about the youth work actions he took part in. When the war started, he was 27.

Tensions were felt in Brčko for some time before the war, because Croatia was so close, just over the Sava River, and there the war was already raging. For months, JNA reservists had been arriving in town.

Officially, the war in Brčko started on 1 May 1992. Demarcation lines were drawn right away. Avdija was in the reserve police forces that were tasked with trying to establish order and so he found himself "on the other side". He stayed with friends because he could not reach his house. In a raid on the night of 13 July, he was picked up together with many other non-Serbs and taken first to the barracks and then to the Batković camp near Bijeljina. About this experience, he said:

> "Just arriving there was a hideous experience, traumatic, humiliating … These were large barns on an agricultural estate where we were made to walk through a gauntlet of – at the time – enemy soldiers who would hit you, spit at you, etc. Then we were taken to get our hair cut, heads down. They had some humiliating, almost Nazi-like methods in the camp. While I was there, more than 15 people that I know of died from the beatings, and some died from disease and having no access to medicines. It was a dreadful experience that I'd rather forget, but we mustn't forget, so that we can tell it to people and younger generations that are against such things, that condemn such things."

He was part of a prisoner exchange in October that same year and that is how he left the camp. After a while, he joined a police reservists' unit. At the end of February 1993, he was seriously wounded and barely survived. His recovery took two years and included multiple surgeries on his thorax and left arm. Today, he has a 90 per cent disability rating.

For a time, he was the President of the Assembly of the Disabled War Veterans' Association of BiH.

Avdija Banda

Drago Jakić

Drago was born in 1951 in Živinice near Tuzla. Before the war, he worked at the Đurđević mine and later opened his own car body shop.

There was an airfield close to his house, so he could see all the planes taking off for Croatia and he could tell if they were armed or not. He was 41 when he went to join the Territorial Defence. He was a gunner on a grenade launcher. During the war, he was the assistant to the commander in charge of operations, then a deputy commander of a battalion and finally a battalion commander. He has this to say about his experience:

> "I was never in a position to shoot at civilians; when you're in the middle of a heavy offensive and you're being shot at from behind, I was never afraid on the front lines, but if they shoot over you, if they're shooting at the civilians, especially if we were holding the defence line, and I see the mortars fly over us and down into the city, where the parents and children are, it's demoralising, it gets to you ... I think I served honourably; I did what I had to do, but today I tell my children: war is waged by people who are not right in the head. I say this to them openly so they don't end up like we did."

He hopes that the future will bring change, that there will be a critical mass of people for change, because the current state is unsustainable. He adds: "All these current presidents have never been in the trenches. If they had, they wouldn't be talking the way they are today."

Drago Jakić

Dražen Horvat

Dražen was born in 1967 in Rijeka. When the war started, he was a student in Zagreb and did odd jobs. He says he learned about the tensions in Croatia from TV reports and newspapers, and it did not dawn on him that this had anything to do with him until the air raid sirens started sounding in Zagreb.

He was lucky to have spent just a few months in the war, without any major consequences. He jokes about how he didn't like hanging out with the whole neighbourhood down in the underground shelter, or having civil defence officers write him up for playing tennis outside during an air raid, so he decided to volunteer to defend Vukovar. After he enlisted, they were all put on a bus, but the bus never reached Vukovar because the roads were blocked. Instead, they stayed in Vinkovci, defending the surrounding villages. Unsuccessfully, for the most part, he adds.

When he is being serious, he says he probably went off to war out of a sense of duty. And he explains:

> "I never felt any hatred towards Serbs or any nation, and I was surprised to see people speaking with hatred about the people on the other side of the line of fire. The only emotion I had at the time towards the people on the other side was fear. Fear that they would injure me or capture me."

He is sorry that he didn't take part in anti-war efforts before the war started. He says he was unaware at the time; he couldn't imagine where it could lead.

Dražen Horvat

Đoko Pupčević

Đoko was born in 1968 in the village of Srpska Tišina near Šamac in Bosnia. Croatia is right across the Sava River. Before the war, he worked at a furniture factory and on his small farm.

When the war started, he was 24, married with a son of almost two. It was April, tilling and planting season, so he was preparing his soil. When he came home, a man was waiting for him and told him to come to a meeting that evening at the assembly point in the library in Tišina. He went along and there they were given weapons and uniforms. The line was set up at the edge of the village; they made trenches and dug in. The war started that night of 16/17 April 1992. It wasn't a surprise; the war had been going on in Croatia for a while. A large number of Serbs had fled from Croatia through Šamac because the bridge there was passable – it hadn't been destroyed. Đoko had seen all these refugees going by, carrying their bundles. He himself had put up relatives fleeing Croatia at his house for a few months. Reservists from Serbia had already shown up in Šamac, and the Zengas from Croatia had come to neighbouring Orašje. Ever since September 1991, Đoko had been on watch duty around the village. There was a story that during the Second World War, on 1 December 1944, Croat and Muslim neighbours had killed 135 people on the bridge. The Sava had washed away the bodies. He explains:

"Then, out of fear of that happening to us, we set up watch duty with whatever we had, hunting rifles, if someone had a hunting pistol, things like that, shotguns, the kind with a double barrel that takes two cartridges, so at least you'd wake the village up if you fired your two shots."

He says waiting for what would happen was the worst. That night, when the war started, the bridge was blown up. Đoko was wounded by a shell on 14 July that same year.

> "I took a long time to recover. First, at the spot where it happened, a relative of mine – he was killed later that day – Milorad, he administered first aid, tightened a belt around the top of my leg, because my thigh was wounded, and my knee was dislocated, then they took the five of us who were wounded and put us on a tractor the way you take pigs to market. They drove us half a kilometre like that on the tractor trailer, and then transferred us to a *Zastava 101* car, and we went along the riverbank to the Šamac Health Centre where

Đoko Pupčević

> they dressed our wounds. Then they took us to Brčko, where I spent maybe seven hours. At around 8.15–8.30 I was on the operating table. My thigh had been blown off, my hand mangled, and then Dr Ninković, the surgeon, he performed the surgery without anaesthetic, without anything. You could hear the scissors as he worked on the shrapnel, cutting away at the muscle tissue … That's how it was done during the war. Then the dressing had to be changed every day for ten days. Then on the 11th day, I go to him, and he sutures the wound, 14 stitches, all without anaesthetic. Just trussed me up. And it gets infected. I went home and a doctor came to change my dressings, and he said, 'I wouldn't wait on this, go to Serbia.'"

He almost lost his leg. After surgery, when he woke up from the anaesthesic, he says he first looked down to see if his leg was still there. He tried to flex his leg – it was there. And he was happy.

He returned home the next year, but he didn't go back into the army. He was the President of the Disabled War Veterans' Committee in Šamac Municipality and held other positions in the veterans' organisation.

Today, he is retired on account of his disability and has three children.

Edin Ramulić

Edin was born in Rakovčani near Prijedor in 1970. He was 21 when the war started. He was unemployed, as was his older brother. Their father lost his job in 1990 when the factory where he had been working shut down. Edin had reconciled himself to the fact that with no one in the family having a job, he could not go to university, so he did his army service (JNA). He managed to avoid mobilisation when the war in Croatia started, and he didn't join the Territorial Defence of BiH when its units were being set up. Edin says he was a pacifist and didn't want to go to war:

> "We lived like a small community, four houses for four brothers and their families, so we all lived like one big family, we were generationally close, we were connected. None of us was active in either the military or politics, we were all just civilians. No one wanted or aspired to be part of those big events."

They stayed in their homes as the pressures mounted. No one could move around, they couldn't go out to get what they needed, sometimes there would be shelling, they weren't getting information either, there was no electricity, so they hooked up a generator to try to get some news. Up until 20 July 1992:

> "That was the end, it was our turn … Two soldiers came to the house and made everyone come outside. And then: 'The men, come with us!' But one of the soldiers, because I looked a lot younger, I had no beard, I'd lost a lot of weight, and that soldier said, 'You go back, say you're 17,' and to the others, 'He goes back inside.' That's how I was separated from my father and my brother, on our doorstep. I went back inside, but then ran straight to the window to see what was happening with them. That's the image that remains, the column, everyone bent over, their heads at waist level, holding on to each other, only the guards standing upright. In that multitude of people, there was maybe a hundred or so, I couldn't pick out my father and brother, I couldn't see them. We had heard that there were camps in Prijedor, but these were all just rumours at that point. We wouldn't have been waiting at home if we'd known there were camps, we would have gone through the woods; rather get killed than get caught and put in a camp. We didn't have the right information. And then they took them away, so the last scene I remember is them singing *Who dares say, who dares lie that Serbia is small*. They're singing, they were ordered to sing, and I guess they

> already knew which song, they took them like that through the whole village. The last thing I remember is that column, moving further and further away ..."

A few days later, Edin and his mother were taken to the Trnopolje camp and from there to Travnik. That was when he decided to join the army: "So, on 29 July, as a pacifist, someone who didn't want war, I decided to go to war." He was stationed in Jajce, then in Sarajevo; he says he doesn't know of a hill in Central Bosnia that he hadn't been on. His idea was that he would return home and he hoped he would manage to save his father, brother, uncles and their sons; he still didn't know what had happened to them. One of his uncles had already been killed in the column, along the way. Another uncle ended up at the Omarska camp and managed to survive. The other six men from his family were taken to Keraterm; none of them survived. His father was killed in the factory where he once worked. Some of them are still counted as missing. Of around 380 men who ended up in the Keraterm camp, in Room 3, Edin knows of only 15 survivors.

Edin's best friend from his army brigade was killed, and he himself was wounded trying to pull his friend out.

> "Everything that we were trying to achieve, just this one more hill, just this one more site, at the end, someone resolved it with a signature. After a while you realise that, actually, everything we're doing is pointless. So, over time, by the end of the war, I became completely anti-war. I realised it was completely pointless."

He lives between Prijedor and Sanski Most. His house in the village has not been rebuilt. As he says, all he owns is a used car. He is a single father. For years, he volunteered with the Izvor association as a human rights activist, tirelessly looking for missing persons and advocating for memorialisation. He is the founder of the Foundation for Building a Culture of Memory in Prijedor.

Edin Ramulić

Enes Bajrić

Enes was born in 1963 in Zavidovići, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He completed military school and served in Slovenia. He was an outpost commander until the JNA pulled out of Slovenia. He was in Sarajevo when the war in BiH started. He decided to go back home to Zavidovići, where it was still peaceful. He soon became a member of the Territorial Defence staff. He talks about the absurdity of how the Territorial Defence split into the Bosnian and the Serb units so that they could prepare for war. The evening news brought reports about clashes in Bijeljina, Prijedor, Zvornik and Sarajevo, and in the morning, they would go to work in the same building that housed both territorial defence units. Enes was tasked with distributing commissary equipment. Then the shelling of Zavidovići started. Enes says:

> "The worst thing is that war wasn't like what we were trained for, that there would be a front and someone would attack us. Instead, the front is wherever you go, to get water, or go to the toilet, or go to lunch, or to see your parents, the front is there ... you don't know who's armed and who isn't, who's a friend and who's an enemy. You end up in a situation where nothing is clear, except that there's a war, it's a done deal, and you can't say I want no part of this war, because the war is everywhere."

Today, Enes is retired. He lives in Zavidovići and hopes that Bosnia and Herzegovina will create the conditions for his kids to come back from abroad, or as he puts it: "Because all of mine have left."

Enes Bajrić

Fikreta Osmankić

Fikreta was born in 1969 in Bihać and still lives in the "most beautiful city on the Una River". She was 22 or 23 when the war started. Her two younger brothers were captured, so she tried to get information about what happened to them. That's how she met Jasmin, her future husband, who invited her to come to work as a medic, because they needed someone. She went to the front lines every day as a medic. She had no prior training, apart from some knowledge of first aid from school, so it was difficult at first; she had to learn as she went along. Also, they didn't have much in the way of drugs or medical equipment. She didn't see her brothers until after the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia fell; they had been imprisoned in Kladuša the whole time.

When asked what it was like for her in this male-dominated military environment, she says:

> "I just decided overnight, I didn't really think about it; that's just how things were, we didn't have money for food, so people did whatever they could. Our salary in the army was 49 marks. I didn't think about how they would treat me, but they did accept me. I was like a sister to them, and they respected me and helped me, always, whatever I needed."

She never got the status of a war veteran, or the benefits. When she sees that her brothers who were captured and her brother who was wounded did not get a pension or disability benefits, she doesn't expect to get any either. She doesn't think she'll get anything, but luckily, she is healthy and whole; she didn't lose any of her limbs.

When we asked her if there was anything she was particularly proud of from her war years, she said there wasn't, she was just glad to have been there when needed, that she could help and give a bit of herself to others. And when asked if there was anything she would do differently, thinking back to that time, she responded:

> "Now, I'd take my kids and go straight over the border. That's what I'd do, without thinking, that's the first thing I'd do. I'd get myself and my family away, that's the first thing I'd do."

Fikreta Osmankić

Ivo Anđelović

Ivo lives in Boće, near Brčko, where he was born. Before the war, he ran a café. He participated in the numerous meetings of representatives of surrounding villages who would meet to see how to preserve peace in the months when war was already raging in Croatia and there were fears it would spill over into BiH. They discussed whether, if things got rough, they would stay and resist or run away, and they decided they would not run away. Ivo was one of the organisers of the resistance in his area.

> "I was 28 when the war started. My first thought: I thought it wouldn't last that long, and that it wouldn't be so dirty. I thought someone would do something, either the international forces, or reasonable people, some of our politicians, representatives, that it would not be on such a large scale and so, let's say, bloody. At the end we saw that it was very bloody and very dirty. But at the time, we thought we'd stay, defend our village, hoping it wouldn't last long. However, as the situation developed, as the lines were drawn, people started getting killed. My brother died in my arms, another defender also died in my arms, I have seen so many things ..."

Ivo is active in the cooperation between veterans' associations in Brčko: the Croat, Bosniak and Serb associations have managed to reach various agreements. He says:

> "I got involved because on a personal level, I wanted to contribute to reconciliation among people, especially veterans, so that the citizens see that, that we can be together, because people should live together. The war is over, and those responsible for wrongdoings – they should answer for them. I can't force anyone to think about it, and I have no right, but I would like it if it were more widespread, if more people were looking for a common story."

His wife is Muslim and they have three children. Their youngest son lives in Germany and the eldest is thinking of joining him. Ivo says he used to be an optimist, but not any more, seeing how many young people are leaving and how Bosnia is becoming a country of old people.

Ivo Anđelović

Jasmin Osmankić

Jasmin lives in Bihać. He was born in 1968 in Kulen Vakuf in Bihać Municipality. When he was six, his father died, leaving his mother alone to take care of six children. He completed agricultural secondary school and got a job at a farming cooperative. Before the conflicts erupted, he worked in Gospić, Croatia. He had this to say about the start of the war in Kulen Vakuf:

> "I had a neighbour, Milan, an honourable man, older, he'd lived through the Second World War. He came to my house one morning. Him, me and my mother, we were sitting down having coffee, and he says to my mother: Nure, dear, run away, run away with the children, with all this going on. Because Kulen Vakuf was surrounded by Serb villages, and the border with Croatia was eight kilometres away. He says to us, the villages they're full of soldiers and this now, he says, will be worse than it was in the Second World War. Because he'd survived the camps in the Second World War and he'd told us about it. And then he started crying, real tears. So I managed to persuade both my sisters to get out with their kids. My mother wouldn't leave, she stayed with us to the end."

His testimony about being expelled from his home, with severe hardships, starvation and sleep deprivation, is harrowing. He managed to make his way to Bihać where he joined the Territorial Defence. Soon, he became the commander of the reconnaissance and sabotage unit. He was seriously wounded three times, his two brothers were killed, his sisters and brothers-in-law were held in camps. When asked about what he was fighting for, he says: "Nothing, when I think about it. I don't know. I was expelled from my home. I fought to protect my family, to protect my loved ones."

Today, he lives in alternative accommodation in Bihać because he is registered as having a flat in Kulen Vakuf, in a building that was burned down and never reconstructed. His wife Fikreta is also a veteran. He heads the cantonal association of PTSD sufferers. He wishes there was "coexistence, peace, forgetting the war, fighting to move forward … That is my only wish – for us to try to get our young people back, so they don't leave, so they don't go away from here … Although I've said I want to leave and I can't stand watching this injustice here."

Jasmin Osmankić

Krešimir Ivančić

Krešimir hails from the Daruvar area. Before the war, he was a long-distance truck driver, criss-crossing most of Europe and the Middle East.

He grew up in a multiethnic community and says that at no point was there any intolerance during his schooling, youth or even later, when he started working. When the tensions started, there were various rumours circulating: that the Serb villages had organised night watches, that the army was coming in, transporting weapons. Graffiti saying "This is Serbia", "Ustashas" and the like appeared overnight, political rallies were being organised, fear was spreading, and soon the barricades went up.

He was 28 when the war started. He volunteered for the army. He says he fought for his village, surrounded on all sides, and that he didn't really have much choice. He was hurt that some of his friends had gone over to the other side without warning him that danger was coming so he could get away. He says: "When the shooting started, no one cared who you were friends with, or who you were related to. All that mattered was if you were Croat or Serb." He was wounded at the very beginning. He tells us:

> "I joined the National Guard, the Croatian Army, on 17 September, and on 21 September, I was wounded, out of commission. I hadn't even been assigned a rifle. I was wearing a JNA uniform, or just the shirt, trousers and boots I had from the reserve unit, just with HV, or ZNG at the time, on my sleeve. The rest of my outfit was civilian. I didn't even get assigned a rifle. When I joined up, they asked me what I knew how to do. I told them, wherever you need me, put me there. They asked me about my occupation. I told them I was a truck driver. They asked: Can you drive the armoured transporter? Does it have a steering wheel? Yes. Sure, then. There was a village that was attacked, a Czech minority village, where a terrible massacre was committed, and they sent us over as reinforcements. And the first contact ... we came right past them, a few metres away, we had no idea, because we wore the same uniforms, with just a few differences, we figured out the other side had helmets with the five-point star, and we'd covered up those stars. And they hit me with a rocket launcher and a colleague was killed, another seriously wounded like me, but we managed to get out of the line of fire and then I was decommissioned until mid-October or

Krešimir Ivančić

so. When I came back, I was infantry. I didn't want to go back to the armoured vehicles, I didn't want to see a steering wheel."

If he could have done so, he would have avoided the war. Today, he takes part in peacebuilding activities with other war veterans and he says: "The point of everything is for war not to happen. My father didn't want it, my mother didn't want it, they didn't want me to go to war. I don't want my child to hear bullets buzzing around his head or shells, to see someone's house burning, to see people dead, killed, blown up, no one wants that."

Marinko Gačić

Marinko Gačić is from Novi Grad, previously Bosanski Novi. He was born in 1964. He is a railway worker by training. He says his first contact with the war occurred in July 1991, before the war officially started in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Territorial Defence had started mobilising in the Novi Grad area, the explanation being that it needed to prevent the war from Croatia spilling over into BiH. Croatian Ministry of Interior forces had reached Dvor na Uni, which is around three kilometres away from Novi Grad as the crow flies. Marinko tells us about that beginning:

> "Back then, we thought Bosnia and Herzegovina was Yugoslavia in miniature and war was impossible, that it would all be over soon in Slovenia and Croatia, that there would be a few clashes, but that there would be no war in BiH. It was the first time I felt the war closing in. And it was really awful. We couldn't cross over to Dvor, though before we would all be crossing; people from Dvor went to school in Novi. I had no idea back then, I thought the Croats were mostly in Dvor, we had never talked about it, or thought about it. My best mates from school who were in the same class as me in secondary school, they lived in Dvor na Uni, and I thought they were Croats because they were from Croatia. I had no idea they were Serbs. That's when the divisions started, we started recognising ethnicity, religion and customs. Before, we were all as one."

Marinko remembers the talk in the media and among people at the time and says "the national rhetoric was such that anyone hearing it felt they had to go to their flock" and adds:

> "There was talk that as soon as this democracy and multiparty system got established, it would be better for all of us. Communism, socialism, these were blamed for everything, they were the spectre that was killing us, but when democracy came, war came along with it. But we chose it ourselves at the elections, no one else, you can't go blaming anyone else. Most Serbs voted for the SDS, most Muslims for the SDA, and most Croats for the HDZ. Which means that we divided ourselves according to what these nationalist leaders were saying. And then it all just took its course."

Marinko is still a railway worker. He is the president of the municipal veterans' organisation and active in the trade union. He has two children. He hopes the system of values will change so that knowledge and education are respected again.

Marinko Gačić

Mesud Kumro

Mesud (1954) was born in Goražde. He was a sergeant in the traffic police. He says he was meant to be replaced because he refused to join a nationalist party, but his dismissal was prevented by the start of the war. He tells us how right before the war, most of the Serbs left the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of BiH and set up their own police station.

Right at the start of the war, their electricity, water and food supplies were cut off. They were surrounded on all sides. The city was shelled indiscriminately; there was no house that wasn't hit. People were killed every day. There were days when over a thousand shells hit the centre of the city. Mesud says it was hellish; everyone who lived through it is traumatised.

He tells us:

> "I had a good friend, also a sergeant, a Serb colleague who also left the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of BiH, but we were really good colleagues and good friends. When politics separated the Serb and Muslim police, we were still sergeants. And we lived in the same city and again, as friends and as colleagues, we had to meet before the war broke out. The day before the war, he called me on the phone and said we should go for a drink. I went to his station, we sat down and I could see he was feeling uncomfortable and was a bit tense. I slapped his shoulder and said, 'What's going on, mate? Go on, tell me why you called.' And he got all serious and frightened, he looked me in the eye and said, 'We're attacking you tomorrow.' We knew it would come to that in Goražde, but I didn't know it would be the next day. And I looked him in the eye, as a friend, and said, 'You're attacking me, your colleague?' He says, 'Oh, come on, I'm not attacking you, but a bunch of crazies have come that no one can stop.' Then I get a bit serious and I want to poke fun, so I say, 'Let's defend Goražde from those crazies who've come, then, mate.' And he, knowing me, that you can't always tell if I'm joking, he says, 'Oh, will you ever grow up? This is serious. What you're saying is impossible. Instead, tell me which city you need me to transfer you and your family to and get out ...' Right after the war, I had some business and I had to go see this same friend of mine. And it was a bit awkward for both him and me, until he had a few drinks, and then we just picked up where we left off, talking about everything, but not the war so much. We talked about our families ..."

Mesud Kumro

Milan Kozić

Milan is from the village of Kozići in Rogatica Municipality. He says of his area: "We were always multiethnic and still are today, which I think is the best thing in the world that can happen."

He was 27 when the fighting started. At the very start, Milan was displaced from his house; the VRS was conducting an evacuation, saying it was unsafe and they could get killed. Tensions were already high, barricades had been set up, the first victim had been killed nearby. He was displaced to a nearby village, some two or three kilometres from his house. He says:

> "The hardest thing was leaving the house where I was born, leaving it all behind. They tell us, get away for five, six, ten days, but the aim was, I guess, to start the whole insanity. And then with my parents, when we left, shut up the house and left, I didn't even take any photos, nothing, that's what I regret most, photos from my childhood, for example, with friends, colleagues, etc. And then later it started. I always felt sorry for the innocent ordinary people, Serbs, Muslims/Bosniaks ..."

His house was burned down. His friend who stayed in the village told him which of the neighbours burned his house down. "So be it, I said, hope it kept him warm."

In February 1993, he was seriously wounded. He and a female colleague stepped on a landmine. The recovery took a long time. He remembers how hard it was to learn to walk again. Then he adds that the hardest thing was when at the very start of the war, the neighbourhood children who grew up around him would call his name. The attacks hadn't started yet, the lines were only just set up, but you could hear shooting in the distance.

> "They were calling for me: 'Milan, Milaaan, Milaaan,' because they'd gotten used to always being given something, anything ... Now, what could I do, I couldn't call back, I couldn't give them anything. And my dear mother says: 'You hear those kids calling you?' I hear them. But what can I do?"

After he was wounded, he didn't go back to the army. He got involved in humanitarian work and helping out returnees. He believes this is what helped him the most through tough times. And he managed to rebuild his house with a donation from a humanitarian organisation. He says it was like being born again and looking forward to life.

Milan Kozić

Milorad Agbaba

Milorad was born in Novi Grad/Bosanski Novi in 1953. He says that they lived normally in the town when the war started in Croatia, with Croats, Muslims/Bosniaks and Serbs sitting together and listening to the news. He worked at a good company and had a family, two small children. Then he heard about the massacre on the bridge in Karlovac and something inside him snapped. He decided to enlist in the army. Although his family was against it, he went off to Banja Luka with another dozen men who were enlisting. At the barracks, they gave them uniforms, then put them on buses; they didn't know where they were going. They were transported over the Sava River and on towards Jasenovac.

He spent four years, five months and one day in the army. Most of that time, he was separated from his family, only coming home a few times on leave. He says his wife did her best to make something good for dinner when he was home on leave, despite wartime deprivation, and he jokes that the children were happier about that dinner than about seeing him.

When asked what was most difficult for him, he says: "War is a dirty business … I've seen killed children, killed women, a massacre, that was difficult. Being away from home, too, the best part of my life wasted wandering the backwoods of Slavonia, Doboj, Sarajevo, Kladuša."

Milorad explains:

> "To this day, I remain a Yugo-nostalgic. In my time, I had travelled the country from north to south, and I felt good everywhere I visited. It's not the same any more, though I still like to visit everywhere. And I take old and new roads. I miss the freedom and openness; now it's all about measuring your ethnicity, which is something I never did, and I teach my children not to do … I don't think we should allow ourselves to backtrack; I would no longer have the physical or the mental strength to go through it again. Those who advocate for conflict don't know what it's like to spend the night in the woods at minus 20 degrees."

He was the President of the Veterans' Organisation of Novi Grad, a member of the presidency of the Veterans' Organisation of Republika Srpska, and chairman of the committee tasked with determining and categorising disabled veterans, as well as holding other posts.

Milorad Agbaba

Mirko Zečević Tadić

Mirko lives in the village of Štrepci near Brčko, on the slopes of Mount Majevica. He was born in 1974 in Germany, but his parents returned to their homeland in the 1980s.

When the war started in Croatia – which is close by, just over the river – explosions and shots could be heard in Brčko. Just like most of his fellow citizens, Mirko did not believe the war would spread. They worked on their land and he was hoping to go to university to study law. He thought the war would last just a short while.

He was not yet 18 when the war started in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even before it started, he had already become a courier, carrying messages to people in the villages about meetings and participating in the patrols. Then the shelling started, and the air raids; you could get killed at any moment.

When asked about what was most difficult for him during the war, Mirko says:

> "The most difficult thing was when my fellow fighters got killed, my cousins, but maybe it was even more difficult when I was on the front line and I would hear a shell flying overhead towards the village. I'd think about the people living there, especially the elderly and children, if they'd have enough time to get out of the way, to save themselves."

At the end of March 1995, he was seriously wounded; he lost his right leg below the knee. Two months after he got his prosthetic, he reported back to the 108th HVO Brigade and was assigned to work on the communications system. That's where he stayed until after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, leaving at the end of January 1996.

> "I did have moments during the war … I was so angry in the war when I got news that my closest relatives had been killed, or my friends; in those moments I just wanted to shoot at the other side across the line. And I did shoot … But when I got wounded and later, I figured out that if I continued to have this kind of bad feeling about the other side, this hatred or whatever, it would eat me up from the inside, slowly but surely. If I keep thinking about you as my opponent, always coming up with ways to hurt you, to do something bad, then I won't be able to live my life, then Mirko will disappear."

Mirko Zečević Tadić

Very soon after the war was over, Mirko started crossing the demarcation lines. He says something got into him; he had to go to the city, to see "the bogeyman", whoever had shot at him, to find out why it had to be like that, why it all happened.

Since 2007, he has been participating in peace activities with war veterans from the region. Mirko is also a mountain climber, scaling peaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Turkey ... and a few years ago he climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro.

Nazif Kahrić

Nazif was born in Jajce in 1957. He was an active member of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia and was still very young when he became a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. He is a mechanical engineer by trade, but spent a large part of his working life as a commanding officer in the Territorial Defence staff and the Ministry of Interior where he gained extensive experience.

Having spent four years as chief of staff in the Territorial Defence, Nazif says he was privy to information about the potential break-up of Yugoslavia, which could not have happened without the terrible war that ensued. Jajce had the misfortune of being almost completely surrounded. He says that in this difficult wartime situation, the defence forces in Jajce, which were made up of ARBiH and HVO units, had to man a front line of 135 km. Every day, VRS forces, assisted by former JNA troops, used heavy artillery, rocket launchers and howitzers to shell the city and the surrounding area, and there were also 48 days of aerial bombardment. Nazif says that given Jajce's position in the valley of the Vrbas and Pliva rivers, which made it more difficult to miss a target than to hit it, the VRS forces, assisted by the JNA, did not manage to kill that many people. Nazif also pointed out that the pilots of the planes and helicopters were not very effective, and he believes this was because the primary aim was to frighten people into fleeing the city. In addition to the shelling and bombardment and the fear they were spreading, a particular problem arose when incidents started happening between ARBiH and HVO, two formations that had been defending the city successfully up until then. It quickly became clear that the two armies could not defend the city of Jajce because their respective political leaders could not come to an agreement. When the city of Jajce fell under VRS control, Nazif commanded a unit that held a retreat route and prevented VRS from cutting off a corridor by which troops, civilians, vehicles and horse-drawn carts left the city, thus preventing their being driven out by the military. This is how he described those events:

> "That day, 29/30 October 1992, when Jajce fell, I'll remember it as long as I live. First, I couldn't reconcile myself to it. At one point, I took one last look at the city, when its suburbs were already ablaze. It's a scene I can't explain, especially the way I experienced it, because I loved my city, I still do, and it was hard to bear, because you're going somewhere, but you don't know where you're going."

He fled to Travnik and then to Zenica, but was then ordered by the minister responsible for the police to return to Travnik in order to organise the Jajce Public Security Station, and he stayed there until the end of the war.

Today, Nazif is active in the Social Democratic Party of BiH. He is not reluctant to criticise nationalism and the nationalist parties that have seized power, and this is how he explains his situation: "Because of my socialist past and commitment to the ideas of socialism, I was often criticised and looked down on, even threatened with being removed from the posts I held. After the first multiparty elections, though I had extensive experience, the nationalist parties – the SDA and HDZ – did not want to have people like me in leadership positions; instead, they installed obedient and loyal people without any professional experience. However, when Jajce fell, these obedient and loyal officers left BiH and went to Germany, so the authorities called on me and appointed me chief of police, despite my past."

He tells us with pride that as a commander of a unit in Jajce, he was in a position to protect several Serb families who lived in the city itself and in the village of Kruščica near Jajce, "when renegade troops from the HOS and some from other units, the so-called dogs of war, decided to loot and pillage and were prepared to kill, as they did at the Pećina restaurant where they liquidated several Serbs." Nazif points out that as deputy commander, he had gotten to know most of the population of Jajce, and certainly the people of Kruščica. That day, when they were at risk of harm, he took two policemen and went to provide them with protection. After he managed to keep them from harm, they asked to be exchanged. He was unable to organise the exchange, but he did provide them with temporary accommodation in the now vacated "Brotherhood and Unity" school building where they stayed until VRS took Jajce. It was only several years later that he managed to get back in touch with some of these people who are now living in Brčko, and some in Novi Sad. They now regularly keep in touch and exchange holiday greetings.

Today, Nazif is retired and lives in Jajce. He is a member of Jajce Municipal Council and is happy to take part in peace actions.

Nazif Kahrić

Novica Kostić (1960–2020)

Novica was born in Dobroviš near Vlasotince, Serbia. He was drafted when the war started in Croatia, leaving behind his wife and two small children. His unit was tasked with pulling out troops and motor equipment from the Logorište barracks in Karlovac. He was severely wounded on 4 November 1991 while attempting to pull a young soldier out of a burning tank. His war service ended there, as he says, but his other troubles started. He had severe burns and was left permanently disabled, having lost a leg.

> "I think I am partly responsible for what happened to me, because I didn't join the people who were opposed to the war and opposed to the policies that were fatal for the whole community, the whole nation."

When he talked about the atrocities of war, he mentioned how difficult it was to meet with the families of those killed. He believed he did harm simply by participating in the war – to people on the other side, but also to his own family. He was his family's breadwinner at the time and believed no greater harm could have been done to his wife and children.

He joined the peace activities of war veterans in CNA programmes in 2003, so he was one of the pioneers of this work. He participated in a whole host of activities, travelling across the former Yugoslavia. He bravely spoke out in public:

> "It is important for me to condemn the war crimes committed in my name, committed by the Serb side."

He was also the president of the disabled war veterans' association in Vlasotince.

We were greatly saddened by his untimely death on 12 December 2020. The commemoration held in Vlasotince on the anniversary of his death was attended by some 30 war veterans from different parts of the former Yugoslavia, including some who had belonged to enemy armies during the war. On that occasion, an initiative was submitted to the municipal authorities of Vlasotince to name a street in the town after Novica Kostić.

Novica Kostić

Pero Voćkić

Pero was born in 1968 in Novo Selo near Šamac. Before the war, he worked as a waiter.

He was wounded in August 1992 and was out of commission for about a month and a half. After the war, he met a man who had taken part in the same action, but on the opposite side, the Croat side, and who was also wounded at the same time. Today, they are friends and go fishing together.

In May 1995, he was wounded again, but it was more serious this time. He lost his sight in one eye.

> "I was upset that as a soldier of VRS, I was being called an aggressor in my town, in my BiH. I'd never felt I was foreign, as a fighter, as a soldier. I'd never gone over the Sava to attack Croatia. I spent the whole war in BiH."

When asked what was most difficult for him during the war, Perica tells us about when he was on a reconnaissance mission and he climbed on top of a silo. And from up there he saw his village burning:

> "I could see my village spread out below. In flames. All the Catholic houses, the Croat houses were burning. That was hard for me. I knew these people, they were my schoolmates, neighbours, they'd worked their whole lives to build that house, and it was gone in ten minutes."

After the war, he worked to clear landmines. He says that during the war he personally planted 280 landmines, but he cleared 2,615 of them in total.

He is proud that at 24 or 25, he was a commander in the war, that he kept his hands clean, that he disclosed the location where civilians killed in a crime during the war were buried, so their families could give them a proper funeral, and that he managed to raise his daughter as a single father.

Pero Voćkić

Saša Premec

Saša is from Daruvar. He was born in 1969. He grew up in a multiethnic community with many so-called mixed marriages, including his parents' marriage. He started university, did his military service, got a job. He was 22 when the war started. When we say he was very young, he says: "Well, yes. Best age for war. Crazy enough and full of energy."

The first major clash happened in the spring of 1991 at Plitvice. Saša says that by that time, a lot of people had already decided which side they would take in the break-up of Yugoslavia. When the first shells exploded in Daruvar, people knew who launched them and from where, but no one could understand why. Overnight, some of the Serb population secretly left their homes. It is assumed they were warned that an infantry attack on the city was being prepared. Saša and his parents are still upset that their friends left without a word of explanation or warning.

He decided quite early on to volunteer. He has this to say about his wartime experience:

> "For me as the commander of an infantry platoon, it was very important to have no casualties. That was the most important, not to have anyone severely wounded. I couldn't imagine having to go to someone's door and break the news to his wife, mother, whoever ..."

Today, with his colleagues from the HVIDR-a Daruvar veterans' association, he runs a permanent exhibition about the Homeland War in Daruvar. For several years, he has been participating in the activities CNA organises with war veterans. He smiles as he recounts how he explained to his teenage son who the members of the organisation were, which armies they belonged to and why they were meeting now, to which his son said he was proud of him, "and this was not something his mother put him up to".

Saša Premec

Siniša Mijanić

Siniša was born in 1973 in Pisari, Šamac Municipality, where he still lives. He and his sister grew up with their grandmother, because their mother died when he was four and their father when he was 11. After secondary school, he got a job in a cafe where he worked for a few months, and then in March 1991, he went to do his military service in the JNA in Banja Luka. He remembers that there was only one officer who warned the soldiers that they might be sent off to war. He completed the military school for reservist officers and trained as a tank driver. Their training was expedited. He was only 18 when he became a commander and was deployed in Knin, in a position where he was responsible for other people's lives and the war was already starting.

He was seriously wounded in October 1991 and airlifted by helicopter to the military hospital in Belgrade. It was a miracle he survived. He was paralysed and could not use his left hand. After 40 days, he was sent home to await another surgery. But the war was on its way to Šamac. As soon as he recovered from his second surgery, Siniša rejoined the army. This time it was the precursor to VRS: the Army of the Serb Republic of BiH.

From his village of barely 30 houses, populated by Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, seven young men were killed in the war. Most of those who had fled returned to their homes after the war. Siniša says he is proudest of having retained his humanity:

> "I can look everyone in the eye and talk to everyone. I had an old schoolmate come visit, we were great mates, slept over at each other's houses, hung out. He came and stood at the gate until I recognised him. Nedeljko is his name. 'Nedeljko, come inside.' He says, 'I don't know if I dare.' I stepped back: 'Oh, come on, come inside!' We talked about everything; he got married, lives in Kostajnica, he was wounded too, in the Croatian Army, I respect that, I was wounded too, and we respect each other. Later, when he left, I thought back to his *don't know if I dare* ... He was right in a way, we don't know how people come out of the war, if they'll be more rational or depressed, how they'll come out."

Siniša Mijanić

Stanislav Krezić (1959–2022)

Stanislav lived in Potoci near Mostar. He was a professional driver and he also worked with slot machines for a time.

The first clash of the war in BiH was the JNA attack on the village of Ravno on 1 October 1991. However, this is not counted as the official start of the war in BiH (officially, the war in BiH started in April 1992). Stanislav joined the army in September 1991. He was 32 at the time. He says about the start of the war: "We have different opinions on when the war started, because the politicians have made it about who entered the war when and whose war it was; our politicians can't even reach consensus on when the war started." About the war, he said:

> "That's what war is like: never did anyone any good. It wasn't logical for me to go to war against Goljušani, which is some two or three kilometres away, with a majority Serb population, and over here we're mixed with the Muslims ... I took part in Operation June Dawns, liberation against the Serbs, we went up there with the Bosniaks and raided a village and no house was left unburned. And then you think, you didn't liberate anything from anyone other than the people who had been living there."

He fought for a better future for Croats. In June 1993, he had to leave his home. He was soon taken to a camp run by the Army of BiH. He spent 156 days in the camp. They were the hardest days of his life and he doesn't like to talk about them. He didn't go back to his home until in 2002, when he received some modest funds to reconstruct it.

He says he used to be a fervent Croat, but he later realised he had been deluded, especially when he saw that others had suffered too and that members of his people had inflicted a lot of harm. He says that war is senseless, that things should have been done differently, because: "How can you divide what is indivisible?" He added:

> "You can't force someone off their land, say they're the aggressor. Let's be fair. I have the responsibility and the need to speak out about the crimes committed by my people."

Unfortunately, as of 15 November 2022, Stana is no longer with us. He didn't get the heart transplant he needed. We miss him very much.

Stanislav Krezić

Suljo Đogo

Suljo (1956) grew up in Goražde. He is originally Montenegrin, but identifies as Bosnian. He says he'd rather be Yugoslav, but since in BiH they are counted as others, he didn't want to register as Yugoslav. He studied political science in Sarajevo. Before the war, he was the line foreman at the nitrates factory in Goražde.

Suljo says the war literally came to his door. He was in the reserve police force. At the start of the war, the police in Goražde separated into Serb and Muslim police. The part of town where he lived was under the control of the Serb police. One day, he looked out of his window and saw masked men approaching his building, and he knew they were coming for him. He jumped out of a window on the other side of the building to get away. He says that a friend of his had warned him war was coming a few days before it started, so he got a Serb to take his family, his wife and two children, to Prijepolje, and from there they made their way to Skopje and then Spain where they stayed throughout the war. For ten years, he lived without his children. He says: "I had children, but I had no contact with them." When he saw them again, so much time had passed that he didn't recognise them.

During the war, he was the chief of staff of a brigade and senior captain. Goražde was under siege from the start of May 1992 until the signing of the Dayton Agreement in December 1995. There was a severe lack of food and people were starving. He says of the war period: "Three years of no water, no electricity. It was like living in a cave, and every day you're expecting to get shot."

When asked whether he remembers the end of the war, Suljo says:

> "Of course I remember. I was on the front lines when we got the news that Dayton was signed. There was jubilation on both sides. On the Serb side and on our side. People were shooting into the air, there were shouts and cries, everyone was happy, not just one side, because all of us, we all wanted the war to be over."

Today, he is a retired army colonel. Friends and acquaintances from Goražde, as well as the whole team of war veterans from different sides, address him as General.

Suljo Đogo

Svetlana Janković

Svetlana was born in 1963 in Čačak. When the JNA first started recruiting women in 1983, Svetlana signed up together with her teammates from the football club she played for. After her military service, she graduated from the Faculty of Defence and Security. In the autumn of 1989, she started working as a contracted officer in Zadar. It was not easy to adapt. Women were a rarity in the army at the time, and then her status as a contracted officer was something the enlisted troops looked down upon. Another difficulty was that some of the people under her command were men who were older than her.

At the barracks, they didn't have a clear picture of what was coming. She says: "If you actually managed to get to a TV set, you could only watch one of the main channels. And what could you see there? Warmongering rhetoric. I see that now. But back then, I decided not to watch. Why should I watch something that will just get my blood pressure up, push me into uncertainty, heighten tensions, create fear and all that?" The barracks were right on the seashore and they had a beach, so she spent most of her free time there. They had no warning:

> "I don't even know what anyone could have done to warn us when no one knew what would happen. At the beginning, there were 1,500 people at the barracks. At the end, when we left, there was maybe 300 of us. A fifth. People were just leaving. When the first soldier ran away, the barracks were on high alert; there were meetings, procedures, pre-emptive measures. At one point, a month or so later, it just became the norm to have one, five or a dozen soldiers abscond, or even one of the higher-ranking officers."

At first, Svetlana was entrusted with a smaller unit, a light anti-aircraft regiment, because a unit with heavy weapons was not deemed appropriate for a woman. However, as her officer colleagues left the army and went home, and there was a shortage of staff, she was assigned an additional larger unit (a medium-range air defence regiment) at the same barracks, as well as being put in charge of the cafeteria, although she says she was no good in the kitchen. She laughs: "But everyone survived, let me say right away."

Everything happened so quickly, people leaving the barracks, the blockade, the water being cut off, food deliveries, electricity … The barracks were evacuated in October 1991. Her unit was amalgamated with the Knin Corps and Svetlana was

Svetlana Janković

tasked with pulling out columns of soldiers from Croatia. She was wounded on 26 May 1992 when an entire column was ambushed near Pudin Han.

For Svetlana, the war ended in July 1992 when she returned to Serbia.

She says watching the film *Vukovar: A Story* in Čačak was a turning point for her. She left the cinema in a rage. She says that if she had run across a politician in that moment, she would have punched him: "Unfortunately, things have not changed to this day."

Svetlana has one son. She retired in 2018 with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Veroljub Smiljković

Veroljub (1977) was born in the village of Bela Voda near Kruševac. Today, he lives in Kruševac with his family. He is an agricultural technician.

He was sent to do his military service in 1997 in Uroševac. He was not yet 21 when the war started in Kosovo. He tells us about that time:

> "Everyone thinks it's no big deal: starts today, over by tomorrow. But it just spirals, one side and then the other, and then really terrible things start happening. And as an individual, you are completely powerless to stop it, you're brought to this place, you watch it all happening, you follow orders, but somewhere deep inside, you want it all to go away, for things to function normally, for you to finish your military service and go back home, to get on with your life, either go to university or start a family ..."

Veroljub was seriously wounded on 14 June 1998 in the area of Suva Reka near Prizren. Today, he is a second category disabled war veteran. He had enrolled to study agriculture at university, but he never completed his studies because of all these circumstances. He lives on disability benefits. He is one of the founders of the "Peacebuilders" organisation in Kruševac.

Veroljub Smiljković

Zoran Zovko

Zoran (1964) was born in Bijelo Polje near Mostar. He completed electrical engineering secondary school and the school for training service dogs. Dogs are his passion.

When the war started, Zoran was 27. His aim was the creation and preservation of the Republic of Croatia. When asked what was most difficult for him during the war, he talks about the casualties. Several people died in his arms, including his father. It was also hard for him when loved ones moved away. He says: "When your family leaves, you're left in a desert."

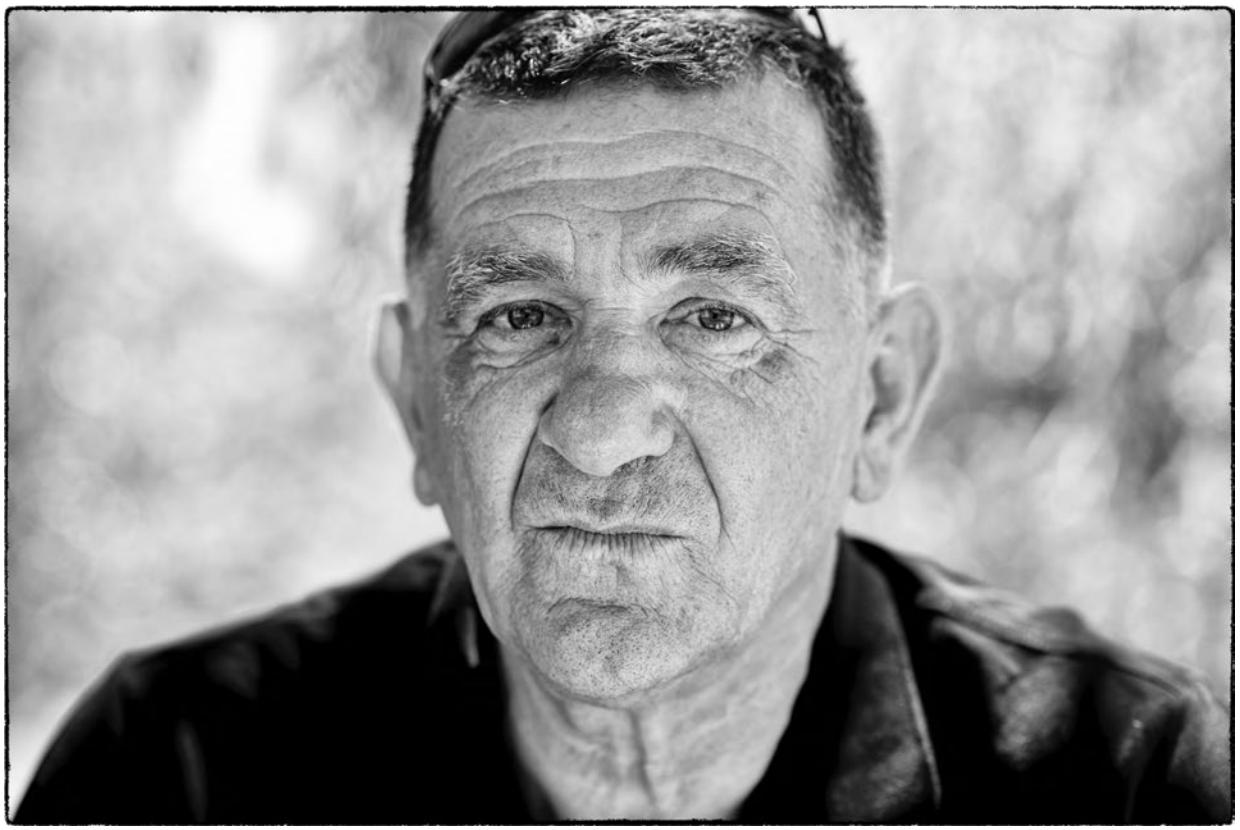
When asked if he remembers the end of the war, he replies:

> "The end? I don't know if the war ended. I mean, the war with weapons did, but it has continued by other means ... People were happy it ended, the goal was achieved, Croatia was there, but I thought Dayton would be ... more honest, more honourable and equal, that it wouldn't put anyone above anyone else, or anyone below anyone else, and that whatever you agreed on, it would be put into practice. And that we would start a new life, build everything we had neglected over those five years."

He tells us how important it was for him to visit the memorial in the neighbouring town, which is in Republika Srpska, and how he felt at peace. He adds:

> "I noticed that the local people, they very much approved. That they look at me, me personally, differently today, because Zoka came to pay his respects to these people. And I think, if all of us from our community went, the relationship would be better, more pleasant, more honest, etc."

He retired with the rank of colonel. He still breeds dogs today. He has three children and six grandchildren. One of his sons lives in Germany.



Zoran Zovko

Zvonko Lucić

Zvonko hails from Slavonia, from Zagrađe near Pleternica. He worked for the electricity distribution company as an electrical engineering technician.

He was 27 when the war started. As borders started to be drawn, his community, though majority Croat, was supposed to belong to Serbia. Zvonko believes that because of this threat, as well as general media manipulation, people were keen to get involved in the war. He says he didn't like it, because it was already clear to him back then that companies which were employing several thousand people and selling their products throughout the region would be shut down and had no future. He adds:

> "But back then I still didn't know as much as I do now about the extent to which the communities depended on each other, be they Serbs or Croats, and the extent to which families were mixed; these were deep traumas. I realised this later, mostly through the war and through working with CNA. And through my life, which is why I bought the house where I did [in Glina]. All those stories, when you put them together ... to this very day, no one in Croatia dares ask if it was worth it. And essentially, those who do ask – they are completely marginalised, as in: what's he on about, of course it was worth it."

Zvonko spent some of his wartime years in Mostar as part of a reinforcement unit, and he was based at Heliodrom. At the same time, Heliodrom was a notorious camp for Bosniaks. When asked what he likes to remember from the war period, he tells us the story of a cigarette holder. When the camp was to be closed down, when an agreement was reached between the Croat and the Bosniak sides, and when it was known that the prisoners would soon be released, one of the prisoners gave Zvonko a cigarette holder made of willow that he'd made himself, to say thank you. Knowing how the prisoners lived in the camp, Zvonko could not fathom how the man had managed to get the tools and the materials to make the holder. He says that on the surface, this little gift may seem like a small and unimportant piece of wood, but it means a lot to him, he still has it and he is proud of the story. Not everyone was in a position to be rewarded for behaving humanely.

Zvonko was not a supporter of the previous regime, but he is not satisfied with the societies we have created since the war either:

Zvonko Lucić

> "Politics is what runs society, or different politics, the way they are formed and launched in society. Our politics have destroyed society, so we no longer have a society that is capable of creating anything … The politicians are insane. What are they thinking? You've got separate schools even today in Vukovar, for Serb children and for Croat children. What are we talking about? Is there a language barrier or something, is that why? It's because of the insanity in the heads of the politicians. Then, when you raise three generations like that, what can you have tomorrow? A society already segrated at that level, living next to each other and not knowing each other, never playing together. They enter the same building from the other side, the same classroom. They made another front door on the other side of the building so they wouldn't even meet in the playground. Are you insane? They say, it's politics. Politics for who? For whose benefit? This is in someone's interest …"

He lives in Glina with his family. And he'd like it if we were able to build a civil society.

In Memory of Novica Kostić

Novica lived in Vlasotince, a small and impoverished town in southern Serbia. He was mobilised in 1991 and sent to the front in Croatia where in an action to rescue a soldier from a burning tank, he himself was severely wounded. He lost his leg and spent months in hospital recovering from serious burns. Novica was given a medal for his bravery, which he never bragged about and which I found out about by accident many years after we met. This was typical Novica, a humble man who never bragged or pushed his way into the foreground.

He was a simple man who won you over with his attentiveness, kind-heartedness and a completely natural concern for other people. Novica was active in the disabled veterans' organisation and our first meeting with him was in 2002, when we were looking for partners for our first actions with war veterans. Novica was quick to accept the idea; he organised a forum in his town despite various pressures and was very happy it had a strong and positive impact in his town and local area. Over the years that followed, he was always ready to get in his car and drive for hours to join an action we had organised; he spoke about the soldiers who were on the other side as his "brothers-in-arms". On these journeys, he would get stopped by the traffic police who hoped to get a bribe out of him, but he would instead spend hours bickering with them, refusing to participate in corruption, even if it meant that he was late to where he was going. In 2004, when we were making the *Traces* documentary, we were sitting on the terrace of his house when we heard someone calling him from the street below. He apologised and explained these were the Roma from the local waste collection company and since he usually invited them in for coffee and refreshments, they had come by to see if he had time for them. That's the kind of man he was.

His health was deteriorating and every few years, he had to have additional surgery on his leg, which kept getting shortened. He had trouble with his prosthetic limb and always apologised when he was unable to do something.

After his appearance in the media following the visit to Srebrenica in 2012, he was threatened, with people calling him in the middle of the night, but he did not give up. In his hometown, he was loved and respected even by people who disagreed with him. He was a pioneer in our work with war veterans; he was fearless and had an innate sense of justice. Whenever he realised he was part of some system of injustice, he would flinch and own up to his responsibility out loud.

Novica Kostić died in late 2020 at the age of 61.

We were immensely lucky to have known him and shared time with him. As a war veteran from Serbia, he was someone we could always rely on and he had the habit of always looking first at his own responsibility and that of his own side. He tirelessly pushed us forward, because if he could carry on fighting despite all the difficulties he faced in life, the rest of us had no excuse to give up. He was consumed by his fight for truth and justice. He did not live long enough to be part of the interviews presented in this book, but he will never be forgotten.

In 2021, the Centre for Nonviolent Action, together with 30 or so war veterans from all sides who came to Vlasotince to attend a commemoration for Novica, submitted a request to Vlasotince Municipality for part of the street where Novica lived to be named after him. The request was also signed by the great majority of his neighbours from the street. At the time of writing, an official decision on the request is still pending.

Nenad Vukosavljević

About the Team Working with War Veterans

Ivana Franović

Amer Delić

Amer was born in Zavidovići, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1973. When the war started, he was studying economics at the University of Sarajevo. Early in April 1992, he managed to get on the last train that was travelling on the Sarajevo-Belgrade line and return home to Zavidovići. He was 19 years old at the time. The rail link was never re-established.

He has this to say about the early days of the war in Zavidovići:

> "It started spontaneously, night watches started being organised in neighbourhoods, there were people coming to take stock of who was there, some hunting rifles suddenly appeared, suddenly we were in danger, they started affixing locks to apartment buildings, bars on the doors, it was completely naive, thinking someone would come to kill us, and then night watches were set up. Everyone over 18 volunteered for this duty, to keep watch for two hours at a time; you had a different shift every day. There wasn't any active fighting in our area, so for the whole of April and almost all through May, we just had these watch duties … And then the lines were set up and they had to be manned. The shelling started, there was gunfire, and I was a bit … I was a bit annoyed, like, why did they cut off our water, our electricity, why the shelling? I volunteered with a local unit, a detachment of some sort, and I started going to the front line."

Everything changed dramatically in June 1993 when the conflict between the Army of BiH and HVO broke out. There was a complete siege, shooting, 2,000 shells were dropped each day, and every day someone was killed: "Just going to the front meant you start from home and the whole way you're being shot at, bullets, artillery, mortars, that's when the war truly started for me … That's when I encountered people who were crippled, killed, carrying the wounded on doors, because there were no more stretchers, people close to me getting killed. Returning home, I would find out that a neighbour had been killed, another wounded … There were snipers, anti-aircraft guns, Malyutkas launched at buildings. A Malyutka could take out two apartments, kill someone's parents, burn someone's car." In one week, out of 35 people in the platoon, there were 23 left.

One time, "around the time of Vozuća, the earth burning up there," Amer didn't come home for 13 days. When he returned, there was no electricity. In the middle of

Amer Delić

the night, he was awakened by rustling sounds. He thought he saw a flashlight. In the morning, he asked his father if it had been him: "He says yes. Well, why? He says: I was going to break your leg or your arm so you wouldn't have to go back to the front line."

During the war, Amer already started making contacts with the "enemy". The man was called Mladen, Mlađo, who was born in Kakanj, but escaped to Brod, where he was mobilised and deployed to the Zavidovići area. Amer describes their first encounter:

> "Nedžad was with me, and we whistled over to ask if he had any cigarettes. He did. Would he share? First of all, I didn't know how to whistle, so I needed Nedžad who knew how to whistle. I went over and we smoked these Blue Ronhills, started talking, completely normally. He's wearing a uniform, with a tricolour, I've got lilies on mine, but we're talking: about his folks, about my folks in Zavidovići, I have parents, they're there, I've got a girlfriend. His father stayed behind in Kakanj, he wanted to get in touch with him, he was planning to get out, to get away from Brod, felt there were no prospects there. That's how we began forming a relationship."

Amer says their encounter got others interested. They started coming in groups. Once, a young lad started talking about the war in terms of: "If we wanted to take you ..." They explained to him right away that this wasn't the time or place for such talk, that he should stick to football and other things. There was a friendly atmosphere; they would say to each other: "This too shall pass, stay safe." Amer describes it like this: "The most normal human conversation, as if we were off camping somewhere, and we were comforting each other."

As these encounters became more frequent and widespread, both sides started carrying out more checks and arresting people; they even laid landmines along the roads where they met. They soon figured out where the landmines were, so they would go around them. Amer says: "You start fearing your own side more than them over there." He also remembers how solidarity developed among them:

> "They said: we can't bring you flour, oil or sugar, we can only bring you cigarettes, that kind of thing, you'll have to get the other stuff yourselves. There was this Braco who said: I'll bring you gum and chocolate bars. Like that was okay, but flour could get him shot. Now, this Braco, when he heard that Hasib had a new

> baby and the baby had no milk, his wife had no milk, he said: I'll bring you some, even if they shoot me ...
>
> In that period, in that normal period during abnormal times, we looked out for each other. They would tell us: they're sending in CSB Doboj, they usually have two snipers, don't raise your heads ... And New Year's 1993-1994 was total mayhem; we switched trenches. So the Serbs came over to us, we went over to the Serbs, celebrated New Year's, we found some generators, played music, it was the craziest thing in the world, and at midnight we all fired shots into the air together."

Amer joined peacebuilding activities with war veterans quite early on. He was at one of the first training events for veterans and he needed no further persuasion. He has been a member of the CNA team since 2012 and today he coordinates activities with veterans.

Nenad Vukosavljević

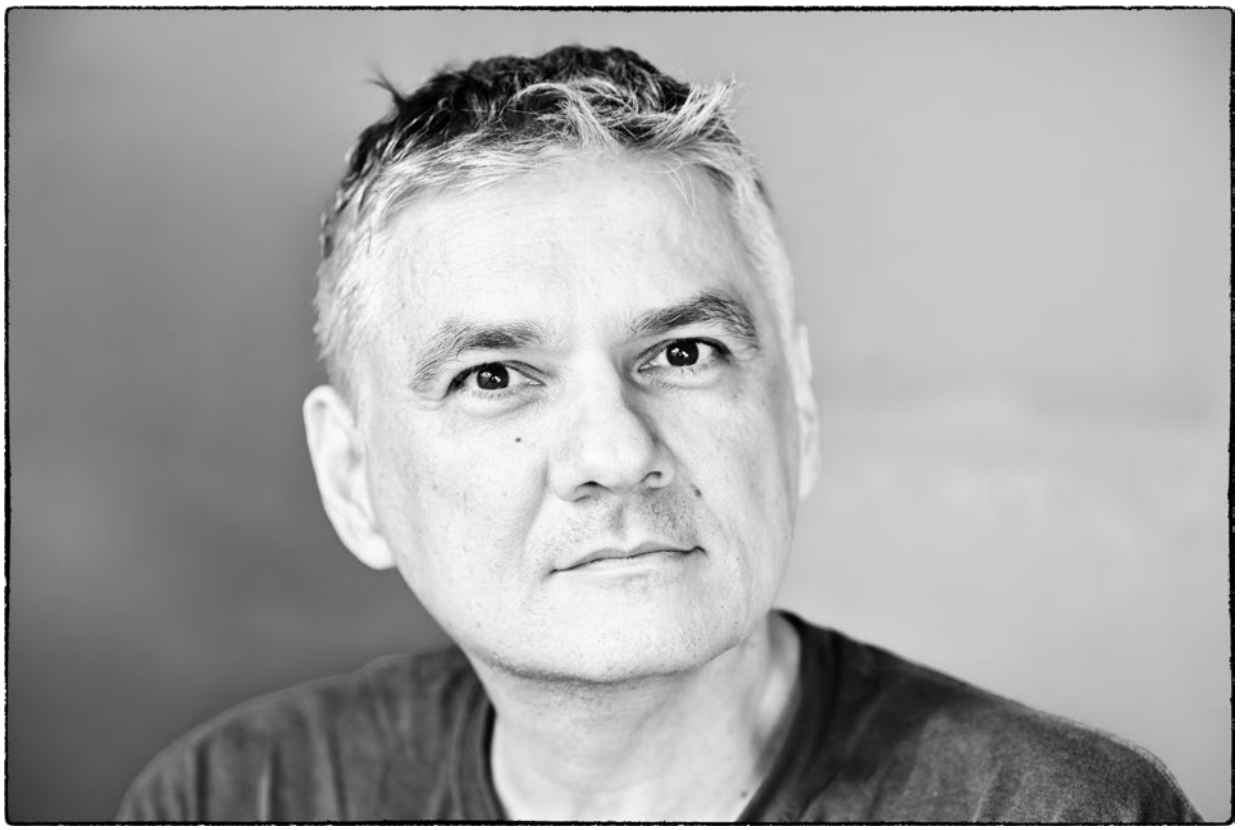
Nenad was born in 1967 in Kragujevac. Before he started school, his family moved to Belgrade. At 19, he refused to do his regular compulsory military service. He says that for him, that was when the war started (1986). He stood up against this lack of freedom and "a machine that literally broke people". He saw the damage done to his closest friends by being in the army against their will. "The aim was for the system to show you that you were nothing, to break you." He was granted temporary reprieve for four years after three weeks of active resistance. He left the country before that time was up.

When the war in the former SFRY broke out, he was living in Germany and trying to find ways to help. He volunteered with human rights organisations providing assistance to refugees. He became aware of the animosity and distrust that had spread among people and wanted to help change that "so that we could be free again". He used the first opportunity, with support from the human rights organisations he had been working with, to return home. Since he couldn't go back to Belgrade under the Milošević regime, he came to Sarajevo and started the Centre for Nonviolent Action in 1997.

He is one of the initiators of cooperation among veterans on peacebuilding. The path was not easy and at first, he often encountered a lack of understanding, maybe even belittling, as well as misgivings at the fact that he was a conscientious objector, a deserter, someone who had refused to take part in the war.

Nenad believes that 99 per cent of people were forced to take part in the war, either by actual force or the force of circumstances that left them no other choice: "Often, they were making a choice they believed was the only socially responsible choice, because they were in a situation to defend their community, defend their country, their city, their family; they were all defending something." And they paid a very high price for it.

At the first peace training he organised, he realised that the group included participants who had gone to war against each other. This continued to be the case at every subsequent training: "The fact that they were there gave a special quality, a certain weight and seriousness to this dialogue between people from feuding, enemy communities, because the situation was catastrophic." He says:



Nenad Vukosavljević

"In these initial encounters, people would timidly mention that they had been in the military, in the war, or they would avoid talking about it, or they would indicate in some way that they didn't want to talk about it. It was difficult for them to speak openly, because they were afraid of hurting someone, or someone hurting them; they just didn't know how to deal with it. It became clear to me that this dialogue was very important and that there was a need for it, because everyone was carrying this burden, but meeting with your enemy was a way to relieve some of it. Even at the training sessions, it became clear that they were seeking each other out, like magnets. Those who had fought each other in the war were drawn to each other ... And together, we were looking for ways to make the value of that encounter and that initiated dialogue public, to amplify its effect on our societies ..."

When asked about the cooperation between war veterans and peace activists, Nenad says that they have become so intertwined that there is no longer a discernible difference. What happened in that process is that the veterans started introducing themselves as members of CNA and peace activists. But it didn't always run smoothly.

"The image of non-governmental organisations in our societies was that they were leeches, parasites, foreign agents, so people were wary to begin with, distrustful of us until they got to know us better. Apparently, they figured out what we were like quite quickly and we overcame these obstacles in trust-building. An important role was played by the fact that our team included people with combat experience, that war veterans were part of the team, because after the initial distrust at the enemy being there, it was easier to accept someone who was also a veteran than someone who was just a human rights or peace activist. There was also more suspicion of someone calling themselves an activist than of someone who used to shoot at you.

The whole task of peacebuilding involves precisely this type of work, dealing with distrust, building bridges. The progress we see was not linear, there were ups and downs, backtracking, but that is also part of the work. There were disappointments, unmet expectations, plans that fell through, but when I sum it all up, there was tremendous progress from what we started with to where we are today, and the things we managed to achieve are almost incredible. They are things we had dreamed of."

In working with veterans, he finds it hard that he can't do more to help in some respects. These people live difficult lives, hardship everywhere, many of them live in poverty, they are not getting adequate treatment and they have wartime injuries that will remain throughout their lives.

Nenad says that working on peacebuilding with war veterans is not something you can do on your own:

> "It can only be done in a team, only in a group. And I'm not sure if I can use such absolute terms, but I would say: only in a team that includes people from different sides, from enemy communities. I would not say that we in the team are enemies, far from it, but people see us as a mixed group and the common way of thinking after the war was trying to recognise: are you a danger to me? In order to find out whether you are a danger to me, I have to find out who you are, what group you belong to; are you one of ours or one of theirs? That is a very common way of thinking. What we have here is that we're both ours and theirs. This is a rarity and I think it is exactly what is needed. It also takes patience and various skills, it takes a lot of things, but to start with, that we're both ours and theirs. Not a third party, not neutral, no, no. We're not neutral. We're not objective. Because people accept us as their own. And when you manage that, when you manage that with people from different sides, then they understand that you serve as a bridge. And then they can also understand that they don't really need a bridge, they can go directly to each other. But the first time they cross over you – you're the bridge. And you serve as an example of what is possible. You know, people say reconciliation is impossible, it'll never happen. What is impossible? An end to hatred? It's not impossible. Look at us here: we have different opinions about some things, of course we do. And? We still don't hate each other."

He claims that peace, reconciliation and an end to hatred are real needs. And that they are within reach.

Nedžad Novalić

Nedžad was borni in 1988 in Pojske, a village between Zenica and Travnik.

He was four years old when the war started. His first memory of the war was when his uncle was killed on 1 May 1992, when there were still no combat operations in Central Bosnia. His uncle was a police officer and was killed in a clash between the police and units of the JNA and VRS. This incident profoundly affected Nedžad's family.

Their family home was at the very edge of the village, off towards the Croat village some 300 metres away. When the conflict between the Army and HVO broke out, this was where the troops were stationed and trenches were dug. He started school near the end of the war, when he was already eight years old:

> "I remember the first day of school when my dad came to take me, because half the building was for the army and half for us schoolkids. So he was going to the barracks and I was going to school. I remember I walked half the way and he carried me the other half, a rifle on one shoulder and me on the other, and then he left me there in first grade. There was maybe 45 of us in the classroom, because there were so many refugees, and the school couldn't fit all of us in … Today, I joke that it's the best illustration of school – someone taking you there with a gun."

Nedžad is a historian by training. He worked in the media sector for several years and joined the CNA team in 2017.

He believes his father's generation was dealt a great injustice; these ordinary people didn't go to war, but the war came for them. This was also what motivated him to start working with war veterans. He says that in the beginning, he felt nervous and apprehensive about how he would be received, because he was quite a lot younger and some of them were of his father's generation, and he didn't have any combat experience from the war. But as it turned out, he was welcomed with open arms, so he felt like he was one of the war veterans himself. He points out that the presence and involvement of Adnan, who is a war veteran, in the team planning and implementing activities meant a lot to him, and that it helped to have Amer there as well.

Nedžad also points out that not all anti-war activists are also peace activists. He says that people generally don't want to see the war repeated for themselves

Nedžad Novalić

or their children, or anyone, but they don't see the disconnect between this and simultaneously supporting some form of discrimination in society – against LGBT persons, against a particular community, migrants, or someone else who is seen as "other". The same is true of war veterans. He says that some of them did not take a step further, whether because of circumstances, their life path or their beliefs. He explains that the difference between anti-war activism and peace activism is whether you are working solely against war or for a more just society free of discrimination, where we will have solidarity and empathy with others. He adds: "And in that group, in our group of war veterans, I really see that it also includes peace activists. I can say that there is a bond, a strong bond between those of us who are just peace activists and not war veterans, and the people who are war veterans."

War veterans are one of the major sources of motivation for Nedžad to continue working on peacebuilding. Although he has felt the burden of having to explain himself and why he does what he does, and this is particularly hard when you have to justify yourself to people you are close to, he has this to say about the group of war veterans:

> "When you see people willing to carry a heavy burden that they don't have to carry … You see this guy, a Bosniak, a veteran of the Army, coming to Trusina, to pay his respects to the victims, and he talks to someone who has lost two or three members of their family, and he is from 100 kilometres away, and he was in the war 100 kilometres away, so he had absolutely nothing to do with that crime, nor did he ever justify it in any way. But he still shows up, he's there on behalf of that community in a sense, and he carries that burden. Or when someone from VRS or VJ comes to Mostar, to Uborak … It's enough to have a man just stand there and tell you: members of VRS killed my mother, father and sister, and I was 12 years old and I survived. And you say: my name is so-and-so and I am a veteran of VRS. I think that is a huge burden; really, when I see things like that, then I say, okay, whatever I do, it can't even compare. Because what is it that you could do to carry the kind of burden he carries?"

He says that the most important thing for working with war veterans is patience: you have to have the patience to go to multiple meetings with the same people in veterans' organisations to try to win them over, and you need patience and tact when their offices display photos of war criminals or signs that glorify war crimes or criminals. He believes this kind of work cannot be short-term, but has to be very much

process-oriented and if you start it, you have to count on it lasting at least ten years before any results become visible. Nedžad also emphasises that this is about working not just with war veterans, but also with associations of victims, families of fallen fighters and killed civilians, local authorities, religious communities: "For example, to organise the attendance of a mixed group of war veterans at a commemoration, you have to meet multiple times with representatives of the victims' association, you have to build a relationship with them, build trust, and you have to do the same thing with representatives of religious communities, local political leaders, mayors, etc. So you are working with war veterans, but you are also working with everyone else."

He hopes people will start coming out of their small environments into bigger spaces and moving freely, even to areas they may view as enemy territory: "You might experience some unpleasantness, as you might in your hometown, but in most cases, people will help you. I wish people could see this. I wish more people could see this." He hopes people will stay and that his children will also stay in the country instead of moving abroad.

Radomir Radević

Radomir was born in 1978 in Podgorica. At the time the war broke out, he was moving up from elementary to secondary school. He was 14 or 15 years and says he was completely immature, adding by way of self-criticism:

> "I was completely steeped in this national myth about the suffering of the Serb people, the need to fight, the necessity of war in order to reach truth and justice. So, as a boy, I did some stupid things, burned the flag of Hajduk football club that I used to support and things like that. I took part in this mass hysteria that was being created against Croats in Montenegro. Until I gradually transformed my thinking and understood it was all completely absurd and there was no rational argument either then or now for such behaviour, it is simply unacceptable."

After his personal transformation, he devoted himself to youth activism and peacebuilding. After attending a Training for Trainers organised by CNA and having learned about the initiative of working with war veterans, he summoned the courage to be the co-organiser of the "Four Views" forums in Montenegro, in Podgorica and Bijelo Polje, in 2003. He says he felt admiration and respect for the people who had the courage to come to a place seen as belonging to the enemy and to speak publicly about the war and against war, because in those days, it was not at all easy to voice anti-war sentiments.

Comparing working on peacebuilding with war veterans and working with other groups, he concludes that working with war veterans requires a lot more time, that efforts have to be made over several years and that building mutual trust and never betraying it is essential. He believes patience is of the essence, and when a new group of war veterans initially turns down cooperation, this should not be viewed as failure, but as the start of a process that will depend on patience and perseverance. He says we should keep in mind that pressures on war veterans are much greater than on other social groups. He also points out that the work is very demanding and can be emotionally draining, but that it is also rewarding:

> "I get tremendous strength. I think these are very, very strong people, all of them, to do what they do, the way they do it, it's really awe-inspiring. These are people who have gone through so much, lost loved ones, lost limbs, lost their youth, their future, they have every reason to hate, and yet they don't. Instead,

Radomir Radević

they are open to love, cooperation, beauty, and that is truly wonderful. I've often thought about whether I would be able to do the same, if I'd been through everything they'd been through. Would I be prepared to sit with someone from the other side, look him in the eye, let alone become friends? Which is what most of them do ... This work is so important for the local community! It is so important that someone with the credibility of a warrior, a victim, a martyr, shows up and honours those on the other side. And it is also important for the culture of memory in this region in general, to show a different model, that it can be done differently, that maybe it's better this way and leads to better results. It takes courage on their part, because they are the ones going out on a limb; they suffer the consequences in their local communities, they deal with them."

He believes that by taking part in peace activities, war veterans help deconstruct images of the enemy. They also help raise awareness about how culture of memory can and must be different, and they achieve a personal transformation. Radomir adds: "What I often say is that national identity is morally irrelevant. That is being achieved."

About his motivation to engage in peacebuilding and work with war veterans, he has this to say:

"More and more often, we hear about how war is the natural state of human society, a natural human need, how it has to happen here every 50 years or so. No, I think that's wrong, it's incorrect, peace and goodness are human needs, and that's my motivation. I want to do this and I want it to become truly mainstream. War is not the natural state of things. I won't accept that."

Nedžad Horozović

Nedžad was born in 1972 in Doboj.

At the start of the war, Nedžad was doing his regular military service. He was 19 years old at the time. Even though he was given live ammunition, he could not accept that it was a real war; he believed it would all be over quickly.

He had to face the war when he returned from military service, when it flared up in Bosnia and Herzegovina. First, he left his studies in Sarajevo to return to his hometown of Doboj, and then with his sister, he went to Sombor. They had planned to stay in Vojvodina for 15 days. They ended up staying much longer.

Nedžad recounts:

> "My main memory is about being on the "wrong" side, so to speak. One of my most vivid memories is of being interrogated at the border by one of the border guards. During that interview, which went on for 45 minutes or an hour, he didn't lay a finger on me, but I felt like I had been ground to a pulp by the interrogation. I felt vulnerable. I didn't know what would happen; anything was possible. They could have beaten me up and put me in custody just as soon as let me go. At the end, they let me go. That's when I realised there are simply people who hate and are prepared to be violent to someone simply because of his name."

He enrolled at the university in Subotica and lived in the student dorm, which was full of refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina:

> "It was the cheapest, simplest way to live: you enrol at university, you get a place in the dorm, you get a meal card and you can live on 10-15 marks a month. I was the only one with a name that sounded 'other', a 'wrong' name. But I never felt I didn't belong, I never felt fear or anything, I was accepted. Even when the talk turned to war, I had the impression people were always careful about what they would say in front of me."

After the war, he couldn't return to his home in Doboj, so he spent some time in Zavidovići where he worked as a teacher in a primary school. He joined CNA in 2001.

He says that working with war veterans seemed arduous and difficult at first, but he also thinks this is precisely the process he'd like to see in society: "You can say: that's how I want the process to be for everything after the war, this is what I want to

see happen after the war, that from these positions that they start from, from being enemies, opposed or exclusive, I want to see them find ways to listen to each other, to understand and to talk. And, of course, they won't agree, but they will find a way to make a connection and create trust."

Nedžad would like to live in a society where people foster hope that it can be better, where they are convinced that it can be better. He still believes and hopes it can.

In addition to the core team working with war veterans, who are introduced in the previous section, several other members of the Centre for Nonviolent Action are involved in organising activities with ex-combatants. They include **Davorka Turk**, **Ivana Franović**, **Katarina Milićević**, **Tamara Zrnović** and **Helena Rill**. **Adnan Hasanbegović** (former team member) also made important contributions to coordinating these activities.

Nedžad Horozović

Abbreviations and Glossary

ARBiH: Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine / Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Army of RBiH) – official army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established by the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995).

BiH: Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the proclamation of independence from Yugoslavia in March 1992, the country's official name was the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but following the 1995 Dayton Agreement and the new constitution that accompanied it, the official name was changed to Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the Dayton Agreement, the state of BiH consists of two political entities with their own parliaments and governments: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly inhabited by a Bosniak and Bosnian Croat population, and Republika Srpska, mainly inhabited by a Bosnian Serb population. Besides these two entities, there is a self-governing administrative unit, Brčko District.

BORS: Boračka organizacija Republike Srpske / Veterans' Organisation of Republika Srpska.

FBiH: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – one of the entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

HDZ: Hrvatska demokratska zajednica / Croatian Democratic Union – a political party in Croatia founded in 1989. Its first leader was Franjo Tuđman. In 1990, a party branch was founded in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

HVIDRA: Hrvatski vojni invalidi Domovinskog rata / Croatian Disabled Homeland War Veterans' Association – Associations in Croatia and BiH.

HV: Hrvatska vojska / Croatian Army (Croatian Armed Forces) – official army of the Republic of Croatia, established in 1991.

HVO: Hrvatsko vijeće obrane / Croatian Defence Council – the military forces of the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995.

IZ: Islamska zajednica / Islamic Community – religious organisation of Muslims in BiH and the highest representative body of Muslims in the region.

JNA: Jugoslovenska narodna armija / Yugoslav National Army – official army of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992).

PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder.

RH: Republika Hrvatska / Republic of Croatia.

RKC: Rimokatolička crkva / Roman Catholic Church.

RS: Republika Srpska – one of the entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

SDA: Stranka demokratske akcije / Party of Democratic Action – a Bosniak political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, founded in 1990. Its first leader was Alija Izetbegović.

SDS: Srpska demokratska stranka / Serb Democratic Party – a Serb political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, founded in 1990. Its first leader was Radovan Karadžić.

SPC: Srpska pravoslavna crkva / Serbian Orthodox Church – one of the autocephalous (ecclesiastically independent) Eastern Orthodox churches. It is located in all post-Yugoslav countries and has congregrations in countries with a Serb diaspora. The head of the Church, the patriarch, is based in Belgrade, Serbia.

UNPROFOR: United Nations Protection Force – the first United Nations peacekeeping force in Croatia and BiH (1992-1995).

VRS: Vojska Republike Srpske / Army of Republika Srpska – the military forces of the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995).

Authors and Editors

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Davorka Turk is a peace activist. Born in Yugoslavia (Serbia), she was raised in Croatia and now lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is a sociologist by profession. She spent 20 years (including the war) producing news programme for Croatian public television. She has been working in the field of peacebuilding in former Yugoslavia from CNA's Sarajevo office since 2012, with an emphasis on peace education programmes, dealing with the past, documentary production and publishing.

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Martina Fischer is a political scientist and peace researcher based in Berlin (Germany). She has published extensively on peacebuilding and conflict transformation in post-war societies, with a special focus on the role of civil society. From 1998-2016, she worked at the Berghof Foundation (Berlin) as a senior researcher, Deputy and Acting Director of the Research Center, Head of the Southeast Europe programme, and co-editor of the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. She has worked for Brot für die Welt (Development Service of the Protestant Church) in Berlin since 2016. She has provided support for various CNA activities since 1997.

Nedžad Novalić was born in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1988. He is a historian with an interest in ethnic identity, historical narratives and historical myths and has worked as a journalist and editor for various media. Since 2012, he has been committed to peacebuilding work in the region of former Yugoslavia. He became a team member at the Centre for Nonviolent Action in 2017.

Nenad Vukosavljević is a peace activist and conscientious objector. He has conducted cross-regional training courses in conflict transformation since 1997, when he founded the Centre for Nonviolent Action in Sarajevo. In 2002, he returned to his hometown Belgrade, Serbia, after a long exile. In the CNA team, he makes an invaluable contribution to the peacebuilding programme for war veterans/former enemies, education and exchange programmes, writing and photography.