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Balkan PERSPECTIVES

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EDIT- ORIAL



- Pristina/ Kosovo in
- May of 2015

Dear readers,

The prince on the white horse, the silent dark knight fighting evil, the strong and tall demigod from ancient myths – stories about heroes have always been told. They offer comfort and make us believe in the victory of good over evil. In times of conflict and war, these images are harder to keep apart. One's hero will be the other's strongest enemy. Who decides then who is the good guy and who the bad?

We are strongly influenced by the narratives of our societies and who we regard as heroes is a result of these subjective stories. In this issue of *Balkan.Perspectives* we question the stereotypical image of war heroes and start the search for alternative heroes - alternative heroes who have rarely been considered as being heroic, who have even been insulted as traitors and spies. Their heroism consists of resisting predominant discourses of hatred and xenophobia and in showing civil courage in moments when everyone else decided to turn their heads and look the other way. Thus, any one of us can become a hero through a heroic act. By not turning our heads. By standing up for the ones in need.

Most of the time heroism is a momentary quality. No person acts like a hero in every situation. In one moment a person can act heroically and altruistically but cowardly and selfishly in the next. The narratives of the faultless heroes are created only in the aftermath of their deeds, their stories are told over and over again and become static and rarely questioned.

In order to break this pattern, our search for these narratives and for alternative heroes in this second issue of *Balkan.Perspectives* starts with an attempt to get to the bottom of the notion of heroism, particularly to the definition of this term in the Balkans. In the lead article, Biljana Vankovska states that there is a need for heroes and virtue. However, she also criticizes that “true heroes” are not recognized by society which still mainly follow former war leaders.

We gathered a lot of stories about individuals who decided to put themselves on the line in order to fight violence, hatred and war. The story of Đorđe and Salih from Bosnia shows that friendship can overcome boundaries created through ethnicity, nationality or politics. We also dedicate some space to the question of how certain heroes are commemorated and how their importance changes over time. Former national heroes are sometimes forgotten nowadays.

In an interview, Gordan Kičić and Nikola Pejaković speak about their movie “Ustanička ulica”, which tells the story of the search for a war criminal and former hero in Serbia, and explain how they relate the notion of heroism to this topic.

The stories about alternative heroes send a positive message of human kindness and compassion. With this issue, we want to shed new light on their commemoration and collect interesting insights into topics that are related to the process of dealing with the past. I hope you enjoy and benefit from the reading of the second issue of *Balkan.Perspectives*.

Sincerely,
• Maike Dafeld / Editor in chief

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Heroism is putting yourself second.

Mirza, 20

Today, heroism means doing the right thing, irrespective of whether 'the right thing' is not seen as such by the people surrounding us. Heroes do not beat their wives. Heroes do not beat members of the LGBT community. Heroes do not laugh at women wearing a scarf, hijab or burka. Heroes in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina are those who believe in and help build a civil state in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mladen, 26

A hero is anyone who risks losing something of their own for a higher cause. Heroism means selflessness!

Nataša, 24

Kosovo

One doesn't always need to rescue a princess from a dragon to be a hero. Anyone who motivates you and pushes you towards making your dreams come true or achieving your life goals, is a hero. Heroism is when you do this for others.

Avdyl G., 21

I would say, a hero is a person who steps out of their comfort zone and tells the truth about what he or she believes in, even when they don't have the approval or support of others. A hero chooses what he/she believes in and doesn't just blindly follow what's easy or set by others. A hero is a person who is not afraid of ending up alone. He/she chooses 'right' instead of 'easy'.

Besnik L., 30

In Kosovo, a hero for me is anyone who, either through their personal effort or their position in power, adds value to the lives of the people who surround them. A person who, surrounded by smog of crime and corruption, speaks up and fights for the voice of the many.

Gent F., 22

What is a "hero" for you?

Serbia

A hero is someone who is consciously or unconsciously willing to risk his or her own life in order to save someone else's. Either in a planned activity or as a spontaneous response to a new, instantaneous situation. Being a hero also means facing problems that surround us on a daily basis. Maybe it will sound like a cliché, but heroism lies in every one of us and is just waiting for the right moment to wake up.

Andrija Jović, 25

In my opinion, a hero is a person that puts the interests of other people above their own, often in spite of living conditions and doing so without the need for personal emphasis or being acknowledged for what they did. It is a person willing to sacrifice their well-being for the well-being of others. Such heroes are important, especially today when many people are focused on material values instead of spiritual ones, when greed and envy are pronounced, when people are afraid of one another. Such people give me hope that this civilization of ours can nevertheless survive.

Mirjana Pantić, 53

Macedonia

For me a hero is a person I admire for their deeds.

Elena I., 43

A hero is a person that knows how to approach particular situations and have a genuine impact on society.

Rametulla A., 39

A hero is a man who despite all his suffering and sadness did not say a word. Yet through his eyes full of grief, he told me so much and even tried to make me smile.

Goran S., 40

HEROES OF OUR TIME

With the unhealed wounds from the wars and conflicts in the period of 1991-2001 and with strong indicators for the weakness of the countries in the Western Balkans, the need for heroes and virtue is more than evident in the region. But who are the heroes of our (post-conflict) time? Do their heroism and virtue go hand in hand?

One famous retort from “Brave New World” by Aldous Huxley says: “My dear young friend, ... civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic.” Even though the novel describes a dystopia, such a situation should be the last thing that citizens of the countries of former Yugoslavia should fear. With the unhealed wounds from the wars and conflicts in the period of 1991-2001 and with strong indicators for the weakness of the countries in the Western Balkans, the need for heroes and virtue is more than evident in the region. But who are the heroes of our (post-conflict) time? Do their heroism and virtue go hand in hand?

The truth is sad: our days resemble the ones Vladislav Peković Dis sang of back in 1910 and for which Dubravka Ugrešić says: “values have changed the omen overnight: murderers became heroes, common thieves became business people, and the semi-literate teachers - ministers of culture”.

Every person, dealing with peace and conflicts, and especially with reconciliation and forgiveness, because of human or professional reasons, will notice that there is an inflation of “heroes” in all these countries. At first, there were the heroic figures in the new historical textbooks, rehabilitated war and political criminals of some former “glorious times”. Afterwards, nouveau generals arrived, colonels and volunteers, and guardsmen, followed by people who at times desired, and at other times believed, that they have to answer the call of their country, or the nation. The armed conflicts ended and many of these people became part of the establishment, with the exception of those who served their time, hence they were put at the margins of the society, same as we through the unnecessary waste. Paradoxically, as time goes by (bringing oblivion or new generations that learn from new textbooks), and just as the imprisonment of convicts in The Hague ends, the number of living “heroes” of today is increasing at the same time. The latter is actually the most evident indication that the ideologies leading to the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia are not defeated, despite the heavy casualties. From Croatia to Macedonia, from Serbia to Kosovo, as a rule, the accused in front of the tribunal in The Hague were portrayed as victims and heroes at first and after the trial, despite the fact that they were found guilty, when they returned home, they were welcomed as knights and martyrs. Honestly, behind the extensive and pompous welcoming on the main squares, there was always a strong logistic of political parties. These people did not really

get real freedom: neither did they repent nor did they ask for forgiveness from their victims, nor were they liberated from their political owners (some of who covered their trial expenses). Now they are activated when there is a need, standing next to their political leader when he or she needs a patriotic aura. Each of the former Yugoslav republics has such “heroes”, who still have the potential to pitch and provoke emotions in the defenders, or in the wider audience. Although in reality their power to provoke emotions is not that strong, they are immune to public criticism, even for their own deeds in the context of their actual role in the wars.

The heroes (no quotation marks), the real ones, are either not written about or forgotten, or they have given up on everything long ago and have withdrawn into solitude. In those times, bad times, when many decided to take an (ethnic) side or a weapon to boast, to innocent civilians those heroes were “cowards”. They either deserted or stood in defense of their neighbors (like Srđan Aleksić), or they were peace activists. In a time of general hatred and fire, those people showed that the most heroic act is caring for the other, the weaker, and the different. Unlike the “heroes” (in quotation marks), they usually remain nameless. They have no uniform, national symbol or medal. Their suffering and the risks they have taken await some Balkan Howard Zinn to write a history with the stories of these “ordinary people”, who were in fact the promoters of important and endangered values such as empathy, compassion, understanding, and devotion.

The concept behind the idea of a hero, who is presented as a man of a special type, with extraordinary capabilities, is utterly inegalitarian. That idea is acceptable for those who have a need for a savior or who hide their own small or big sins and misdeeds behind this “heroic” name. Besides the people that are called “heroes”, for whom new pages are written in history textbooks, there is also a suitable scenography, manifested in numerous monuments and memorials to the heroes of the recent wars. These memorials and monuments do not only eternalize the memories of the wars, but they are also the “markers” of “our” territory, as opposed to the one of the enemy. The poet Branko Miljković said that if people knew their leaders better, surely the public squares would remain without monuments. It is already too late for the heroes of the past, but the question is if people have the strength and the will to recognize the real heroes, many of whom live quietly nearby. Chances are slim, but this is the only way we can learn something about the heroes of peace versus the heroes of war.

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Biljana Vankovska is a university professor and an experienced civil society activist and expert on dealing with the past. She was one of the first public promoters of RECOM in Macedonia (2011-2014).



MORAL COURAGE: *the* PATH TOWARDS **PEACE BUILDING**



“Ordinary Heroes”, a project from the Post-Conflict Research Centre (PCRC), is a multi-media peacebuilding project that incorporates stories about rescue and moral courage. Its aim is to promote reconciliation and inter-ethnic cooperation among divided citizens and young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This project was inspired by stories of individuals who refused to allow their ethnic, religious or national identity to dictate their behavior during a period in which mass crimes were committed. They risked their own lives to protect others from collective violence, disunifying propaganda and extreme threats. The PCRC consolidates lessons learned from these stories and uses them as a tool and inspiration for overcoming existing stereotypes and prejudices in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ordinary heroes come from all spheres of life but all of them possess moral courage. Moral courage means doing what is right, irrespective of the consequences. The ordinary heroes of this project all consciously decided to help someone else, often without knowing the religion or ethnic group that these people belonged to. All of the ‘heroes’ that were involved in the project do not describe their deeds as special, or consider them as such. They frequently ask: “What else could I have done?”

Telling stories (and the process of disseminating these personal stories) that feature examples of self-sacrifice for “the others” promotes the human ability to identify with “the others” as well as helping to overcome negative perceptions, views and behavior towards members of other groups. By focusing on these frequently overlooked stories from the past, the project propagates an alternative and more complex interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one that does not consider ethnic divisions as a natural state of existence. Sharing personal

stories encourages empathy whilst simultaneously destroying the conviction of an exclusive right to suffering. Listening to the stories of others reduces the usual conviction that one’s own group is the only victim. Inter-group contact is a powerful tool for overcoming a dehumanized perception of others. This type of interaction can help build new relations and create new networks that overcome ethnic divisions that currently exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The data from the initial research on ‘moral examples in the process of reconciliation’ show that trust in reconciliation among young people increased after they had heard stories about heroic helpers in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Zoran, a young man from Metko vići says: “This is the best example of how, in such terrible situations, a person can remain a good person and can follow internal instincts that do not allow any religion, ideology or ethnic difference to change who you are.”

By using the examples of ordinary people that contributed to peace, the project has discovered that reconciliation is possible. In addition to this, by promoting the work of such people, the project builds their capacities to create positive changes in the civil society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The PCRC believes that by sharing stories such as these it will encourage ordinary people to act positively and to further eliminate barriers of ethnic division in local communities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Ms. Leslie P. Woodward

is Project Director at the Post-Conflict Research Centre (PCRC), an organisation she co-founded. Her previous experiences include working at the Centre for Sustainable Development and International Peace (SDIP) on the development of a peace and state strategy for Somalia and holding the position of research manager at the Leadership Institute of New Sudan (LIONS).

THE NOTION OF HEROISM IN CINEMATOGRAPHY IN SERBIA TODAY

The notion of heroism is one that is quite important in Serbia as well as in the rest of the Balkans and is thus a theme that frequently arises in the cinema of the region. In an interview for Balkan.Perspectives, Gordan Kičić, a well-known Serbian actor and producer, and Nikola Pejaković, an actor, screenwriter and musician, talk about the notion of heroism in their movie "Ustanička ulica" (Redemption Street) and in Serbia more generally.

What is in your opinion the meaning of the term 'hero'?

Pejaković: A hero is anyone who lives contrary to the distorted rules and customs of these times. Every man of God is in a way a hero if – he/she does not lie, steal, kill, cheat, is not an adulterer, is not mean, is not an egoist; if he/she thinks that he/she is an average, ordinary person, worse than others, and if he/she loves even his/her enemies. That is a hero. Find someone like that, if you can.

Mr. Kičić, how did it happen that you started working on these issues (a War Crimes Prosecutor's Office), since this is not really a popular topic.

Kičić: No, unfortunately it is not. A war crimetribunal is not a popular topic anywhere, since it prosecutes, amongst others, 'its own people'. I was interested in this topic when these people, these prosecutors (Vladimir Vukčević and Bruno Vekarić), appeared for the first time in the media and became quite present. There were quite negative emotions regarding them. I was very interested in learning about how they work, what kind of cases they deal with.

I have the feeling that the main heroes of the movie, the prosecutor Dušan Ilić and the criminal Sredoje Govoruša, are tragic heroes.

Kičić: Yes, that is right. They are connected in this way. All of the characters in the story are tragic. The fate of these people that participated in the war, either directly or indirectly, is tragic. Their families are destroyed, their lives are destroyed, all of them are thus tragic characters. The prosecutors dealing with this live that past, this tragedy that obviously happened, and their lives are very fucked up. These people are slaves to their work, and the approach they have to their job is heroic. In the movie we tell these small human stories, such as the fact that the prosecutor has a job and a family and the criminal

also has a job and a family. Both of their wives are pregnant, and based on this it is visible that they, just as all of us, have their daily problems, that they suffer, etc.

Pejaković: They are drama characters, people that are in conflict with themselves and their environment. They are not heroes, since heroism is not a reaction to a problem because everyone reacts when they feel itchy. Heroism, if it even exists, is changing yourself, changing your bad characteristics, turning an egocentric individuality into a new personality, collected, modest and calm, without any personal problems and misfortune that forces you to do this. I do not believe in revolution. We have so many hysterical revolutionaries - the righteous, who criticize everyone but themselves - that we could export them. And there are few calm and able Serbs. I mention Serbs, because the characters from Ustanička are Serbs.

Are such people, veterans, irrespective of what they have done, heroes, because they have to live with these terrible memories every day until the end of their lives?

Pejaković: They are not heroes. They just have the opportunity to undergo catharsis through suffering. To understand and to make others understand, to send a warning to the generations to come as well as the people around them. Because everyone has their opinion of the war in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. And I do, as well. In spite of that opinion, the war has brought death, pain, despair, depression and hopelessness. Hate has grown and has always been present. And now we live with this; someone is destroyed, and someone is recovering. People that were in the first trenches, except for executioners and criminals, do understand each other well, irrespective of the side they fought for. War is terrible, and those



of us that have not felt it in the most direct way do not have the right to talk about it, because we do not understand. We cannot understand what kind of trauma that exactly is. The war trauma is known only to those that have experienced it and have been fighting it.

A significant part of the identity of the Yugoslav people or Yugoslav state were heroes from WWII. What is your perception of these heroes today, such as Tito?

Pejaković: I think that they are unimportant. They are certainly not heroes. Communism is a small-time fraud that has cost us a lot. And Yugoslav unity was an illusion. I am sorry for our people that followed these traders in evil.

Other personalities from that period, such as Dragoljub Mihajlović, had not been considered heroes in Yugoslavia at all, but rather criminals. However, Mihajlović is now a hero to many people. How did this change of public opinion occur?

Pejaković: They tried to hide the truth and now it is coming out. Of course, again distorted, idealized, tampered, processed... People are looking for the truth in the wrong places. Nothing is just black or white. And history, official history, is full of fraud and lies, that is at least visible and clear today, given the Internet and TV. It is easy to recognize spin and false news, facts that are not facts and official judgments that are made under political pressure. Now, if this is clear to us today, I do not see which intelligent person might guarantee that this has not happened before.

Several days ago a survey appeared, the results of which show that more than 50% of Serbs still consider Ratko Mladić, for example, a hero. Is a trial necessary in order to change this opinion among persons?

Kičić: No, I think that this is an endemic problem, because people do not know the truth, they don't know what was really going on, and we, just as any other people, have this problem. My idea was not to change people's opinions, which is hard to achieve anyway. My idea was to present these characters the way they are, because all of them are fucked up, the lives of all of them are destroyed, and my only question is 'why?'. Why has all of this happened, if we as a people in the former Yugoslavia had lived together for 50 years? When that state fell apart, we all had an identity crisis. That is, in general, a very unlucky thing. It is not easy for anyone, in all countries of the former Yugoslavia.

And who is responsible for everything that has happened?

Kičić: Well, certainly the people cannot be blamed. No, the responsibility is individual. People that held positions back then are responsible. In addition to this, facing the past is a very complex and painful process, because nobody knows what truly happened back then. You see, facing the past after WWII in Germany was understood as a social responsibility. That was the opinion of the German Government. This has not happened here and it is not the opinion of the state, and this was also not the case in Yugoslavia. Unfortunately.

The political thriller "Ustanička ulica" depicts the young and ambitious war crimes prosecutor Dušan Ilić in his struggle to find the last living member of a paramilitary unit from the Yugoslav wars and bring him to justice. As he closes in on the suspect, Ilić realizes that he himself is part of a conspiracy and that it is really the structures of an old and corrupted system he is fighting against, eventually at his personal expense.



Nikola Pejaković



Gordan Kičić



The interviews were done with **Mr. Pejaković** and **Mr. Kičić** separately. The interviews were conducted by **Johannes Rueger**.

A STORY ABOUT ĐORĐE AND SALIH

In Bijeljina two people decided not to spread hatred but to overcome ethnocentric barriers. A process which culminated when Đorđe helped Salih to get released from a concentration camp.



Photos by **Mirko Pincelli**

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Tatjana Milovanović is a Project Manager and Trainee Coordinator at the Post-Conflict Research Centre (PCRC). She graduated from a secondary medical school and is currently studying law at the University of East Sarajevo. She started volunteering at several youth organizations in her hometown when she was 13 years old and since 2010 has been regularly participating in different community development projects. She is one of the main characters featured in the documentary "Memories 677", which was made by the PCRC.

On April 1, 1992, Serb paramilitary forces entered Bijeljina and violently overthrew and replaced the government. From June of the same year until the end of the occupation most prisoners were held at the infamous nearby concentration camp "Batković", where it is estimated that around 4,000 civilians of Bosniak and Croatian ethnicity were held.

Salih Hamzić (58) spent most of his life in Bijeljina and was one of the prisoners held at "Batković" in 1995. He remembers that soldiers apprehended him one morning and, without asking too many questions, took him to the concentration camp, where he was held for 45 days.

Those who remember Bijeljina during the times in the former Yugoslavia call it "Bosnia in miniature". "We had a good relationship with all our Muslim neighbors since this was a "mixed" area. We did not think at all about someone's ethnicity and religion", says Đorđe Krstić as he recalls his life before 1992 in Bijeljina. Đorđe also remembers the beginning of April 1992 as a period in which a large number of the non-Serbian population was terrorized and forcibly expelled from the municipality of Bijeljina.

The moment that Salih will always remember, more than all of the other 45 days spent at the concentration camp, is when one of the soldiers approached him and told him that he would be released. "When I got out, I saw my sister and Đorđe Krstić at the reception desk. I cannot describe that moment, it was as if something broke in me, as if I had been reborn. I started crying because of the happiness I felt", says Salih.

"Some imprisoned people, others released them. That is why I say that not all people are the same and that is why we should not judge others based on their religion and ethnicity, but rather based on whether they do good or evil. Without thinking too much about what he was doing and what consequences he might suffer as a result of his actions, Đorđe Krstić reacted as he had been taught by his parents from his earliest childhood, namely to help a person in trouble."

A shared message that these two men, inseparable friends today, would like to send to their fellow citizens while they are enjoying their afternoon coffee is the following: "That was an unfortunate period that we should leave behind and not think about. We should focus on work, to try to create and not destroy."

THE NEGLECTED DESERTERS OF VOJVODINA

The story of people who refused to fight in the Serbian army is neglected by modern Serbian society despite the fact their stories could be used to set positive examples.

Some time ago a sociologist, Janja Beč, posited the idea to form an initiative to build a monument to deserters somewhere in the region of Vojvodina. Given the situation that we have been living in for too long, in which there is an almost absolute contortion of the term 'value', this idea was met with silence. Some other "heroes" are more important, in fact, they are the only ones we know.

The enormous number of people who said 'no' to the general insanity of the war machine in full progress do not even get a paragraph in the textbooks used in secondary schools across Serbia. Democratic and pro-European, two thousand men, mostly from Vojvodina, who could have held weapons in their hands, opted for life instead of war. They opted for the streets of different cities of the world instead of the theaters of war. They opted for jobs they had never dreamed they would be doing instead of those that they were educated and trained for. People who had not necessarily been active anti-militarists or believed that the regime back then had to be fought against, still did a heroic deed.

By refusing to go to war, either through organized or individual resistance to war, they unjustifiably lost their place in the collective memory of the population. This should not have happened. Why? Because their stories carry the potential for contributing to catharsis and the healing of this society, just as two decades ago their decisions reduced the potential for an even worse outcome of the war itself.



Željko Stanetić is the director of the non-governmental organization "Vojvodanski građanski centar" (VCG), a journalist and human rights activist from Novi Sad.



*Hani, A.: November, 2013.
Graffiti on Vodnjanska street, Skopje,
Macedonia.*

Image content: The graffiti carries the message that "Heroes are eternal", a quote initially attributed to Johan Tarquillovski, a man convicted of war crimes by the Hague Tribunal. Graffiti like this is widely replicated, mainly in areas populated by Macedonians, the ethnic majority. An unknown artist has been editing the piece, erasing the last name "Tarquillovski" and reattributing the quote to other famous 'Johans'; Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms etc.

HERO-ZERO?



*Hani, A.: November 2013,
Graffiti on Vodnjanska street,
Skopje, Macedonia.*

This article is about forgotten heroes, about those who were labelled as enemies or traitors, about those who naively sacrificed their lives working against the war - about those who have never been considered heroes.

It started somewhere near here - word after word, squabble after squabble, act of violence after act of violence. It spread to an armed conflict in front of the eyes of a generation that has had the opportunity to enjoy only a few of the benefactions caused by the socialist regime being unable to understand that it was, in fact, a dictatorship. I call them the transitional generation, the dream of the youth, which in a certain moment dramatically shifted away from 'brotherhood and unity' towards racism and extreme ethnocentrism. Life, which had been predictable, became unpredictable. People, who until yesterday had shown tolerance for others, began to insult each other using violent language, the kind which was used back when states were established centuries ago - a racist language. The language of Nazis. Everyone started to dream about a life without the others; everyone started to dream about independence, like a child's deep desire for their first bicycle.

Just before everything collapsed I had started to understand the world, to dream about a perfect love and continuous adventures. Then: BOOM! I became someone's target. This is how I started to look at the others through binoculars, from far. Those who until recently had promoted 'brotherhood and unity' now did not let me learn in my native language. I was also forbidden to use my language in state institutions which they claimed were theirs. They asked me to move to a state I had never seen before. I became interested in knowing more. I started to ask questions and investigate. Soon I understood why my name doesn't have anything to do with my nation or religion. Why I was not able to speak to my father in my mother tongue when we were hanging out in his office at the municipal building. Why I didn't know anything about the history of my nation. Why there was not a single

national symbol in our homes. Why as a child I was not allowed to make any jokes about Tito. Why my friend's father was in jail.

I didn't want to be a number, an engraving in marble, so I decided to alarm everyone. I understood that the problem was the infected minds of the people who, in the new political system of democracy, saw an opportunity to quickly become rich by robbing anything that had remained from the past regime. They wanted to infect us with that type of virus too. I decided to change my point of view, to not watch the others through a sniper's binoculars but to see them through my heart and mind. I soon started to deal engage in something I believed would lead to prosperity and peace: I started to work on the distorted opinions and perceptions of "the others". I started to engage myself for peace and by doing so I became a spy and a traitor for the community I belonged to and an eternal enemy and culprit for the community I did not belong to. I became a threat to those who, even today, benefit from the miseries of a poor population. I was not desperate because of my work as a lawyer but it was my work which convinced me that by disturbing the opinions of others I could find a way to reconcile them.

While they greeted each other with the sound of bullets and mortar bombs, I started to talk openly about the option to end this chaos without that type of noise. I helped people in the places which were later reported in the news as locations where mines exploded. I had no idea about how to survive in a war; I only knew I had to pee on the asphalt and to never walk on soil. My naïve humanity, my wish to help others and my dream of peace was sliding through the furrows trodden by the boots of soldiers and through streets where mines were installed.

Only I know how lucky I was that I survived. If anyone asked me today to do the same thing I did again, I don't know how I would respond. But, today I know that peace needed the naivety of people like me. If I hadn't been naïve, I am sure that the people of my community, who were threatening me for becoming a peaceful activist, would not be able to promote peace, tolerance, the need for integration and positive interethnic and interreligious relations today.

Today, I consider myself to be a war veteran. I was and I am a soldier of peace, tolerance and understanding. I fought intensely. I was a fighter with all my heart and soul and I protected the issues I continue to protect today. I'm the first one walking through front lines. I am "the third party" who withstood bullets unarmed. I have the same fate as many veterans who feel manipulated, angry and desperate. This situation makes me feel like a 'Zero', but it also encourages me to continue fighting nationalistic intellectualism among the quasi-rulers who survive from the seeds of hatred and fear.

I believe all peaceful activists have many stories to tell about times of war in the Balkans and I also believe that the day will come when their contribution to our modern societies will be recognized. One day, when we have finally understood how manipulated we were from those who benefited from war, statues will be erected for us just as they have been erected for the many fighters on horses, uniformed, with pistols, mortars and so on. Today I still work as a peaceful activist because I deeply believe that our culture of remembrance will be thankful to those who wanted peace, that one day the peaceful activists will be asked for forgiveness, even though today they are still considered 'zeroes' rather than heroes.

Albert Hani is the Deputy Programme manager at forumZFD's Skopje office and Regional Coordinator of the Peace Education Programme. He is an experienced peacebuilding activist, trainer and mediator. Albert Hani is also a well known political analyst and teaches multicultural communication at the State University of Tetovo.

.....

an

UNKNOWN SERBIAN
DESERTER,

a

HERO

that

WILL NEVER BE
FORGIVEN

.....



It is 1991. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is seemingly bursting at the seams as a result of a dense capillary network of nationalism and chauvinism, but its break up is in fact due to mere pilferage and desire for power. As with all rapacious murderers, these villains have justifications, explanations, alibis. In order to convince the people of Yugoslavia, who are connected by everything and separated by almost nothing, that they were really archenemies, they stuck their hand deep into the bag of history and took from it (or selectively discarded) everything that they considered useful at a given moment. That bag is full with a long history of fights for freedom and independence, suffering for equality and the right for a place under the sun, together with other peoples. But it also contains damnation of minimal differences, colonial manipulation and fratricidal repression.

In this context – in regard to Serbia – the heroism of soldiers in WWI, their determination to withstand the unbearable while defending their homeland, was evoked in order to somehow create a connection between two completely different historical periods. At the same time, it was kept secret (or falsely interpreted) that the Assembly of Serbia, in the darkest moment in 1914, set the unification of all Southern Slavs as a goal of war and considered it the only guarantee of a shared, free and independent future. The revision of WWII was even worse. While stressing the enormous number of victims of the Ustasha genocide in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the one hand, the regime in Serbia at the same time marginalized and defamed the anti-fascist partisan movement that was supported by the majority of both Serbs and all other Yugoslav peoples. True freedom fighters became suspects and enemies of the state overnight whilst quislings and war criminals became heroes and role models. Along with the roar of the howitzer,

hissing of multiple-barreled rocket launcher and yapping of the machine gun, all of this served its purpose – the logic of the pack has prevailed.

However, there are always true heroes. In a country where lives are classified as prior and after wars, these heroes were the people who refused to put on ghillie suits, cock an AK-47 or sit behind artillery sights. Whilst on the run from both military and non-military police they unmasked the bloodshed of the 90s as crimes motivated by the basest instincts. While the electorate classified truck drivers, bricklayers, hairdressers, locksmiths, farmers and all other people as “ours” and “theirs”, using exclusively the criterion of ethnicity, these unknown Serbian deserters refused to be in any way connected to generals, commanders of paramilitary groups and other warlords. They were rabidly demonized as “national traitors” and “foreign mercenaries”, but they relentlessly fought the war, destruction and ethnic cleansing.

These heroes were mercilessly and relentlessly persecuted by all means available to the government officials that are currently in power in Serbia, former alpha males in the national pack and current champions of neoliberalism and European integration, as well as various other integrations. Today, when their choices – absolutely all of them – turned out to be completely wrong and fatal, they are the ones that utter many of the things that their former victims fought for a long time ago: that the wars of the 90s should have never happened, that there is no progress without cooperation in Europe and especially in the region and that human and civil rights are inalienable. This will never be forgiven by the last Serbian hero: an unknown deserter. But he does not care at all. He knows that in Serbia, just as everywhere else in the world, true heroism is never measured by awarding medals and giving distinctions.

Filip Švarn, born in 1966, has been a journalist since 1990. In 1992, he started working for VREME magazine in Belgrade. From 1991 to 1995, Švarn reported on the Yugoslav wars, frequently being on the front line himself. Now, his reporting mainly focusses on war crimes, organized crime and internal politics in Serbia. He has received several awards for his investigative reporting. Filip Švarn lives and works in Belgrade.

The Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina and the Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina are implementing the project “Living Together”, which deals with positive stories about people from the war period. Five documentaries have been made and ten texts have been published under the project thus far. The project is financed from the EU media fund “Strengthening Media Freedom in Serbia”, part of the EU Delegation to Serbia. The project is also supported by forumZFD.

GORAŽDE: HEROES OF THE BATTLE FOR THE WOUNDED

The memorial plaque at the entrance to the Regional Hospital in Goražde carries the names of healthcare workers who died doing their job during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992-1995. Alongside the names of Hasan Imamović, MD, Muhamed Pašić, MD, Sabina Pašalić, Mehmed Živojević, Alija Kurtić, Satko Čos and Nizam Halilović, is the name of a woman from Belgrade – Dušanka Vujasić, DMD.

Although presented with various opportunities to vacate Goražde, which had been under siege by the forces of the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serbian paramilitary forces since May 4, 1992, Dr. Dušica had no desire to leave. The Goražde hospital received around 4,500 wounded persons in four years of war. 1,700 of them arrived during the first year after attacks against the town began in November. Interviewed in July 1992, the late Dr. Dušica, as she was known to the people of Goražde, explained to a group of journalists that she stayed “because of the patients and people of this town”.

“I would like to survive this war, to go back to Belgrade, Serbia, and tell the truth to people there. No, not to people! I would like to tell the truth to my parents, because my parents do not know the truth”, said Dr. Dušica back then.

As a doctor of dental medicine, Dr. Dušica became one of many doctors that also assisted in surgeries. Throughout the war, surgeries and amputations of extremities were conducted without anaesthetics and through the use of a normal saw.

“I think that there was no better woman, or friend, at the outpatient clinic at that time. At the beginning we worked non-stop. There were maybe 35 of us, including the doctors”, said Meho Čano, an ambulance driver.

Dušanka Vujasić, DMD, was killed on April 27, 1993, when she was 37 years old, from shells launched from an MRL. She was six months pregnant. She was not killed instantly, but her colleagues were unable to save her or the baby.



*Dušanika Vujasić's parents
(Drago and Ljubica)*

Dušica and her husband Zvonko had come to Goražde from Belgrade several years before the war, having applied for jobs in the town. He was an engineer and worked at a construction company, and it was in Goražde they gave birth to a son, Slobodan.

Dušica's parents, Drago and Ljubica Dimić, still live in Belgrade. Her father passed on to us what Dušica had told him on April 29, 1992, several days before the beginning of the siege of Goražde. "She said, Čako, that is what she called me, talk to me. As long as it is possible to make phone calls, talk to me, and when this is no longer possible, we will not talk anymore. And that is what happened", says Dušica's father.

The parents of Dušica Vujasić will be buried next to her in Goražde by their own wish. Dušica's father was thinking about transferring her remains to Serbia, but then he changed his mind. "Her bones should rest where Dušica worked, where she was killed, where she was buried. Nobody will touch her in Goražde, in the location where she rests". His wife, Ljubica, adds: "When someone tells me here, how could you allow Dušica to stay there, among them? What do you mean by them? They are wonderful people, and when I go there, they fully accept me, as if I had been living with them".

Dr. Dušica's son, Slobodan, once met a woman in Goražde who had always been desperately keen to meet him. Dr. Dušica convinced her during the war to give birth. She told Slobodan that "whenever she looked at her daughter, she thought of his mother".

"In such a moment, when you hear this, you think how beautiful it is that someone had such an impact on people. Someone who is known by everyone in Goražde, who is so well respected by everyone, that is a motivation in life for you to say: maybe I am like that, too", says Slobodan.



*The grave of Dušanka
Vujasić in Goražde*

Dinko Gruhonjić has been a lecturer at the Media Studies Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad since 2005. He has been the chairman of the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina since 2004 and the head of the Vojvodina correspondence office for the news agency Beta since 1997. He has also been the editor-in-chief of the Vojvodina Research and Analytical Center (VOICE, www.voice.org.rs) since 2015 and producer of the information portal *Autonomija* (www.autonomija.info) since 2007.



I HAVE NEVER THOUGHT I COULD BE THIS STRONG

After the loss of their husbands, a lot of women took care of their families and restored normality. A report about the lives of widows in Krusha e Madhe who showed a lot of strength for their families.

On a normal working day in February, when the weather is almost that of a spring day, Mirvete Ramadani, 46, is in her courtyard in the southern village of Krusha e Madhe, fixing some things around her green house. The sunny day is a reminder that the season of sowing vegetables is approaching and the volume of work in her green house and hectare of arable land will soon be increasing significantly.

“I have already started to prepare, to buy the plastic covers, the fertilizer, and I am waiting for the temperatures to rise,” says Mirvete, who, after her husband was killed by Serbian forces, was forced to undertake the work that is often considered exclusively a man’s job in the Kosovar society.

Her husband, Osman, was killed in March 1999, together with 250 other men from the village. Krusha e Madhe had served as a stronghold for many soldiers of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), making it a target for severe assaults from the Serbian forces.

Several months before she lost her husband, Mirvete had given birth to a boy. He joined a large family of six daughters, none of whom had yet reached teen-hood. The post-war period also found her without her house, which had been almost completely destroyed during the war. Faced with the need to survive, she found rescue in the arable land she had inherited from her husband. In addition to managing to support her family, she says that the work helps her beat the bad memories she can hardly forget every day.

Whilst now everything looks simpler, the beginning was extremely difficult. She tells how she received financial assistance from an international organization to fix her tractor and to buy seeds for pepper.

“I had to work extremely hard together with my daughters to collect money both to live on and provide means for the education of the kids,” she says. “I have never thought I could be this strong - I thought we would die.”



With her work, Mirvete manages to earn an average salary of 500 to 600 Euro a month, in a country where the average salary is around 300. She sells the peppers that she grows to a range of different buyers. One of them is the pickle factory in the village, which was established by other women who had lost their husbands during the war.

There are over 100 women in Krusha e Madhe who manage to support their families and provide education for their children through their work. Around 25 of them work in the pickle factory which has now become famous throughout Kosovar society for its products. The factory was established with the support of both foreign and local donors in 2005 and is run by Fahrie Hoti, also a widow from the village.

On the day we visited the factory, Mrs. Hoti was not there as she had scheduled some meetings to discuss the well-being of the factory. But, contacted by phone, she explained that different kinds of pickles were produced in the factory and were sold all over Kosovo.

“We are proud of what we have achieved and we believe that with our work we will continue to grow further. Next July, we will announce a public

call and we expect to employ 10 other women, as providing jobs for women is our main mission,” she said.

Kosovo continues to be one of the poorest countries in Europe. The ‘Young Europeans’ - a phrase widely used to describe Kosovars after the declaration of independence in 2008 - are faced with high level of unemployment and poverty while tens of thousands of people, mainly young people, have tried to find fortune in western countries, many of them through illegal routes.

Altin Hoti, a 22 year old university student, is just one of those from the village who lost his father in March 1999. He is grateful to his mother, Shqipe, whom he says has done the very best to ensure he doesn't feel the absence of his father too strongly. Shqipe, a bee-keeper, has only six bee units but previously owned many more than that. With the money she gets from selling honey every season she manages to earn a living, albeit in very difficult conditions after the loss of her husband during the war.

“My mother has worked very hard and in a way she stopped us from feeling that we were missing another parent. We also managed to get a school education,” Altin says.



Shqipe's bee units



Pickles factory, Krusha e Madhe

FOR HANNA, FUTURE STORIES FROM THE PAST

*The
Second
World War placed
a heavy burden on the
lives of Willem Poelstra's parents.*

*His Jewish mother lost many family members
in concentration camps whereas his father worked
voluntarily in a Berlin-based locomotive factory. Regardless of
the objections from their environment, they nevertheless married
and lived together until the end.*

*For this project, Poelstra (born in the Netherlands in 1956)
drew on the impact the war had on his family, seeking to
extend this to the recent conflict in Kosovo. In that sense,
Willem Poelstra is documenting history that just
keeps repeating itself.*

Who is Hanna?

Hanna is my Mother. She died in 2003. After my father died in 2011, I discovered a box with information about my family history. That's how I learned more about my mother's Jewish family history and about her destiny during World War II and the Holocaust.

I chose the project title 'For Hanna, Future Stories from the Past...' since she is the connection to my Jewish family past and my past in general.

Why did you choose to come to Kosovo for this project?

I decided to use my parent's story as a metaphor that can be applied to the present – and to the future. Intuitively, I thought about the former Yugoslavia and specifically Kosovo. The ethnic divisions still persist and in many cases the Serbian and Albanian communities live diametrically opposed to each other. Their separation seemed like a story to be told and to be connected to my parents' story.

How is your project perceived in Kosovo?

What are the reactions of Kosovar people to the exhibition?

So far there have been two presentations and the reactions have been diverse. Some people welcome the fact that Kosovo's history is told through this exhibition in the Netherlands and support the idea of talking about the past in order to create a better future. Others are more critical and think that it is insensitive to show the project, especially outside of Pristina. Also the fact that both sides, Albanians and Serbs, are pictured is not always welcomed.

What are the reactions in the Netherlands? Are they different from reactions in Kosovo?

In the Netherlands the reactions were very positive, a Dutch newspaper called the project "a broad look on history". People could understand the situation in Kosovo better by relating their own history to it and making connections. But there were also comments about my father who was 'on the wrong side' during the war since he collaborated with the enemy.

Does your project contribute to the process of dealing with the past in the Western Balkans? If yes, how?

I do believe that dealing with the past means first acknowledging your past in order to build a better future. I cannot change the world by myself, but I do believe that I can make small contributions to this process. I try to do it in an objective way and leave it to spectators to make their own judgements. In that sense, my project is a contribution to the process of dealing with the past, that's for sure.



*The downside.
A couple lost their home in the aftermath of the 98/99 war*

Photo **Willem©Poelstra**



On may 6th, 1999 Sadije was shot in the back by an Serbian Policeman and paralyzed her for the rest of her life. Years later she took the courage to witness at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

Photo **Willem©Poelstra**



balkan.perspect

Protesting is a freedom, but you need people who stand-up for it.

Photo **Willem©Poelstra**

NEWS & UPDATES

THERE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE - CIVIC COURAGE IN TIMES OF WAR AND PEACE

Between August 27th and 30th in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC), in cooperation and with support from *forumZFD* and other local and regional partners, will deliver a six-day youth event entitled: "There is always a choice - Civic courage in times of war and peace." This youth event will be the first of its kind. Its aim is to sensitize both young people and those acting in civil society to the topics of moral and civic courage and 'rescuer behaviour', as well as stressing their importance in attaining sustainable peace in a post-conflict setting. In order to highlight the "heroic" actions of the real-life people who acted on behalf of others in times of danger, often crossing interethnic divisions, this event will utilise various forms of multimedia as well as interactive and educational workshops; from panel discussions and personal narratives to cultural activities, workshops, photo exhibitions, theatre performances and films as pedagogical tools. The participants in these activities will be 150 young students and activists drawn mainly from across the Western Balkans region as well as from Germany.

Soraja Zagić

REGIONAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION "BIBER"

'Reconciliation' is not a popular term. It is often identified with the concept of forgiveness or the idea that everything needs to be forgotten and that the future must be faced instead. However, if reconciliation is instead seen as seeking ways to attain justice, but in such a way as not to inflict injustice upon others and as a chance to build a more certain, safer and freer future for all, then the organizers of the "Biber" competition believe, it is something societies urgently need. Therefore, authors are invited to think about reconciliation in new and creative ways and should attempt to inspire audiences with stories that overcome existing prejudices and entrenched hostilities.

Authors are invited to write in Albanian, Macedonian, Bosnian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Serbian. The invitation is open to both acclaimed authors as well as so far unpublished ones. The competition is open until September 6, 2015. The competition is organized in collaboration with the Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo-Belgrade.

For more information: <http://biber.nenasilje.org/>

Maike Dafeld

NEXT ISSUE

The third issue of *Balkan.Perspectives* will explore how people in the Balkans dealt with conflict and war in the past and how they maintained their everyday lives during these times. Furthermore, the authors will explore the concept of resilience and trauma and analyse which mechanisms help people deal with their past.

IMPRESSUM

Balkan.Perspectives is published by *forumZFD*

The Forum Civil Peace Service (*forumZFD*, Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst), is a German organisation that was established in 1996. It trains and deploys peace experts to conflict regions where they work together with local partners to promote peaceful coexistence and non-violent conflict resolution.

In the Western Balkans, the focus is on projects in the field of dealing with the past and on fostering dialogue between opposing parties. This includes school mediation projects, the support of civil society, or enhancing media capacities for a more constructive approach to dealing with the past.

The program is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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Cologne

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