

Resisting the Wars in the Former Yugoslavia: Towards an Autoethnography

When first approached by this book's editors to contribute the following chapter, I was hesitant. My experience of anti-war activism ended brutally and I am still expecting an apology for the arrest and torture I endured at the hands of the Serbian State Security (also known as DB). For a long time, I believed that the best way to deal with trauma was to forget my experience and turn to my academic career. Then, Bojan Bilić, who was a graduate student in my department, appealed to me pointing out a huge gap in the existing scholarship on war resistance during the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. Furthermore, as Bojan stressed, there were barely any personal testimonies from the protagonists themselves. Eventually, the activist in me prevailed and I decided to write about my experience, despite the fact that it might awaken some bad memories. That turned out to be the least of my worries. As a historian, I was very well aware how problematic it would be to write recollections more than a decade after the actual events in which I took part. My biggest challenge, however, was what and how to write at all. Trained as a historian, I have internalised the basic postulates of historical "objectivity," such as time distance, document or evidence based narrative and, most of all, personal detachment from the object of inquiry. With this text I was expected to move in an entirely new field for me — that of analytic autoethnography, where I had to juxtapose my lived experience with some sort of conclusions and generalisations. Vesna Janković helped out by pointing to the discussion of Ellis and Bochner on the merits of the genre as well as to the recent attempt of Zagreb activists to remember and analyse their anti-war activism.¹ Still, no matter how hard I tried to preserve an engaging personal story while making connections to existing knowledge or theories, my lack of experience in the field of autoethnography remains obvious. I found it impossible to keep my recollections "unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious and creative" as my anti-war activism was.² Predictably, I tamed my story, subjecting it to the control of reason, logic, historical context and

1 Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35 (2006) 4, pp. 429–49; Vesna Janković and Nikola Mokrović (eds.), *Antiratna kampanja 1991.-2011. Neispričana povijest* (Zagreb: Documenta, 2011).

2 These are the imperatives set out by Ellis and Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography," p. 435.

(post-facto) analysis. Thus, I ended up with two voices, one autobiographical and the other analytical, that of historian in me. Not being able to separate the two, I have, nevertheless, tried to refrain from sweeping generalisations or imposing theories. My aim is only to contribute to (or rather, refine) our knowledge of the Yugoslav wars as well as a general understanding of war and resistance to it.

The testimony of my own involvement in the anti-war movement will be structured around three themes of “becoming an activist,” “being an activist,” and “thinking about activism,” though they will inevitably overlap. Unlike social movement theory that seeks to explain protests and social activism as a function of social relations, I admit that my narrative (or autoethnography) is entirely subjective. Bordering on a confession, many will question how relevant and representative this approach is. All I can say to this legitimate objection is that my motivation to become an activist and my later experience were indeed very individual. Despite some massive protests and draft evasion, anti-war activism in the former Yugoslavia remained a minority affair. Centred on my own activist trajectory, my observations and analysis focus on the most controversial and least documented issues of conscientious objection and military desertion that were my main concerns during the 1991–1999 period. In addition, I briefly contextualise anti-militarist and anti-war resistance in (ex-)Yugoslavia and account for various forces that have shaped it from the perennial role of mothers, to feminist anti-militarism, international activists, anarcho-punks and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, it will address the differences and the links between anti-war activists in the former Yugoslavia, who found themselves on opposite warring sides as well as our contacts with international activists. Finally, it will examine the impact of post-Yugoslav anti-militarism and the lessons it can offer for international peace movement.

Becoming an activist

I first joined anti-war street protests in the autumn of 1991, just as I had returned to Belgrade from my compulsory military service. For me, like for most people in Yugoslavia, war came as a shock, despite its lengthy preparations. What puzzled many an observer was how relatively little resistance there was to such a terrible, orchestrated and preventable tragedy, whose consequences still plague most people in the former Yugoslavia twenty years after.³ What blinded them and prevented any massive reaction? Again, I cannot but offer my individual perspective. Only a year before the conflict, in

3 For a rare attempt to contextualise the history of (anti-)militarism in Serbia and Yugoslavia, see Dragan Stojković, “Antiratne i mirovne ideje u istoriji Srbije i antiratni pokreti do 2000. godine,” *Republika*, (2011) 492–493. Available at: <www.republika.co.rs/492-493/20.html> (Accessed 30 July 2012).

the midst of a serious crisis, I joined the army, like all other Yugoslav eighteen year olds. I had just returned from my senior year of high school spent in the United States without much knowledge and concern of what was going on in my homeland. Through connections in our local military office, my father arranged that I got sent to Croatia, as he feared troubles in Kosovo, so it seemed logical to stay as far away as possible.⁴ However, neither he nor I questioned complying with the law and joining the army. Looking back from today's perspective, I think we were hostages of the pervasive role of the army in Yugoslav society and the idea of military service as a necessary stage into adulthood. The Yugoslav regime, personified by Josip Broz Tito, owed its power to the Communist-led Partisan victory in WWII. The Yugoslav People's Army [Jugoslovenska narodna armija (JNA)], successor to Partisan Army, was glorified as the fourth largest military force in Europe.⁵ The Army assumed the role of *nation builder* while militarism was ingrained in country's ideological foundation. Military training was compulsory and included school classes, civilian training and military service for men that was initially three years' long (just after WWII). At the time when I joined, the duration of service had fallen to 1 year. Conscientious objection was an unknown notion even though generations of religious objectors had demanded the right to undertake civilian service in its place throughout the existence of Yugoslavia. Instead, they were repeatedly sentenced for the same "crime" and incarcerated for up to fifteen years in the harshest conditions.⁶ In the 1980s, their sentences were reduced, but except for a tiny peace movement emerging in Slovenia and international human rights and war resisters' organisations, no one in Yugoslavia paid attention.⁷ I had never heard of them nor had I ever contemplated objecting to compulsory military service that I, as most other urban youth in Yugoslavia, utterly despised. The target of ridicule as an insti-

4 There is no place for the chronology of the Yugoslav crisis in this testimony and the literature on its causes and dynamics abounds. In many accounts however, the role of the Kosovo crisis in the events that led to Yugoslavia's collapse and subsequent wars is downplayed and revived only in connection to the armed conflict in 1999. In fact, until the spring of 1991, violence was restricted to Kosovo and most people feared big conflicts would erupt only there.

5 For the role of JNA in English, see James Gow, *Legitimacy and the Military: the Yugoslav Crisis* (London: Pinter, 1992); Miroslav Hadžić, *The Yugoslav People's Agony. The Role of the Yugoslav People's Army* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). In Serbian/Croatian, see Davor Marijan, *Slom Titove Armije: JNA i raspad Jugoslavije 1987.-1992.* (Zagreb: Tehnička knjiga and Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2008); Mile Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom 1918-1991* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 1999); Dragan Vukšić, *JNA i raspad SFR Jugoslavije* (Stara Pazova: Tekomgraf, 2006).

6 I wrote about the experience of the religious objectors in Communist Yugoslavia in Bojan Aleksov, "Nonconformist Sects under Communism: Case Study of Yugoslavia" in *Crossroads of History: Experience, Memory, Orality. Proceedings of XI International Oral History Conference vol. III*, Istanbul. International Oral History Association and University of Bogazici (2000), pp. 1334-7.

7 For civic initiatives, including the peace movement in Slovenia, see Jozef Figa, "Socializing the State: Civil Society and Democratization from Below in Slovenia," in Melissa K. Bokovoy, Jill A. Irvine, and Carol S. Lilly (eds.), *State-Society Relations in Yugoslavia, 1945-1992* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 163-82. See also Marko Hren, "The Slovenian Peace Movement: An Insider's Account," this volume.

tution of political and social indoctrination, JNA and conscription were never criticised in principle. The legacies of both Serbian and Yugoslav modern statehood cherished victories on the battlefield, and war and violence were seen as the means of liberation and progress. In terms of values, an inherited patriarchal mentality and exclusivist nationalisms imported from the mid-19th century, fitted well with the militarism promoted by JNA and the Communist leadership. The dominant ideology never allowed “lesser” issues, such as women’s emancipation, sexual orientation or the right to conscientious objection, to enter, let alone, influence the political agenda, not even among those who opposed the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party buttressed by the Army. Some attempts in Slovenia in the 1980s to undermine the Army and push forward alternative agendas such as the ones just mentioned, fell on deaf ears in Serbia and elsewhere. Even in Slovenia, they were soon replaced by more “real” vindications of national self-determination.⁸ The division and strict hierarchy between “real” and “lesser” issues were even reflected in the nascent peace movement and various civic initiatives. War was univocally rejected, but peace was often, and by many, understood only as absence of war.

Let me illustrate with one more example how detrimental the legacy of militarism and tradition of celebrating war and violence were, as they are grossly overlooked in most accounts of the Yugoslav crisis and dissolution. The worst crime of the wars in the 1990s and the only one officially recognised as genocide, occurred when Serbian troops led by General Ratko Mladić, massacred over 8,000 men and boys in Srebrenica in the summer of 1995.⁹ The slaughtered men were mostly Bosniak Muslim prisoners of war. Their executioner, according to the criminal charges brought, was a former Yugoslav Army general. This worst massacre of the 1990s occurred exactly fifty years after the largest WWII massacre in Yugoslavia, in which tens of thousands of Croatian Ustaša as well as Slovenian and Serbian collaborationists and monarchist forces and members of their families were summarily executed.¹⁰ True, history never repeats itself because contexts always change, making any analogies superfluous. The first major difference between the

8 Žarko Paunović, “Mirovne aktivnosti u Srbiji: između inicijativa i pokreta,” *Filozofija i društvo*, (1995) 7, pp. 107–25, here p. 111.

9 On the Srebrenica massacre, see David Rohde, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica, Europe’s Worst Massacre since World War II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998) and Isabelle Delpla, Xavier Bougarel and Jean-Louis Fournel (eds.), *Investigating Srebrenica: Institutions, Facts, Responsibilities* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2012).

10 The literature on post-WWII massacres of prisoners of war and ideological enemies in Yugoslavia is, however, vast. For an overview of the existing literature on the “Bleiburg” massacre, see Vladimir Geiger, “Osvrt na važniju literaturu o Bleiburgu 1945,” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 35 (2003) 1, pp. 189–216. For the Kočevski rog massacres, see John Corsellis and Marcus Ferrar, *Slovenia 1945: Memories of Death and Survival After World War II* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). For a recent English language general overview, see Michael Portmann, *Communist Retaliation and Persecution on Yugoslav Territory during and after WWII (1943–1950)* (Vienna: Grin Verlag, 2004). Recently a special issue of *Europe Asia Studies* (62 (2010) 7) was dedicated to the Communist legacy in Yugoslavia including that of post-WWII massacres.

two massacres are the war aims and military capacity of those executed. Secondly, there is a difference in scale as the first massacre took at least ten times more lives.¹¹ Nevertheless, historians draw parallels and point to continuities. Despite the obvious differences, let me point out some worrisome similarities. In both cases the victims were prisoners of war or civilians seen as belonging to an enemy side. They were either caught fleeing or surrendered to international forces, the British in the first case and the Dutch UN troops in the second, which did nothing for their rescue or even handed them over to their executioners. The perpetrator of both crimes was either the Yugoslav Army or its successor(s). Finally, in the first case, responsibility was never ascertained and the victims were not even allowed proper burials. People in Yugoslavia and its armed forces lived for decades in the belief that killing prisoners of war and enemy civilians was just. For a long time the same scenario threatened the memory of Srebrenica victims, but was prevented thanks to tireless efforts of the Mothers of Srebrenica [Majke Srebrenice]. None of these parallels explain why the massacre in Srebrenica happened, but they help to explain how it became possible and why so many Serbs still deny any wrongdoing.

After this lengthy digression on the pervasive and normalised culture of militarism and violence in Yugoslavia, let me return to my personal recollections. While in the Army, I was stationed in Northern Bosnia and Eastern Slavonia, where the first violent clashes erupted (starting from 2 May in Borovo Selo) between armed Serbian and Croatian groups. My military service, which was supposed to be only a tiresome duty, turned into a nightmare. During the summer of 1991, I would witness, participate in and anticipate, not just isolated incidents, but the looming tragedy for the whole country. My unit was in a constant state of alert. As tensions rose, the officers increasingly threatened and treated us soldiers abusively and with violence. We were also subjected to numerous interrogations by military security officers. On one occasion, escorting a supply convoy, we were attacked and had to return fire. I remember that event as the most idiotic situation — we were all scared to death, and no one knew where to shoot. The officers yelled and we screamed and fired all around. Everywhere we went, and even in the barracks, my fellow young conscripted recruits and I were gripped with fear as the Army had no clear agenda besides the vaguely posited task of acting as a buffer between various armed forces and preserving Yugoslavia.

As the hot summer dragged on, decisions by the JNA leadership seriously undermined our “neutral” position and task. They were preparing for a full scale war with Croatia and Slovenia. My country was being torn apart by its own people in front of my eyes and I could not identify with any side in the increasingly ethnicised conflict. More importantly, I developed a strong disgust for the Army and began to question its role in the Yugoslav crisis. I could not simply accept my “fate”: obey absurd orders, adjust to the war, and

11 In the sense of the total number of executed prisoners of war after WWII in Yugoslavia.

acquiesce to the contempt, mistrust, and hysteria that were feeding it. During these summer months, many soldiers from Slovenia and Croatia deserted the JNA barracks, especially after their home republics declared secession from Yugoslavia in late June. The officers immediately labelled them cowards, traitors and enemies. Yet, I could not instantly change my feelings about friends who fled and consider them enemies; I understood and shared their fears and concerns. Their decision to desert was spontaneous and often not political. However, by deserting, they were sending a semi-conscious message to those of us who stayed behind, to the officers in command, and to all soldiers and civilians equally. I also wanted to get out as some of my fellow soldiers had already done.

On 7 August 1991, my unit was ordered to Đakovo, Croatia, to protect an isolated military campground and ammunition and weapons store. I tried to escape, but was caught and experienced a nervous breakdown. As a result, I was sent to Sarajevo military hospital where after serving for eleven months, I was released with a note “mentally unfit to serve”. To put it simply, JNA was getting rid of all trouble makers, in addition to Croatians and Slovenians.

In mid-August — worried for the friends I left behind — I headed back home and to safety. Still, questions remained. Was deserting the war enough? I had come to believe that there was no cause for which I should die or kill. My friends and family provided a positive environment that supported my decision, even though months went by before I understood all of the political implications of my action. As news arrived of the deaths of some of my fellow soldiers, I realised what a miracle it was to get out of the Army. I was determined not to remain silent about their deaths, but to share my experience with as many people as possible. Not only was I persuaded never to take up arms again, I also felt the need to do something against the war.

In Belgrade, however, I was shocked to find out how misinformed people were about what was happening in places only couple of hours away. I wanted to tell everyone what I experienced, to scream out loud, but no one seemed to care. A decade of political and economic crisis, which was unleashed right after the death of Yugoslavia’s president for life, Josip Broz Tito in 1980, culminated in the nationalist euphoria in 1989 and by the summer of 1991, slipped into warmongering and war making. In Serbia, most people were brainwashed by the Milošević controlled media and were immersed in the role of Serbs as eternal victims. The opposition to Milošević was brutally crushed on 9 March 1991, the protest which saw the Yugoslav Army tanks used for the first time since WWII against their own citizens.¹² The outcome of the protest ushered lethargy, resignation and sense of help-

12 For more information on Serbia in the 1990s, see Thomas Robert, *Serbia under Milošević: Politics in the 1990s* (London: Hurst, 1999) and Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

lessness, while the media stirred up fear and nationalist hate which, to some extent, explains why oppositional and anti-war activities that ensued could not stimulate massive participation.

In the midst of the war mobilisation and agitation of autumn 1991, almost by chance, I encountered a few people who protested against the war by lighting candles every evening in front of Slobodan Milošević's residence in Belgrade's Pioneer Park. There were also organised protests against the shelling of Vukovar and Dubrovnik. I was relieved to meet some other people who were equally tormented and refused to be silenced. That winter, I joined the organisation behind the protests, Belgrade's Centre for Anti-War Action [Centar za antiratne akcije (CAA)], which was formed earlier that summer, to channel and voice resistance to war.¹³ During the winter and spring of 1992, as the war in Croatia was halted, the tensions rose into explosions in Bosnia and Herzegovina with even more fatal consequences as the war there would last for another three years. In that initial period, my and everybody else's activism consisted of street protests as we had too little experience, means and opportunity to do anything else. The first actions I remember ended as failures. One was a peace caravan to Sarajevo, trying to alert people to the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina if the war spread there. Then, there was a campaign to collect 100,000 signatures necessary for a referendum in which the citizens of Serbia would vote on whether soldiers from Serbia should fight beyond its borders. We managed to collect only around 60,000 signatures. Nevertheless, the activists at CAA remained committed to their cause and in the spring of 1992, organised some of the biggest peace protests ever in Yugoslavia, in which I was heavily involved. Similar rallies took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but to no avail.

The early summer of 1992 saw the peak of protests in Belgrade, from peace marches and concerts, in which I took part, to student strikes and demonstrations. To our huge dismay, Serbia's president, Slobodan Milošević, who for us personified all the evil of war waging and destruction, survived seemingly unscathed. Nevertheless, I experienced a turning point in my activism or better to call it a life changing experience, when the CAA director Vesna Pešić selected me to attend the International Conscientious Objectors' Meeting (ICOM) in Larzac, France. In Larzac, I met many men and women from all over the world who opposed war and militarisation in principle. Most of them were not personally affected by war as we in the former Yugoslavia were, but some had spent years in prison or hiding or in exile because of their refusal to do military service. Yet, they were all interested in my experience and selflessly offered to help and, indeed, many spent later years actively supporting peace movements in the former Yugoslavia. While my resistance to war was mostly based on personal experience, their objection to

13 For an illustrated English language volume documenting protests and citizen initiatives in Belgrade in the 1990s, see Group of Authors, *The Last Decade. Serbian Citizens in the Struggle for Democracy and an Open Society 1991–2001* (Belgrade: Media Centar, 2001).

war was based on their conscience, religious and moral values and their knowledge of historical experience, as well as the injustice, suffering and destruction wars cause. Meeting other war resisters and exchanging thoughts and experiences with them, made me more political, more steadfast in my refusal of militarism, nationalism and violence and more motivated to do something about it. On that trip, I also recognised that the few of us who were resisting the war in Belgrade were not alone.

Being an activist

The failure of several mass protests in 1992 further contributed to a sense of resignation in Belgrade and throughout Serbia. Just when we thought it could not get any worse, an international economic embargo was imposed on Serbia, which sentenced many people to a struggle for survival and political apathy, as the embargo only targeted the general public, including all of us who were regime opponents. In these precarious circumstances, I became a full time anti-war activist. Upon return from Larzac, I got closer to the Women in Black [Žene u crnom (ŽUC)] who I saw protesting dressed in black and in silence from October 1991. During the first conflict resolution training session, organised by CAA and delivered by American peace activist Eric Bachman, I befriended Staša Zajović, a feminist and one of the founders of ŽUC, who introduced me to the others. I admired their uncompromising anti-militarist stance, their refusal to obey and especially the visibility of their protest strategy. ŽUC reliance on the feminist slogan “Not in My Name” and insistence on individual and moral responsibility of knowing, speaking up and resisting, fitted very well with my views and recently acquired understanding of conscientious objection.¹⁴ We became natural allies. ŽUC followed the segment of the feminist movement that did not seek to attain equality with men by joining traditionally masculine roles such as the military. On the contrary, they believed men must achieve equality with women by not exerting violence over women and not making use of the army, but rather through participating in the bringing up of children, in housework, care for the elderly and powerless, etc. This would be the first step not only for a society without soldiers (male or female), but also for a society without the militaristic values which produce war, oppression, discrimination and violence.

For a young and vulnerable man that I was, ŽUC provided a very welcoming and embracing environment. In the following years, several other men joined, though the group remained primarily a women’s organisation.¹⁵

14 See Bojan Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air: [Post-]Yugoslav Anti-War Activism* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012).

15 Sintija Kokburn, “Muškarcu u Ženama u crnom,” in Staša Zajović *et al.* (eds.), *Žene za mir*, (Belgrade: Žene u crnom, 2007), pp. 36–9.

Being a feminist and women's group, ŽUC brought some rare qualities into political activism. The women in the group cared for each other in all possible ways when this care was most needed as the sense of community and society in Belgrade was rapidly disappearing. Solidarity became our chief motto and we later tried to reproduce and recreate the same solidarity when we worked in refugee camps, with deserters or any other victim of war or discrimination. The group's premises became a sort of commune where we worked, cooked, ate and often slept — if work or just talk kept us late. Time and again any one of us would be hurt by personal loss or trouble. Some did not know where their loved ones were or whether they were alive. And we were all immersed in anxieties and anger while constantly in search of meaning of what we did and believed. Being together was what saved us all and helped us go on, even in the most troublesome times. We would often gather and sing and dance our fears and tensions away. Eating together or partying was as important as working, writing or standing in the square in protest. For better or worse, we merged life with activism. While this helped us to survive, blurring the borders between the two meant very often that the focus was lost. Moreover, it made it much more difficult to disentangle myself/ourselves from such a life once the war was over and ties among us loosened.

Throughout the war period, and indeed continuing today, ŽUC remained welcoming, participatory, and pro-active — which attracted both young women and men whereas many other anti-war organisations suffered from “bourgeois” conventions and hierarchical set-up and decision making systems, which were an obstacles (especially for young people) to joining. One example is that in ŽUC we all used egalitarian “ti” form in addressing each other regardless of age, sex or status. Nevertheless, neither ŽUC nor any other anti-war group in the former Yugoslavia ever acquired a massive following. In my view, there are several important reasons behind weak civic anti-war engagement. First, the idea of civic activism, even if only sporadically present in Yugoslavia, mostly died out due to the Communist Party monism.¹⁶ As all activities were either organised, managed or controlled by the Party, non-Party members, especially young people, lost enthusiasm and the belief they can influence anything. Any activism smacked of being too close to the Party or to power of some sort. Another consequence of strict party controlled activism in a country where most Party leaders and members hailed from rural, patriarchal and conservative areas was the absolute lack of empathy for “Otherness,” be it in terms of disability, sexual preference or simply outlook on life. During my activist years, I also witnessed time and again how the nascent peace movement in Serbia and all over the former

16 Vojislav Koštunica and Kosta Čavoški, *Party Pluralism or Monism: Social Movements and the Political System in Yugoslavia, 1944–1949* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1985), is an early analysis of the creation of the Communist Party political and social monopoly in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia had continuously — and often unsuccessfully — struggled to differ from the mainstream and become alternative, not only in strictly political terms or in a simple rejection of nationalism, but in group culture and ways of working. In this regard, ŽUC was a notable exception. I also believe that the lack of massive appeal should be attributed to years of nationalist propaganda which made people more suspicious and xenophobic, if not outright chauvinistic. Finally, one should not ignore the effect of condemnation and repression to which we were continuously exposed. One basically needed courage and strong personal motivation to join. And, then, it was hard to join “part-time” as activism and the group sucked-up so much time and energy.

The core of ŽUC was made up of a few feminists who had been active since the 1970s in women and human rights’ groups. Their ideological and practical realisation that the Communist-led system failed to address, let alone solve, major women’s issues prompted them to act and create some of the first political groups and organisations in the 1980s.¹⁷ By 1991, they were experienced activists and had already established international contacts. The rise of nationalism and war preparations sounded the biggest threat to decades of women’s struggle and feminists were the first to mobilise. In a rather peculiar way, they were joined by some of the mothers who they met during protests in which mothers demanded the return of their sons from JNA. The mothers’ movement was one of the most politically manipulated protests in the former Yugoslavia as some of the mothers who got their sons released from JNA later took a nationalist stance. In Croatia, some mothers created an organisation called Rampart of Love [Bedem ljubavi], which stood at the forefront of nationalist and state-led propaganda, while in Serbia, the mothers’ protest was associated with the controversial role played by Nena Kunić.¹⁸ Nevertheless, a few of the “mothers” that joined ŽUC stuck to their principles and continued their activism even after their sons were released. They had more to learn about feminism, but had already embraced female solidarity. Later on, some women refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina also joined, followed by many other people from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and of all genders and ages. This diversity also meant that we

17 One of the oldest members of ŽUC was a WWII veteran Neda Božinović. During the war years in the 1990s, she was writing a history of women’s issues and the women’s movement in Serbia and we all contributed with criticism, enquiry or simply typing and correcting. We later published it as Neda Božinović, *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku* (Belgrade: ‘94 and Žene u crnom, 1996). The book gives an overview of the women’s movement in Serbia and explains the “revival” of feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s.

18 For more on the mothers’ protests and early anti-war resistance in Serbia, see Obrad Kesić, “Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches, and Wombs,” in Sabrina P. Ramet (ed.), *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pp. 187–202; and Jasmina Lukić, “Media Representations of Men and Women in Times of War and Crisis: The Case of Serbia,” in Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (eds.), *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 393–423.

were just a randomly assembled group without a particular peer connection. Rejection of war, nationalism and violence united us and we all enjoyed diversity which was spontaneously created in the group, but it also caused conflicts and demanded an extra effort to manage.

During the war years, ŽUC held weekly public protests against the war every Wednesday, as well as on many other occasions and worked tirelessly on counter-information spreading, support to refugees and peace education. Initially, there was not much division of labour in ŽUC, but when I joined, I became unofficially “in charge” of conscientious objection (CO) and deserters. From their beginning in October 1991, ŽUC openly expressed solidarity with those who refused to go to the front, demanding amnesty for deserters as well as an end to the mobilisation for war. The draft-refusers and deserters seemed left to themselves as they could only choose between fleeing the country or hiding. CAA and the Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights [Jugoslovenski komitet pravnika za ljudska prava] offered legal counselling at some stages. We wanted to offer more — direct moral, emotional, and sometimes practical support to deserters and conscientious objectors. That was easier said than done. No one dared to talk openly about it. It was only through personal connections that we established contacts with some men who deserted the army or were in danger of being conscripted. We tried to hide them, find them shelter, something to do, provide lawyers or safe passage to other countries (the latter of which was the most difficult).

None of the above would have been possible without the cooperation and support we were getting from abroad. From its beginning, ŽUC worked to establish a strong international solidarity network. Over the years, we established very lasting and solid ties with anti-militarist and anti-war groups all over Europe, especially in Germany, Italy and Spain. We also became associated with international anti-military networks (War Resisters’ International, Amnesty International, European Bureau for CO, German Peace Society and Spanish Movement for CO, to mention but a few). Their support was immeasurable, not just in terms of the aid that they delivered to refugees, deserters and other victims of war through us, but also in terms of moral and political support that kept us going and so often transformed our disillusionment into hope. They told us about other conflicts in the world and various strategies used to oppose war and violence; taught us conflict resolution and how to use computers; widened our views and improved our tactics. Some of our international friends came and stayed volunteering with us for years; others often came for visits; others were lobbying in their own countries and preferred not to travel; but with all of them, we formed a single movement and worked towards the same goal. Unfortunately, international solidarity was often misunderstood. Some who received aid, given out of solidarity, conformed to their role of “victims,” while others who offered solidarity acted paternalistically. Frequently, we overlooked these problems because we were too exhausted and busy with the day to day work.

In order to keep our friends and everybody around the world informed about what was going on, we organised a counter-information campaign, covering issues one could not come across in mainstream media. I wrote reports about mobilisations and trials of deserters and conscientious objectors. We later collected and published all this materials in a booklet in four languages entitled *Deserters from the War in Former Yugoslavia*.¹⁹ In Serbia, it was more difficult to get attention and publicly promote war resistance. The monthly political journal *Republika* was the only media, albeit with very limited circulation, that regularly supported individuals and groups resisting the war, including conscientious objectors and deserters, and published several of my articles.²⁰ In order to overcome the media isolation from 1996 to 1998, almost singlehandedly I prepared and published nine issues of a special journal on conscientious objection — *Prigovor* [Objection], that we also managed to have printed and distributed with the refugee newspaper *Odgovor* [Response] in very large numbers. When the atmosphere of fear and apathy subsided slightly in 1997-8, we launched a campaign to support religious objector Pavle Božić and several newspapers featured our story.²¹ Supporting Pavle, I came across the Nazarenes, the religious sect active in Serbia/Yugoslavia since the second half of the nineteenth century. A generation of their faithful spent their best years in jail and Pavle was the last in line. Pavle and the Nazarenes taught me about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and sacrifices the Nazarenes are ready to endure for their faith. With another activist I went to visit him when he served his repeated sentence and we could not but admire the religious hymns other Nazarenes sang outside of the prison where we met to support him. My activism led me to discover the Nazarenes and their important role in the history of Hungary and Serbia, which later on became the focus of my major research study.²²

Another part of my work was to promote CO to compulsory military service. In Serbia CO was nominally introduced in the Constitution, but without laws to follow it, remained illegal and punishable. We organised events every 15 May, the International Day of Conscientious Objection, wrote about it, published leaflets, etc, but our message was slow to spread. We then encountered unexpected allies who helped us to spread the word and engage many young people in favour of it. While working in refugee camps across Serbia we came across a group of youngsters that listened to or played

19 The Italian edition had an official publisher, whereas we published the Serbian/English/Spanish versions. See Bojan Aleksov (ed.), *Disertori dalla guerra in ex Jugoslavia* (Parma: Alfazeta, 1995).

20 Bojan Aleksov, "Prigovor savesti," *Republika*, (1994) 83–84, p. 23, and "Žilavi militarizam: ratno okruženje i njegove posledice," *Republika*, (1994) 100, p. 24. See also Bojan Bilić, "Islands of Print Media Resistance: *ARKzin* and *Republika*," this volume.

21 See the article by the fellow activist Vladimir Marković, "Pavle Bozic, Advocate of Conscience," Available at: <www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=119&Itemid=1> (Accessed 30 July 2012).

22 Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850–1914* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006).

hard-core music and defined themselves as “anarcho-punks”. Very soon they became our most ardent supporters and added the most to the age/gender/social background diversity at ŽUC. They came from Smederevska Palanka, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Sombor and many other places and already functioned as a network. Getting to know them enabled us to promote CO in their concerts and festivals, but we also organised public events such as lectures or protests or leafleting together in their home towns. As a group, we also discovered that we had more appeal in the Serbian countryside than in Belgrade where many people demonstrated a big city arrogant dismissal of our underground (and to them, useless) activism. The young hardcore fans provided a major boost to our activism and opened a whole new world for me, a city boy, into different kind of music. We became close friends and to me that was as novel and different as bonding with feminists or soldiers’ mothers or Nazarenes before. In the summer of 1995, a big group of us went on a long train and boat journey to Ikaria island in the Aegean to attend the meeting of European COs. Again, for our new CO activists, meeting other European youngsters who rejected war was the same profound experience as it had been for me a couple of years earlier. Discussing, eating, playing music and sleeping on the beach, we also enjoyed a short escape from our grim reality back home.

That summer and autumn we faced the biggest forced mobilisation in Serbia since 1991, targeting refugees who took shelter in Serbia. After the ordeal and expulsion they experienced in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, these men who had escaped to Serbia to safety were being illegally captured by Serbian police or paramilitaries and, often after torture, sent back to fight. We recorded the cases, talked with the families, wrote reports, protests, and appeals. But none of us could hide and protect somebody’s son or husband, or issue him a passport or a German, French or any other visa as we stated in our plea to foreign governments in 1995.²³ We could neither attract the attention of the major media nor influence the political forces capable of making difference, despite some major victories, such as the European Parliament resolution on the deserters from the former Yugoslavia, adopted on 28 October 1993 and the Council of Europe Resolution 1042 from the following year.²⁴ While these statements “condemned strongly” the fighting in Yugoslavia, the asylum agencies of the EU countries refused to accept deserters from this conflict as refugees and often did not even let them in the country. Our impression has always been that there was generally little con-

23 For one of the numerous reports we produced in this period, see “Statement: Marking the Forced Mobilization of Refugees in Serbia,” (1995). Available at: <www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=117&Itemid=16> (Accessed 30 July 2012).

24 “Resolution 1042 (1994) on Deserters and Draft Resisters From the Republics of the Former Yugoslavia,” Available at: <www.assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta94/ERES1042.htm> (Accessed 30 July 2012). See also Vesna Bjekic and Ozrenka Radulovic, “A Right to Desert,” *Index on Censorship*, 23 (1994) 1–2, pp. 156–7.

sensus and enthusiasm among power-holding countries to prevent or stop the war in the former Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, when this will was displayed, war resisters were treated as objects for manipulation. In 1999, NATO dropped millions of leaflets over Serbia appealing to men not to join the Serbian armed force (or to desert it) during its bombing campaign over Kosovo. When hundreds of young men fled from Serbia to Hungary to avoid participating in this all-out war against NATO, I expected they would finally receive the support needed. Back in Serbia over 22,000 cases of desertion or refusal of call-ups were lodged with courts and around 7,700 charges were pressed in less than a year.²⁵ Moreover, most of the deserters in Hungary risked their lives to escape and cross the borders illegally. As I happened to be in Budapest and encountered many of them, I used my know-how and contacts to raise the alarm. International human rights organisations claimed they were entitled to refugee status according to the Geneva Convention. On 6 May 1999, the European Parliament again adopted a joint resolution on the situation in Kosovo in which under point 13, it called on the Member States to take in Yugoslav Army deserters and conscientious objectors and grant them a temporary right of abode in EU.²⁶ I managed to get several major newspapers and television stations to report on the issue, which seemed very clear — these men fled an internationally condemned war and escaped orders from political leaders who had been accused of war crimes. Nevertheless, neither UNHCR nor any NATO member country ever considered them to be rightful refugees. The Hungarian authorities were left alone to deal with them and denied them legal status and aid. With the help of Amnesty International, I led a campaign on their behalf which we called “Safe House” and we secured some modest aid so that they could survive in this grey area. I managed to assist only a few of them to get out by linking them with support networks in Germany, where some attained asylum. Some also went to other countries, but again only through private support networks.

The most important and sensitive aspect of our work was the links and relationships we maintained with individuals and groups from other parts of the former Yugoslavia especially from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, as they were officially considered the “enemy” side. With phone lines interrupted, this task seemed almost impossible. But our foreign friends helped again. They established first email networks (ZaMir); organised reunions in Hungary (in Mohács, close to Serbian/Hungarian border) or invited us to-

25 *Oči boje fronta: Projekat Centra za antiratnu akciju o licima koja se nisu odazvala vojnom pozivu ili su pobegla iz Vojske Jugoslavije tokom NATO intervencije u SR Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Centar za antiratnu akciju, 2000), pp. 34–5. In the year between the NATO campaign and the overthrow Milošević, the Serbian Military Courts sentenced 970 people on these charges, from one to seven years in prison.

26 A German member of the European Parliament, André Brie, refers to this resolution in his letter to the Council of Europe. Available at: <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Notice.do?mode=dbl&lang=en&ihmlang=en&lng1=en,en&lng2=da,de,el,en,es,fi,fr,it,nl,pt,sv,&val=253705:cs&page=>> (Accessed 8 August 2012).

gether to meetings in third countries. Already on my first trip to Larzac, I met Zoran Oštrić and Roberto Spiz from the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia [Antiratna kampanja Hrvatske (ARK)]. Later on, our contacts became more intense and we valued every occasion to meet and hear what our fellow activists from Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina had to say. Refusing to accept division, hate speech and propaganda, or the isolation that comes from ignorance, we strove to have our eyes and ears open to other stories and opinions. We felt both empowered and legitimised by knowing, witnessing, and testifying about “the other side”. It was especially important to establish and maintain links in war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our greatest victory was when two women from Bosnia and Herzegovina attended a ŽUC’s annual meeting for the first time. It was not enough that we were to bear witness and tell their stories, but it was vital to have real people testifying about their work in war zone. I spent the whole day at the border waiting for them and then taking them to Novi Sad where our meeting took place. We felt borders to be our greatest enemy and we strove relentlessly to cross and overcome them. But there again, no understanding or solidarity was shown to civilians or peace activists from European states and their bureaucracies. Our freedom of movement was hampered by visas introduced from the end of 1991 and we were often exposed to humiliating treatment in order to get them. Travelling to “the other side” and meeting fellow activists was just the first step. Overcoming differences or working together was much more complex.

In terms of approach, I always felt that we were more impulsive, radical and rebellious, whereas the peace activists in Zagreb were more systematic and long term oriented. To put it more bluntly, many of us thought they were too complacent with the new Croatian state, whereas many of them thought we were just useless Yugonostalgics. While some of this might be true from today’s perspective, I think much of the difference can be explained out by the contexts in which we operated. No matter how much we opposed it, we were determined by our context and could do little to move beyond it. As I already stated, civil society was only rudimentary in the Communist ruled Yugoslavia, so apart from personal links between artists, intellectuals and some activists (i.e., feminists and environmentalists), we had little to build upon. We met, exchanged views, published them in our books or reports, but had no means for something more concrete. The funding of peace movements and civic activists in the former Yugoslavia came almost entirely from our international supporters and anti-war networks. Needless to say, this sufficed only to sustain our “symbolic” activities. It took years before first common project between CAA and ARK was fully developed in Pakrac. Even more difficult was to bridge differences with activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most of “the war” that we resisted in Belgrade and Zagreb, and certainly the vast majority of the killing, suffering, displacement and destruction, took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, the status of victim does not suffice for anti-war activism to develop and war conditions made it next to impossi-

ble. At the same time, traditional patriarchal and authoritarian structures remained generally unscathed, forbidding any dissent or activism. Earlier on I listed some reasons behind the lack of civic activism in the former Yugoslavia. I strongly believe they were the most manifest in Bosnia and Herzegovina which, unlike the rest of the country, was under the firm rule of local party leaders until the late 1980s. For long we did not have any connections there except for some private links. Thus, when some activism appeared — like groups supporting victims of rape or later the Mothers of Srebrenica — we were eager to build ties, but we remained different type of activists. It was especially difficult to find partners among Bosnian Serbs as we clearly singled out Bosnian Serb leadership as war criminals, which for them was impossible. At the same time, many Bosnian Serbs suffered as much as Bosnian Muslims, especially if they lived in cities under Bosnian Muslim control and the anti-war movement both in Serbia and around the world took very long to highlight this. To illustrate how dangerous it was to undertake any action in Bosnia and Herzegovina, let me just mention that I was arrested once when visiting with a group of Norwegians and we were rescued only with the help of their embassy. However, this was nothing compared to what was still to come in my hometown.

I left Belgrade in 1998 to pursue postgraduate studies in Budapest, ceasing temporarily most of my anti-war and anti-militarist activities. The war in Kosovo and the NATO intervention against Serbia in spring 1999, however, prompted me to act again, supporting Serbian conscientious objectors and deserters who fled to Hungary. In summer 2000, I travelled back to Belgrade to inquire about the troubles ŽUC were experiencing as Milošević's regime became increasingly anxious and repressive. It was then that I was kidnapped and tortured in Belgrade by Milošević's State Security. I was held in a room for 23 hours without water, food or sleep, while being interrogated, beaten, humiliated and threatened by seven agents. In order to be released, I had to admit to undertaking anti-state activities and sign a statement and record a video agreeing to co-operate in the future. Once out, I was devastated and on the advice of lawyers and family, I immediately escaped to Montenegro. After meeting other women who fled, we spent a few days there and then crossed over the "green border" into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Eventually, I landed in Berlin where I applied for asylum. Following Milošević's ousting from power later that year, I dropped my asylum request and with the help of the Humanitarian Law Fund [Fond za humanitarno pravo] in Belgrade, initiated charges against the state of Serbia. Initially, the court in the first instance ruled in my favour and awarded me an apology and compensation. Soon after, however, the High Court overruled the verdict and ordered the renewal of the process. After many years of refusal to co-operate, the State Security finally identified the direct perpetrators who, in turn, denied all of the charges. After ten years and numerous legal and paralegal obstacles and delays, the court in Belgrade, in its second ruling, declared my charges void. For the

most part, this lengthy and burdensome legal process just kept alive for me the humiliations and depravity of Milošević's regime that we got rid of. In July 2012, exactly twelve years later, the Court of Appeal, as the highest legal instance, overturned the previous decisions and ordered the Republic of Serbia to award me three hundred thousand dinars [around 2,500 euros] as compensation for "damage to honour and reputation" inflicted on me by the members of the State Security.

The removal of Milošević and his repressive apparatus after 2000 enabled ŽUC to set up a solid anti-militarist network, consisting of NGOs from many towns in Serbia and Montenegro. The next year, 15 May was celebrated in Serbia in 17 towns simultaneously for the first time, though not entirely without problems.²⁷ Finally, the network was able to openly promote the right to conscientious objection and advocate the shortening of military service and I returned to Serbia to participate in some public events.²⁸ Some years later, conscription was abolished, not as a result of our campaign, but like in the rest of the world, because of the introduction of professional troops that are considered more efficient from a financial and practical point of view.

Thinking about activism

As I began to reflect about my anti-war activism for this chapter, I looked for what others wrote on the topic. Unfortunately, there were only a few analyses beyond snapshot surveys.²⁹ The two authors most analytically concerned with anti-war activism in Serbia were Dević and Fridman.³⁰ Fridman conducted

27 More on the Women in Black website: <www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=16> (Accessed 30 July 2012).

28 See the article on my debate with Ljubodrag Stojadinović and Srđan Knežević: Predrag Dragosavac and Ivana Semerad, "(Da li) rado ide Srbin u vojnike", *Glas Javnosti*, 16 September 2001. Available at: <<http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2001/09/16/srpski/T01091506.shtml>> (Accessed 30 July 2012).

29 Some were mentioned previously, in particular, in footnotes 3, 8, 12–14 and 18. The following overviews have generally covered the independent media much better than the anti-war organisations and initiatives, but common to all is no mention of conscientious objection: Ivan Torov, "The Resistance in Serbia," in Jasmina Udovički and James Ridgeway (ed.), *Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 247–66; Bojana Šušak, "An Alternative to War," in Nebojša Popov (ed.), *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), pp. 479–508. There is also ample literature on the protests organised after Milošević annulled the local elections which saw the opposition gain most cities in 1996. See, e.g., Marija Babović *et al.*, *'Ajmo, 'ajde, svi u šetnju!': građanski i studentski protest 96/97* (Beograd: Medija centar, 1997); Mladen Lazić (ed.), *Protest in Belgrade: Winter of Discontent* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1997); Stef Jansen, "The Streets of Belgrade: Urban Space and Protest Identities in Serbia," *Political Geography*, 20 (2001), pp. 35–55.

30 Ana Dević, "Anti-War Initiatives and the Un-Making of Civic Identities in the Former Yugoslav Republics," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 10 (1997) 2, pp. 119–56; Orli Fridman, "'It Was Like Fighting a War With Our Own People': Anti-War Activism in Serbia During the 1990s," *Nationalities Papers*, 39 (2011) 4, pp. 507–22.

lengthy interviews with me as part of her research into “alternative voices” in resisting war and militarism. I cannot agree more with her conclusion that in “combating denial and silence” we “challenged the boundaries of the existing discourse in Serbia, for which [we] paid the price of marginalization.”³¹ With the distance of ten years, I still think that despite the plurality of resistances in the former Yugoslavia, their persistence over a whole decade and its huge symbolic importance, we have remained marginal. In the process of Yugoslav dissolution and subsequent wars, the vast majority of ex-Yugoslavs supported their war-mongering ethnic leaderships or preferred to stay quiet as most people do in most situations. The lack of a tradition of resistance and political activism was the biggest obstacle we could not overcome. Another obstacle was the hostility spread by the Milošević-controlled media who permanently marked us as “traitors”.

Our marginality might seem contradictory to reports about massive draft evasion and desertion, especially in 1991 and 1992. Yugoslavia’s last defence minister and highest ranked officer, General Veljko Kadijević, insisted that the widespread draft evasion and desertion were the key factors undermining the Army’s capability.³² According to Kadijević, “desertion and draft evasion were organised sabotage which in the critical period of war operations, created a bigger problem than the real strength of enemy forces”.³³ Yet, we only have estimates and outsiders’ interpretations of the extent, motivation and nature of this massive resistance. None of them point to any organised force behind it. Recently the magazine *Vreme* conducted a survey of draft evasion and desertion within the context of the role of JNA in the dissolution of Yugoslavia.³⁴ During the summer and autumn of 1991, an estimated 50,000 mobilised soldiers rebelled and most returned home from the front line or barracks.³⁵ There were dramatic acts of personal revolt such as that of Vladimir Živković from Valjevo, who drove his armoured vehicle all the way to Belgrade and stopped in front of the Parliament. Yet the most traumatic and emblematic was the suicide of Miroslav Milenković at Šid cattle market on 20 September 1991. Just mobilised, Milenković, a father of two from Gornji Milanovac, faced a difficult decision. His unit literally split in two. On one side stood those deemed “patriotic,” who followed the order to cross the border into Croatia and fight. Opposite them stood those deemed “traitors,” who refused. Milenković went between the two columns and shot himself

31 Orli Fridman, “It was Like Fighting a War With Our Own People,” p. 512.

32 Veljko Kadijević, *Moje viđenje raspada: vojska bez države* (Belgrade: Politika, 1993), pp. 125–51.

33 Ibid., p. 165.

34 Ofelija Backović, Miloš Vasić, Aleksandar Vasović, “Spomenik neznanom dezertneru,” *Vreme*, 895, 28 February 2008, available at: <www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=592022&print=yes> (Accessed on 30 July 2012). This lengthy and valuable study unfortunately does not contain references and does not follow academic rigour. It is a journalistic account and part of the larger project on New Armies in Former Yugoslavia funded by the EU Media Fund.

35 Backović, Vasić and Vasović list all major rebellions.

dead. He became a symbol of the senselessness of war. During daily vigils for the war dead, Belgrade anti-war activists collected messages (epitaphs) dedicated to him and published them as the first anti-war book entitled *Grobnica za Miroslava Milenkovića* [A Tomb for Miroslav Milenković].³⁶

Nevertheless, as the *Vreme* survey demonstrates, the reasons for defection were numerous. Some did not want to fight in JNA and preferred to be part of a Serbian army instead. Many complained about JNA unpreparedness, poor equipment, lack of leadership and confusion. Some undoubtedly opposed the civil war and questioned any armed conflict with their former compatriots. Yet, very little of this resistance was articulated and genuinely anti-militarist. There was very little connection between rebelling soldiers or draft dodgers and anti-war activists from Belgrade and other towns. From fear, shame or conformity, those who evaded call-ups preferred to do so in anonymity even when they were in their thousands or often the majority. According to sources known to *Vreme* journalists, the percentage of response to call-ups was around 50% in Serbia and only 15% in Belgrade.³⁷ Thousands were threatened with legal action.³⁸ There were other reasons for those who rebelled for not reacting in connection with the nascent anti-war movement. Initially, we had weak outreach and there was a lack of accessibility or awareness of our actions and existence. In addition, some of us might have suspected whether some forms of their resistance were genuinely anti-militarist. There was also the isolationism and self-righteousness of the Belgrade anti-war activists which contributed to the reticence of the deserters to make contact. Most of the Belgrade activists came from the privileged Yugoslav intelligentsia and establishment, whereas rebelling soldiers came from underprivileged rural areas. There were some exceptions, especially in the northern Vojvodina province, where we established very good links, especially after the rebellion in the ethnic-Hungarian village of Trešnjevac, which ŽUC duly supported.³⁹

Many draft evaders fled Serbia and went abroad. Again there are various estimates, some exceeding a hundred thousand, but none of them could ever be verified. From the beginning of November 1991, men were forbidden to leave Serbia without the approval of local military authorities. This forced some to look for illegal ways to exit the country that was officially never at war. I met some of them later in Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Vienna... A

36 *Grobnica za Miroslava Milenkovića: Beogradani protiv rata* (Belgrade: UJDI, Helsinški parlament gradana, Helsinški komitet, Beogradski ženski lobi, SDSS and Centar za anti-ratne akcije, 1991).

37 Backović, Vasić and Vasović, "Spomenik neznanom dezerteru," p. 2.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Only official figures were announced by the Chief of Staff and government in 1993 as part of the discussion on an Amnesty Law. It entailed 13,672 cases of criminal acts (mostly desertion and draft evasion) up to the end of 1992.

39 Even *The New Yorker* wrote about this tiny village's resistance to war: Vanessa Friedman, "The Talk of the Town, 'Right On, Log On,'" *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1993.

few of them became active in peace and humanitarian organisations that worked in the former Yugoslavia. Some joined with those exiled from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in political or cultural initiatives. Many did not return for a decade and some still have not done so. They remain both the unaccounted victims and victors of the Yugoslav wars.

During these years of war and hatred, like many fellow activists, I was constantly torn between putting the blame for the war and all our related misfortunes on the Milošević regime or the people of Serbia. Rationally, I knew how to judge responsibility and how power works, but being perceived as a “traitor” for years for not supporting the war cause, had a devastating psychological impact. At one point during the 1996 street protests, a fellow activist literally had to hold me in order to prevent me for venting my anger at Milošević’s supporters who came to the protest on his order to discipline rebellious Belgrade. I was so laden with anger that she had to remind me that even they were victims and that we had to refrain from any violent outbursts. They were my people, but I hated them. Only a year earlier, the Croatian Armed Forces, in conjunction with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the so-called operation Storm [Oluja], retook control of the Croatian Krajina region that had been in hands of Milošević controlled local Serb paramilitaries since 1991. During this period, I visited Krajina several times and witnessed the expulsion of all non-Serbs and terrible crimes being committed in our (Serb) name. Barely any locals spoke up as these criminal policies enjoyed official and popular support in Serbia. When attacked in August 1995 and left without Milošević’s support, virtually the entire Serb population of Krajina, (more than 200,000 people), fled to Serbia. It took days, almost a week, for the entire convoy to arrive. Among them, there were many children and elderly, dehydrated, starving, sick and wounded. As this vast human tragedy began evolving in front of our eyes, we immediately decided to go and help this people with all our modest means, even though we never supported Krajina as an entity or policy. For days without end, together with friends from ŽUC, I stood at the border or on the highway handing out water and milk, talking and comforting people in the scorching heat. At the same time, Milošević was in his summer residence high up in the mountains. None of the official Serbian institutions acted to help. Some diehard Serbian nationalists staged a protest rally in central Belgrade, but only a few people showed up.

For over two decades, policies emanating from the Serb leadership were disastrous for the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, including the Serbs themselves. Still many, if not most, Serbs supported them. Even men of my generation who went through similar or worse ordeals than the one I experienced, rarely became politically active and critical. Contemplating my activism, the question that still haunts me is whether and how much desertion or draft evasion was meaningful to anyone else besides the few of us directly involved in anti-war movements. The wars went on and it always seemed

there was enough cannon fodder for the generals and politicians who waged them. The massive draft evasion prompted Milošević and JNA to award volunteers in paramilitary gangs the same status as regular soldiers, that opened the way for some of the most gruesome war crimes committed. Once Yugoslavia fell apart, year after year, I observed how Serbia under Milošević decayed, how its social fabric disintegrated and how its culture and economy were obliterated while pursuing a nationalist cause. Eventually, his regime collapsed, as authoritarian regimes usually collapse, when the leader loses backing from the regime's own structures such as the army or police as they realise that continuing to support him becomes too costly or risky. In addition, international pressure finally united and supported the opposition in a power takeover. For us anti-war activists, the change in regime opened new possibilities, but also raised old doubts. The main focus of our discontent, Milošević, disappeared, leaving behind almost unaltered, structures and mentalities that kept him in power for so many years. Together with other fellow activists from 1990s, I often wondered — did we manage to affect or change any patterns, relationships or modes of thinking in our society? What happened to the energy we found in ourselves and in our anti-war and anti-regime groups? Did we empower others and bring about changes or did we exhaust it on ourselves? Because of the constant pressure we faced from the political and social environment and from our own goals and expectations, we often left problems of interpersonal relations and teamwork unresolved. We tended to prioritise other tasks that could be more easily measured and achieved. Consequently, some of us could not endure the strain. For a long time, we lived at the hectic pace of an activist's life and tried to deny that we were in any danger, so we were completely unprepared for arrests, maltreatment and torture. Finding myself in this situation, I felt terrified and helpless. Today, in retrospect, I see that our problems did not develop so much because of our weakness, but more because we set our own expectations, and perhaps even our principles, too high.

On a more personal note, I am very content that by actively resisting the war, I overcame some of the feelings of guilt and shame I had for leaving my friends in the Army. Being an activist for years, I enjoyed, acquired and shared great values of solidarity, compassion and understanding. I changed forever as I still feel that I embody these values even though I have ceased to be a full time activist. During these years, I was inspired by many remarkable people from all over the world who supported us. I learnt and discovered what no school or books could teach me about life and fellow men and women in precarious times. After I escaped from Belgrade, the most precious aid, comfort and understanding came from my long-term activist friends and our supporters in Germany. Sharing some of my experience for the first time, I want to finish by expressing my gratitude to all of the Women in Black and other friends and anti-militarist activists: Dejan Nebrigić who is not with us anymore, Jovana Vuković, Darko Kovačev, Stevan Čurčija, Igor Seke, Srđan

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