Veterans in Peacebuilding[1]

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Introduction

During the fallout of SFRY and wars in the region of this country, especially after the completion of the bombing of SR Yugoslavia by the NATO forces in June 1999, we faced the existence of a large number of traumatised people who came to us, as well as psychiatrists and psychologists, seeking psychological assistance. The waiting rooms were crowded by lost, anxiety ridden people who expected not only someone to listen to them and understand them, but also to help them alleviate the apprehension that flooded them. The war was over, the armies receded from Kosovo, NATO soldiers entered Kosovo and Serbian ones celebrated 'victory over the aggressor', as the controlled media would have interpreted it. In fact, they celebrated that they lived to see the end of the war

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1 **The text before you is comprised of the parts of the book** *Where have you been, my son?* **by Vladan Beara and Predrag Miljanović, addressing the problem of wartime trauma in the former participants of the wars and the possibilities of their contribution to peacebuilding. Courtesy of the authors of the book, we have reproduced some of its parts which we are certain can significantly contribute to a better understanding of the problems that war veterans face, and the importance of their inclusion in the processes of peacebuilding and dealing with the past in the region of the former Yugoslavia.**
The activities of The Centre for War Trauma of Novi Sad (Association for Mental Health Protection of War Veterans and Victims of Wars 1991-1999) are certainly among the group of pioneer initiatives in providing psycho–social support to veterans from Serbia and Kosovo, affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the entire region of the former Yugoslavia there is next to no readiness of state institutions to address this problem, and therefore this type of initiative gains even more significance and represents a very important support for peace activities that also strive to affirm and encourage a more active inclusion of the population of veterans in peace processes. For the very reason that we consider the work on healing the trauma to be peace work at the same time, we are very glad to have the opportunity to convey at least a part of their rich experience. (editor's note)

in one piece, and then return home. For many Serbian soldiers, the result was more than defeating: during the ten years, some of them took part in some of the five lost wars: Slovenia in 1991, Croatia 1991–1995, Bosnia 1992–1995, Kosovo 1998–1999, NATO 1999.

Following the end of the bombing, in June 1999, a group of psychologists and psychiatrists from Novi Sad founded the 'Society for the Protection of Mental Health of War Veterans and Victims of Wars 1991-1999'. The society was founded with the goal of providing psychological assistance free of charge to war veterans, refugees and all civil victims of wars in the region of SFR Yugoslavia. We have noted that there was a large number of war traumatised people who had no one to turn to for adequate psychological-counselling help. A classic medication based psychiatry service was neither trained nor motivated to provide this type of assistance. A psychiatrist in a medical institution has a maximum of fifteen minutes per patient and uses them primarily for diagnostic purposes and in order to adjust the dosage of medication. On the other hand, many psychiatrists and psychologists have found themselves under the influence of the burn out syndrome, having lived in Serbia during the past ten years, and so were not in a position to provide adequate counselling assistance to people traumatised by wars. Humanitarian organisations provided help primarily for refugees, as well as women and children who were traumatised, whereas on the other hand they avoided any sort of contact with men traumatised by wars, i.e. war veterans. War veterans are a population that many identify as war criminals in and of themselves, and thus any type of assistance to these people is understood as a peril to the credibility of the organisation trying to help them. Participants of the wars, the men, are left to their own devices and those of their families. They try to adapt to peace conditions, and the difficulties and frustration they encounter during this are, as a rule, amortised by their families who suffer along with them. These people, if they largely fail to adapt to the peacetime environment, turn to alcohol, drugs, criminal activities, and can ultimately turn to terrorist activities, individually or as a part of a group.

In Serbia and Montenegro (provisionally!) there are more than 400,000 men, participants of the wars, as well as populations of bombarded towns

and villages, of whom 10–15 % exhibit signs of being traumatised (which is a conservative percentage), and many of them are at the same time unemployed, are military wartime invalids, with no family or with a significantly damaged family environment.

Emotions of a traumatised veteran – when they return from the war

Always, and at all meridians, trauma has the following emotions as its accompanying elements: guilt, depression with self pity, anxiety, hatred, anger, shame. I will elaborate on some parts of my experience with working with veterans.

Guilt is primarily related to something immoral that the veteran did or to something morally just that the veteran failed to do. Guilt is often seen among the veterans if they have been through situations of battle, for example, in which their comrades died. That is when they often accuse themselves of having had to do this or that, and had they done this instead of that, the situation would have looked differently… Sometimes the guilt is linked to situations in which they killed someone. One veteran who was in Vukovar, as a nineteen year old boy during his military service, killed a Croatian soldier in close combat and hasn't been sober for twelve years since that moment. Some veterans feel guilt for having taken part in immoral activities, such as torturing prisoners, raping them or desecrating corpses. A veteran felt horrendous guilt for having taken part in a football-like game, where a severed human head was used as a 'ball'. Some of the veterans feel guilt because they witnessed something, for having let something happen, for not having had reacted differently. Many veterans, the victims, have a feeling of guilt for having let something happen to them.

Feelings of guilt are often displayed by veterans in Serbia, when they display aggression towards their children, their wives, their friends, in situations when they feel such aggression hasn't been deserved. A veteran once felt guilt when he, after a psychotherapy session, started to laugh after many years of not having done so. After that, an intense feeling of guilt ensued, followed by these thoughts: 'These people were killed, and here you are, laughing…'. Some veterans begin to feel guilty when they experience improvement during a session because: '… How can I not feel guilt after all that happened?! Only now am I a proper bastard!'.

The traumatised veterans are frequently hypersensitive; they have 'short fuse' and react with impulsive aggression towards their wives or children for insignificant reasons. A veteran once came to therapy after he had taken his child in his arms who was crying incessantly, and threw it on the bed. Such feelings of guilt are encountered by almost all traumatised veterans in Serbia, except in cases of some forms of personality disorders.

A colleague from Israel once asked whether there was the feeling of guilt among the veterans in Serbia for the suffering and misery of the innocent. We think that a large number of war veterans in Serbia feel that those who tried to 'forcedly carry out secession and exterminate Serbian people in their territories' are the ones to be held responsible for the wars, and they feel the guilt on an individual level for what they personally did or failed to do. The feeling of 'collective' guilt is encountered in Serbia among those people who feel the Serbian side is responsible for the wars and that the Serbian side should by no means have done it.

Being depressed is the sense of the world being unjust and the emotion accompanying it. Depression is, we would say, a dominant emotion among the traumatised veterans. Most frequently experienced is the feeling of injustice related to the sense that 'everyone committed crimes in the war, and we the Serbs are the only ones to be accused', or '… we never killed women and children, and they did, and yet now it is us going to The Hague and they never';… or 'the Croats got help in ethnically cleansing Croatia from the Serbs, Albanians were helped in ethnically cleansing Kosovo, and yet it is us who are tried in The Hague for ethnic cleansing'... The traumatised people expect the culprits to be punished for their crimes, but they have the feeling that other sides avoided the punishment, and that it is only their people who are being punished. It is interesting to note that many Croatian veterans have the exact same feeling, believing that Serbs are turned a blind eye to, and that it is only them, the Croats, who are tried in The Hague. The sense of depression emerges here as a consequence of not being able to stand the injustice of the world and slighting living in such a world. It is often: 'Poor me, the world is treating me so unfairly.

The sense of injustice is often linked to the feeling that their wartime merits are not understood and not valued. Having returned from the war, many veterans expect their suffering to be rewarded, or at least 'adequately treated, with respect'. Instead, they encounter their suffering being treated as their personal matter, and society doesn't seem to care much about them. Not only are they not rewarded, but also they are often unable to realise even what they are entitled to by law. Sometimes they are involved in court procedures with institutions contesting their degree of disability, which they experience as major injustice. Some veterans have lost their jobs. A mobilised reserve soldier, a baker, was wounded in the war in his right arm. He remained disabled. When he recovered, he learned that he was fired from the bakery he worked with, because 'who ever wants a baker who is not able to bake bread'. The veteran, a young man of twenty three, a wounded person, says: 'What do I have of life – I can't get a job as a disabled person, I can't find a girlfriend as a disabled person, what's left for me to expect…?'

Some veterans remained disabled and are still at the rehabilitation centre in Stari Slankamen, because they have nowhere to return to, and it's been twelve years now.

Depression can also ensue as a consequence of self-denigration, belittling or humiliating oneself for what has happened to them. Wounded veterans often tend to see themselves as less worthy because of something, or even to discount themselves as human beings. It often happens that they say: 'What am I now, a freak…' and the like. A man who thinks of himself as a freak feels depressed. Self denigration comes from various failures, especially in terms of situations they could easily control before and now they fail to do so, due to their inability to calm down, control themselves and the like. Self denigration often happens after being rejected by families, loved ones, friends, or even persons they don't even know.

Hatred is usually linked to enemies who have perpetrated all sorts of crimes in the war, but can also be displayed towards members of their own side if their conduct was 'unjust, immoral, improper…' Hatred is felt towards people you no longer see as people but as animals who deserve to be destroyed and

exterminated. Veterans sometimes hate them for their having killed someone of theirs, for having tortured them when they were their prisoners or for having come across their atrocities. A veteran, with profound hatred towards Croats, 'opens' up within the group after a while and tells of a case from a burned and looted Serbian village in Croatia, where they found a child nailed to a door. Another veteran, a member of the Serbian special forces from Kosovo, profoundly hates the Albanians. He says they found devices for torturing prisoners in a cellar of a house in an Albanian village. The veteran says: 'I haven't imprisoned a single Albanian since'. Another Serbian veteran, filled with hatred towards Albanians, says: 'It once happened that they left a child in a cradle and fled from us. We approached, took the child, only to find that the cradle was mined. Everyone in the room died. I have hated them ever since and I would kill the lot of them, seeing as how they are capable of doing such things, sacrificing their own children only to conquer us'.

Hatred is felt for someone who is no longer perceived as a human being, who is viewed as a beast, a villain, for what they do, think or speak and because they are like that, we have the right and a duty to destroy them. Some veterans felt hatred towards the murdered Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and the Republic Government, because they saw them as a traitors' government cooperating with The Hague, getting ready to extradite them all. Unfortunately, many traumatised veterans rejoiced, and some of them even celebrated, when the Prime Minister was killed.

Feeling hurt is a feeling for people who are considered to have belittled, humiliated, tricked us and made fools out of us with their actions. War veterans often feel hurt by the politicians, who they believe have dragged them into the conflict, and now wash their hands and deliver them to The Hague; they started the war and then signed 'capitulation' at the negotiators' table. Some veterans feel hurt by their compatriots who avoided being drafted and participating in the wars. These veterans reason: 'While we were fighting in the war for them, they were developing their businesses, getting rich. Now they have it all and laugh at us, at us who are torn to pieces…'.

Anxiety and tension felt by the traumatised veterans is usually related to fear of losing control if the tension increases. Then, the veteran feels, they can lose control and thus, through uncontrollable behaviour, they can hurt someone. Also, a fear of going mad is often encountered, because they recognise the tension within them as a sign of approaching madness. Our experience, as well as the experiences of our colleagues from the Military Medical Academy from Belgrade, tells us that the dominant issues of traumatised persons is exhibited as anxiety disorder with panic attacks. After the completion of the NATO bombing, the number of people seeking help for symptoms of panic attacks has increased dramatically. Panic attacks happen at the time when the person believes they are in serious danger, that they have to calm down at once or else something horrible will occur – they will go insane, die, have a stroke, they'll be embarrassed and rejected by all. Therefore they panically try to calm down and seek help.

Some veterans fear that they will, if their tension increases, lose control over their behaviour and start to kill people around them, that they will attack some of the people living with them or harm themselves. Some veterans simply live in apprehension, anticipating the end of their abilities to endure the tension, when they will end up as inmates of a lunatic asylum, forgotten or rejected.

War veterans as pillars of peace

'Those who were never hungry don't know the true taste of bread'
Charles Bukowski

Those who were never in a war don't know the true taste of peace, we could say. Even though it is sometimes believed that war veterans are warlike in their essence, we feel it is not as simple as that. A traumatised veteran is a person who values peace highly, but has great difficulties living in it normally after their experiences from the war. The wartime experience often moves a person to think of things that surround them, which they didn't even notice – such as a peacetime life. '… Before the war, I never even thought about peace…', a veteran says and continues: '…It's quite different after the war. Peace means more to you. When you've seen the things that had happened. A worst peace is still better than war'. 'We think little about peace because it goes without saying.

Only after it's been disturbed do we begin to think of how much peace means to us and how we can't do without it. When peace is disturbed, suffering and trouble ensue and that is when we see its significance'… 'How much time does it take for you to become upset, a second, and it takes hours for you to calm down. You tear down a bridge in fifteen seconds, and you build it for years. How much time does it take for you to restore peace? Before the war we never even thought about it. Had the subject been broached earlier, the war would never have happened. We only start to think when the consequences arrive. When you are already familiar with it'.

- There is no true peace after the war… Whether it's peace of mind… The consequences remain.
- When we've found ourselves in the war, our outlook on life inevitably changes. We learn what can happen to us, what we can endure, we face the transience of life, mass death; many lives are extinguished within a single day, you look the other way and the man standing next to you is gone, you don't know if you're going to have lunch with the same person you've had breakfast with. Sometimes you don't even finish your breakfast. You realise you have no control over something you thought you did have control over. Once you've managed to survive the war, you realise how much peace is worth. It would be good not to learn this from your own personal experience.

The voice of immediate participants of the war needs to be heard, because they know what war is, they have seen the suffering of people, their mates, they have lost parts of their bodies. Participants of the wars are not allowed to speak in any country. If that happened, there would be no wars to start with.

- Veterans are rightfully bitter because no one ever asks them anything. Every one of them needs to say that they want to be asked in order for them to realise they are not 'nobody'. It seems to me that people are afraid of hearing the accounts of war veterans, afraid of hearing how much of an evil that is. People are so traumatised that they fear hearing such experiences. Only the person who has tasted a hot chilly pepper can explain it.

Crime and punishment

Complexity of our wars as phenomena. Who is it creating the true image?
Who is it who knows the complete truth?

'People, let's punish the crime only because it is a crime, not only because it is a condition for accessing Europe' – a man once said.

The wars that were led in the region of the western Balkans from 1991 through to 1999 can hardly be viewed in their entirety and thus evaluated properly. People usually tend to judge wars on the bases of the information that they have. It is usually then that they make their judgement, the judgement that is always and necessarily limited, and only after that do they search not for facts that would check that judgement, examine it, but rather those that would confirm it as accurate. That is when they receive the information from the war selectively and fiercely defend their standpoint from any critical questioning. Sometimes they are prepared to kill everyone who does not feel the same – those who 'vilify and lie'. Thus you can see that many people, who at the start of the wars and under the influence of nationalist propaganda, concluded that Serbs are entirely just, that they only defend themselves and don't harm anyone (good guys), simply neglected the masses of facts speaking against this for a long time during the war and after it. They haven't taken into consideration the numerous prisoners' camps, nor Srebrenica, Ovčara and other massacres; burnt down villages, devastated cities, the looted and the killed… In the same way, those who have perceived the Serbian side as the "editor in chief' of these wars, in other words as the 'bad guys', have also selectively adopted information that corroborated their thesis of Serbs as bad guys, and simply overlooked the information on the nationalist strivings of other peoples, of massacres committed against Serbs, of hundreds of thousands of refugees, of the tortured prisoners of Lora, of the killed civilians of Gospić, Bilogora, Knin, Kupres, Kravica and other villages around Srebrenica… All of them feverishly clung to their own conclusions and strived to maintain their judgement – as if letting go of it would mean letting go of one's own self.

People who try to speak about the war from a broad a frame of reference as possible, sooner or later face being perceived as radical nationalists by some, and as national traitors by others. This is not only a trait of the uneducated, but also of some highly educated collocutors. Many people tend to reject those who say anything different, to place them in a category that discredits them as speakers and sever ties with them before they get to know their standpoint in more detail.

Working on psychotherapy with participants of the wars, you get to hear of various experiences that expand your frame of reference and help you learn the reality more broadly and more completely. The problem lies in the fact that this process is often hurtful and doesn't do much for a peaceful night's sleep. But in turn you learn that whatever you have learned about the war is modest and insufficient for you to be able to claim you know the phenomenon of the war.

Obstacles to reconciliation

There have been innumerable crimes in the region of the western Balkans. You will never learn about the majority of them. Some mass crimes were unveiled, some culprits will be tried, and many of the 'smaller fish' will probably pass unnoticed.

Many crimes were committed with great atrocity and sadistic hatred; hatred that is transgenerationally passed from one generation to another, for centuries. In these regions, children grew up believing that 'if we don't get them first, they will kill us all, just as they did that time in the war…' These are the beliefs people carry from their childhood, inherited from their grandmothers and grandfathers, more often than not themselves the traumatised victims or even participants of massacres.

There are many crimes that were never punished, and for this reason there are not healthy foundations for reconciliation; and instead, under the cover of the communist ideology of brotherhood and unity, the remembrance of a traumatic past was attempted to be repressed. The punishments for massacres carried out by the communists were often not even legally founded and justly measured punishments, but were instead massacres against those disagreeing politically and against class enemies. Many were punished unjustly, in order to be able to nationalise their properties more easily.

Crimes were perpetrated out of hatred and revenge, most frequently, often out of fear, and often under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Some people simply had the chance to manifest their psychopathic leanings and jumped at it.

Reconciliation is a long and difficult process. There are many obstacles in this path; I will name a few that I consider to be very important, and overcoming them – essential.

1. **The matter of truth about the war** – Almost all participants in the war, and many who think and speak about the war, in fact strive to make their view of the war affirmed as the only and indisputable one. In order for this their judgement and experience to be accepted by both 'ours' and 'their' sides. Thus, it is a logical consequence of the fact that people who are not heard are the ones talking about the war. To make things even more difficult to resolve, it seems that the two basic epistemologies among many people are – narcissistic and authoritarian ones. The narcissistic epistemology can be reduced to: 'A thing is true because I have experienced it or concluded so'; according to it, everything that is not a part of my experience I don't consider to be of any importance. The authoritarian epistemology could be reduced to: 'A thing is true if an authority says it is true', and therefore, everything that is not said by a leader, a professor or some x–y is not relevant'. People most frequently make a judgement about the war, and then selectively pay attention to the facts that will confirm their judgement, and avoid the ones to test it. The prerequisite for reconciliation is, therefore, accepting the standpoint of there being many various 'truths' about the war and that it is important to set one of them out and say: 'This is the right one and the others are wrong'. Accepting different experiences and views on what had happened is a prerequisite for a more tolerant dialogue.
2. **The matter of humanity** – The psychological preparation of a population for a war entails propaganda activities. Through propaganda, the dehumanisation of adversaries takes place. Its goal is to motivate one's own population to kill. You are not allowed to kill a person, but you are allowed to kill an 'ustasha, chetnik, a commie, a baliya, the beasts…' Members of the

other side are devoid of the status of human beings and they are represented as non-humans, beasts, villains. In fact, not only is one allowed to kill such creatures, not only is it good, but there is also a duty to do so. Reconciliation entails restoring the humanity of those we need to be reconciled with. Forgiving the 'sins' entails restoring the image of another as a human being, regardless of what they have done. Some people have committed crimes, but there are still just people who have done something. Their act makes them candidates for punishment or medical treatment, but does not make them devoid of humanity. After all, haven't we been taught for thousands of years that the ability to perpetrate crimes belongs only to humans.

3. **Individualisation of responsibility and punishment** – The standpoint that some people have perpetrated X or Y, whereas other haven't, and by justly punishing the former, it makes it possible to realise that the justice has been met. That the enclosed gestalt is an enclosed whole.
4. **Emotional problems – guilt** – Guilt as an emotion hinders the healthy process of overcoming trauma and accepting responsibility for what has been done. It is a feeling that a person has when they believe they should (under no circumstances) have allowed themselves to do something, and since they have, they are evil and bad, a damned one who deserves to be punished. A person who imposes guilt on themselves usually:

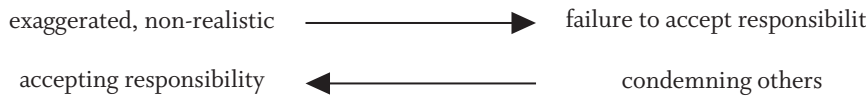
- tends to punish themselves, over and over again, in order to relieve the painful feeling
- avoids all contact with the victim and thus misses the opportunity to repair the damage
- seeks contact with the victim, but in order to redeem themselves; thus, not to repair the damage, but to extort, receive forgiveness, in order to relieve the painful feeling of guilty conscience.
- drinks in excess, takes drugs and various medications in order to alleviate the painful feeling
- concludes they are bad, that they will never change and will continue to act the same

- attacks the victim all over again, transforms the guilt into hatred on the principle that: 'It's not me who is bad, it's you who is bad for **constantly** imposing the feeling of guilt upon me'.

These are some of the reasons for which I consider the feeling of guilt to be a bad foundation for overcoming a traumatic experience and establishing good neighbourly relations. Feelings of guilt either lead to self-destructive or destructive activities. Contrary to that, feelings of regret are constructive and can lead to a healthy reconciliation. With feelings of regret, a person knows that it was their actions that were bad, not they as a person, and they are thus more prepared to work on themselves in order to prevent it from ever happening again. The feeling of regret makes it possible for a person to accept responsibility for what they have done. The feeling of regret and accepting responsibility can be described by the words: 'Yes, I did that, I am sorry for that, but that doesn't make me non-human. I wish to repair the damage and I am trying not to ever do it again'. Regret makes it possible to see one's own responsibility in more realistic terms and that of the other agents in the situation.

It is thus that the damage can be settled, that the damaged ones can be helped, instead of seeking redemption. Regret makes it possible for a person to apologize, ask for forgiveness, instead of begging, mourning and making non-realistic promises with the sole goal of relieving the painful and heavy condition.

Regret is constructive because instead of punishing oneself with punishments with suffering, the person takes more care of compensating for the damages and changing one's behaviour in the future. The guilt oscillates between:



There certainly are more hindering factors, but an attempt to elaborate on all of them requires a more serious study than this text.