

Confronting the Past and Involving War Veterans for Peace:

Activities by the Centre for Nonviolent Action,
Sarajevo, Belgrade

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1. Introduction

The Centre for Nonviolent Action (*Centar za nenasilnu akciju* – CNA) was set up in September 1997 by Nenad Vukosavljevic, a peace activist from Belgrade, with support of the German NGO *Kurve Wustrow*, an education centre for nonviolent action.¹ His goal was to strengthen civil society in the region by promoting nonviolence, peaceful approaches to conflict, and tolerance. CNA soon grew into a team of committed young people from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia-Montenegro – women and men with a diverse set of backgrounds and biographies, ranging from conscientious objectors to war veterans – who all wanted to contribute to transforming conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Occasionally, international volunteers from regions that had also seen violent conflict, for example Northern Ireland, were invited to join the team. On the whole, though, the initiative was carried through by local activists who subscribe to principles of grassroots democracy. In 2001, complementing the office in Sarajevo, an office was established in the centre of Belgrade. Currently, the team consists of eight members – four in Sarajevo, four in Belgrade – who jointly organise CNA's activities.²

Main activities include training in nonviolent conflict transformation for persons who have multiplying potential across the region, fostering cross-

¹ The NGO *Bildungs- und Begegnungsstätte für gewaltfreie Aktion e.V., Kurve Wustrow*, located in Lower Saxony, gained substantive experience in organising nonviolent action against nuclear power in Germany and has developed a range of education programmes as well as assessment training courses for international peace activists (see www.kurviewustrow.org).

² Milan Colic, Ivana Franovic, Helena Rill and Nenad Vukosavljevic work in the Belgrade office; Sanja Deankovic, Adnan Hasanbegovic, Nedžad Horozovic and Tamara Smidling are located in Sarajevo.

regional networks and advising partner organisations. From 1997 to 2001, the team developed and offered various training formats (basic training and “training for trainers”) that translated the concept of nonviolence (“*nenasilje*”) into the regional context and aimed to spread it widely throughout the Balkans. These training programmes have created an impressive cross-border network of experts from the education sector, the media and the NGO community (for a more detailed account, see Fischer 2001).

Starting in 2002, CNA has increasingly focused on activities that aim to initiate and support a self-critical process of “Dealing with the Past” in Yugoslavia’s successor states. For this purpose, CNA organised public discussion forums in which war veterans from all sides spoke about their personal experiences and opinions. Fourteen such public forums were held between 2002 and 2004 in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Serbia-Montenegro. Sixteen war veterans of Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian origin have gone through the process of preparing themselves for such public debates together with CNA. Beyond the public forums, all of CNA’s pedagogical materials – from training manuals to film documentaries for TV and video screenings – aim to motivate people to reflect critically and honestly on their role and their personal responsibility before, during and after the wars.

From the very beginning and during the various phases of CNA’s work, the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management has supported it with supervision and advice on self-evaluation, strategic and organisational development and fundraising. Moreover, Berghof Center staff have conducted several external evaluations.³

This article summarises the CNA approach and discusses the organisation’s most notable experiences to date. It identifies successes, yet does not avoid the difficulties that CNA has continued to face in “Dealing with the Past” and in motivating people to opt for nonviolent means in shaping societal relations after the wars. The next section deals with the development of CNA’s training concept and activities. Section 3 looks in detail at the “Dealing with the Past” project, including lessons learned. The final section presents conclusions and looks at the challenges for future peace work in the region.

³ In June 2001 a first evaluation was carried out, focusing on the concept, methods, and impact of the training on participants, as well as on multiplying and networking effects and the question of how CNA is perceived by its partners (Fischer 2001). In November 2003, Oliver Wils of the Berghof Research Center and Natascha Zupan (who then served as regional peacebuilding adviser for the Swiss embassy) undertook a review of CNA’s activities upon the invitation of CNA and on behalf of the Berghof Research Center. Some of the results of this evaluation have been published as a Berghof Occasional Paper (Wils 2004). The comprehensive version of the evaluation report (Wils/Zupan 2004) can be downloaded from the websites of CNA or the Berghof Research Center.

2. Training, Networking and a Regional Approach for Confronting the Past

From its foundation in 1997 onwards, CNA has developed a training approach for nonviolent conflict transformation and peacebuilding. The range encompasses basic training, advanced training and training for trainers.⁴ The approach is explicitly “regional” and reaches across borders, which means that the team worked with people from all post-Yugoslav states from the beginning (most participants came from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Macedonia). In most of the training courses, participants and teaching teams were from multiethnic backgrounds. CNA’s main target group are young adults, aged between 20 and 35 years, working in NGOs, political parties, youth organisations and youth centres or as journalists and teachers – in short, people who may spread their skills in their communities.

Box 1: CNA’s Training Approach

CNA’s training activities are intended to promote social and conflict management skills, focusing on *awareness raising and empowerment*. They aim to promote social responsibility and activism as responses to injustice, rather than solely approaching conflict on an interpersonal or psychological level. Training programmes include:

- a) theoretical knowledge of conflict transformation, historical development of concepts, and practical approaches to nonviolence
- b) empathy, dealing with stress, tolerance, ability for self-reflection, ability to assess one’s own opportunities and limits, ability to work in a team, self-confidence, and the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own actions within a group or society
- c) techniques for team work and work organisation, conflict analysis and communication.

The training modules include 1) nonviolent communication, 2) team work and decision-making, 3) violence/nonviolence, 4) perception, 5) understanding of conflict, 6) dealing with differences, 7) gender issues, 8) dealing with prejudices,

⁴ Sixteen basic training workshops (each lasting ten days) were held in various places in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro in the period 1997–2003, with participants coming from all over former Yugoslavia. CNA also conducted three training for trainer (TfT) courses (each lasting 6 months) and, after an extension of the programme in 2002, another one-year TfT course. Funds have thus far been provided by private donors, the German and Swiss Foreign Ministries, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Research, church-based organisations and a number of international donors. Since 2003, CNA Belgrade has also been supported through the Civil Peace Service programme (ZFD) of the BMZ.

9) identity and “national identity”, 10) leadership, 11) creative conflict transformation, 12) power and action, and 13) dealing with the past.

The training sessions focus very strongly on participatory working methods. The team proceeds on the basis that, in general, the participants should learn from each other and develop their skills together within the group. The trainer’s role is therefore limited to providing inputs which facilitate this process. Formal lectures and seminars rarely feature in CNA’s work.


In general, the training takes place in small groups, or sometimes with the whole group, and uses primarily practical exercises: forum theatre methods, either with drama or group poses to simulate conflict situations, and role-play, planning and simulation games, with occasional written and oral group work. Reports by persons with practical work experience, and the use of a variety of media for visualisation purposes, are also key elements of the training process. Another principle is that the trainers should learn as well.

The role-plays are intended to facilitate the learning experience within the group. Attitudes and behaviour are challenged and modified if necessary. The play simulates reality, which participants can act out and “test” in a safe environment, without impact on real events. The role-play is designed to help foster the ability to recognise one’s own and others’ behaviour, present and analyse conflicts within the group and in other areas of life, and to raise awareness of the social and political context of the problems experienced.

The planning, decision-making and simulation games address conflicts and problems through play and, through a sharing of roles, identify possible solutions and illustrate the complexity of decisions and alternatives. As with role-play, the participants learn from their conflict with others how processes of social and political interaction operate; they also identify the information they need for action and the conditions which facilitate or impede solutions.

CNA has, in many respects, strongly professionalised its training work for peace and conflict transformation over the last few years. Evaluations have helped focus that development. On top of its workload, the team has also prepared a number of pedagogical tools, among them a range of training material. CNA’s training manual “Nenasilje”, which has been published in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, Macedonian, Albanian and Hungarian versions, has been very positively received across the whole region.⁵

⁵ See www.nenasilje.org and www.berghof-center.org. A print version is also available in different local languages, for which the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies provided financial support.



The reshaped concept of the “training for trainers” (TfT) resulted in a significant increase in people who could further spread the skills and capacities of dealing with conflict nonviolently (the multiplier effect). Once the training ended all TfT participants were supported in initiating projects in their own communities and organisations. Support included ongoing opportunities for consultation during follow-up workshops and – as much as the small budget allowed – some material or financial contributions.

This sustained effort of training, peace education and providing spaces for encounter helped create a robust network of individuals and organisations who support CNA’s goals and principles throughout Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo) and Macedonia. Thanks to a careful selection of participants the network now comprises people who work in the education sector and the media, and people who work with youth. It also includes members of the different political parties who are active in a variety of local or regional/ cross-border initiatives. CNA continues to use this network by calling upon its members to serve as trainers or resource persons in further activities.

During their different activities for peace education, CNA members became more and more aware that “Dealing with the Past” is a key challenge and precondition for sustainable peacebuilding. CNA decided to put emphasis on this topic in 2002, also because the team considered the existing initiatives to deal with the past as not satisfactory. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in their view, was a motor for public debates but also gave support to nationalist discourses in some regions. Public discussions on the past were still very limited in the entire post-Yugoslav region. CNA found that most of the discussions simply reproduce and reinforce the widespread notion of victimisation, and that there is a lack of readiness to face individual and collective responsibility for past events. Up to then, each conversation on the subject of these wars seemed to “imminently point out one side (one nation) as an exclusive sinner – and hence, logically, another side as an exclusive victim, in the belief that all that happened is best forgotten” (CNA 2002a:4). According to CNA, *overcoming the “victimisation”, taking responsibility for the past, and refusing to accept violence as a means to deal with conflict or implement politics* are essentials for the post-Yugoslav societies.

Starting in 2002, a new target group was thus brought into focus with the programme “Dealing with the Past”: war veterans – former soldiers who had participated in the wars that ensued when Yugoslavia fell apart. Public events (entitled “How I found myself in war and how to reach sustainable peace?”) created a space for veterans from the various warring factions to openly address their experience. The debates were moderated by journalists and based on very

personal accounts by the war veterans in which they talked about why they had participated in the war, what their experiences during the war were, and in what way they evaluated their own role with hindsight. They also spoke about ways in which they themselves tried to make sure that there was going to be a peaceful future.

CNA started the “Dealing with the Past Project” in order to raise public awareness that the past should not be ignored but has to be addressed by society. The idea issued from the “wish to open a new field ... for facing the past of the society ... , but also with the individual responsibility of each and every one of us” (CNA 2002a:4). The intention was to initiate conversation within a local community. One important intention was also to move away from the centre (Belgrade) and to work with people from smaller towns who have less opportunity to hear stories about the war from persons from Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina. CNA wished to approach many issues from the very base, with less of an emphasis on mere facts (historical, political) and more on the feelings of people from different sides, who recount their personal dramas, fears and dilemmas and their personal insights into ways of achieving sustainable peace in this area. It was CNA’s wish to include people from all the sides involved in the conflict, “outside of enclosed circles in which the likeminded people address exclusively each other” (CNA 2002a:4). The group of ex-combatants who have active experiences in war-fighting, but also suffered from past violence, seemed to be a good partner for this endeavour.

Former combatants represent a large group in the region. In some regions, for instance Bosnia-Herzegovina, combatants are often considered as heroes who defended their homeland against aggression. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Croatia. But in some regions they also tend to be marginalised, especially in Serbia, where the feeling of lost wars is widespread. According to CNA’s experiences, many war veterans suffer from personal losses and traumatisation.⁶ Still, initiatives for psychosocial assistance for this part of the population are rare so far.⁷ Programmes for social reintegration of war veterans,

⁶ The Center for Trauma, a psychosocial counselling project in Southern Serbia, estimates that at least one third of Serbian war veterans show symptoms of traumatisation. The situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina presumably does not differ significantly from this picture. Trauma refers both to an individual intra-psychic dimension and a collective, macro-social dimension, which are interwoven. It implies a notion of tearing, rupture, of structural breakdown; it can only be analysed with reference to a specific context and has to be understood as a process that develops sequentially, see Becker (2004:423) and *also the article by Monika Kleck in this book.*

⁷ There are very few organisations working with traumatised men and ex-soldiers in the Balkan region at present. One of these is CORRIDOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see www.heks.ch) and the Center for Trauma in Novi Sad, focusing on Southern Serbia.

which have been implemented in Bosnia-Herzegovina for instance, have focused primarily on economic concepts and neglected the psychosocial dimension.⁸

CNA considered working with ex-combatants from the different war regions for some years. This was partly due to the fact that participants in training workshops repeatedly announced that they had been involved in the fighting. Also, one member of the current CNA staff himself had a combatant history as a conscript in the Bosnian Army. Moreover, the team expected that war veterans who participate in a constructive dialogue about war experiences can serve as important multipliers, especially if they are active in war veterans' associations. So they approached such associations in order to find out whether they could provide contacts with ex-combatants who might be interested in this endeavour.⁹ CNA undertook several exploratory visits to local branches of veterans' associations in order to investigate whether they would support the panel debates and – which was also important – to get more information on the specific situation in the respective community.¹⁰

CNA found that as a result of their traumatisation, some former combatants are motivated to participate in activities enabling them to address their war experiences together with others who had a similar experience. CNA could successfully involve former combatants as speakers at public events in a pilot phase which took place in Serbia-Montenegro. To organise the public forums, the project team received a lot of support from local partners in the respective towns,¹¹ yet carried out a major part of the organisational tasks themselves. CNA spent a lot of energy talking to war veterans' organisations, media and local authorities in order to secure their general support in the cities in which the panels took place.

⁸ This has been pointed out by war veterans' associations as an important deficit, see Heinemann-Grüder/Pietz 2003:31.

⁹ The veterans who joined the pilot phase belonged to 1) Soldiers' Association of Medveda; 2) Association of Defenders of Croatia; 3) Association of Bosniak Defenders of the Croatian Homeland War; 4) Association of Volunteers and Veterans of the Homeland War of the Croat Republic of Herceg-Bosna.

¹⁰ This background information facilitated the decision where to organise the forums; another important criterion was, of course, the existence of local partner organisations who would assist in organising the events.

¹¹ Local partners in Serbia were the Youth Culture Club – Indjija, the URBAN-IN – Novi Pazar, the Centre for Development of Civil Society PROTECTA – Nis, and Millennium – Kragujevac.

3. The “Dealing with the Past” Approach in Detail

3.1. The Pilot Phase: Public Forums in Serbia-Montenegro (Summer 2002)¹²

In June 2002, a series of public forums was held in smaller towns in Serbia (Indija, Nis, Novi Pazar and Kragujevac). The speakers were Adnan Hasanbegovic (CNA staff member) from Sarajevo, Gordan Bodog from Zagreb, and Nebojsa Jovanovic and Sasa Dujovic, both from Belgrade. The forum was facilitated by Katarina Katanic, a professional TV journalist who had participated in CNA’s basic training and the “training for trainers” programme.

The debates were entitled: “*From the past: How I found myself in war. Towards the future: How to reach sustainable peace?*” The course of the debates followed these questions. After an introduction, the speakers answered the question how they found themselves in war and what they felt. In the second part, they expressed their views on “Dealing with the Past”, and obstacles and chances for creating sustainable peace in the regions they come from. In the third part, they had discussions with the audience. The audience could ask questions, express their own opinions and talk about their own experiences. Finally the panel speakers answered the question on the next steps towards sustainable peace. Moreover, the audience could leave written messages for the organisers and speakers in a guest box. The topics of questions and discussions revolved around personal issues – ranging from questions on what the speakers would do if war broke out again, and whether they really could feel empathy for the other side, to issues related to regional politics, such as the international involvement, and especially the role of the international community in BiH and the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

The views and voices of the speakers have been documented by CNA and the news magazine *Vreme* (see Box 2).

¹² Information relating to the preparatory and pilot phases of the project (sections 3.1 and 3.2) is based on the study by Wils (2004).

Box 2: Views and Voices of War Veterans (Pilot Phase, 2002)

Adnan Hasanbegovic (born in Sarajevo 1973) took part in the war as a member of [the] Bosnia-Herzegovina Army from 1992–1995.

He speaks about the atmosphere in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the beginning of the 1990s ... and also about the specific mood in Sarajevo in those days: “When the national parties won the elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the war psychosis began. I, like many other people in Bosnia, found myself in an extremely tricky position. I can certainly say that we had no clue how horrid all that was to happen to us could be. And even when the war started in Slovenia and Croatia, we thought it would not reach Bosnia.”

In April 1992, war in Bosnia-Herzegovina began. The siege around Sarajevo was closed and the first grenades were fired from the surrounding hills. “In May, the first missiles fell in front of my building. To the question on how did I get to be in this war, I can only answer that the war came under my window, found me at my place somewhere. Things went on much too fast and I was scared and confused.” Soon afterwards, the temporary government and temporary army were formed, and in June 1992 Adnan received an order to report for service. “Three months later I get transferred to the front, in Zlatiste above Sarajevo, where my personal war story begins. I wasn’t mentally ready for all that, I was scared and felt sick. People started dying, and the horror of siege in the city began – no electricity, no water, no food... I was in all that with a motivation of defending my city from someone who’d attacked me, from some nationalists who wanted to tear us apart.”

The following two years were marked by the horrible seal of war experience and all kinds of violence, but also the inner questioning and rethinking the whole context of war. The great desire for the war to stop, because, in Adnan’s words, it was a “complete disorder of everything”, was followed by heavy emotional breakdowns and lack of capacities to endure all that was happening.

He describes his feelings at the end of the war, when it was finally ended with the signing of the Dayton Agreement, as follows: “When the bombing of the Bosnian Serbs’ troops took place, I wasn’t happy, but felt that as a great relief because I just wanted the war to stop. When the Dayton Agreement took place, I’d never felt happier.” The first post-war years, for him, were marked by the attempts to overcome the post-traumatic syndrome in which he, as he says, had great help in many books he’d read, but also turning to religion and God. Parallel to that, the process of getting to know the ways and possibilities of peace activism in these regions took place, and from 1998 he himself became involved in this infinite field of action called “peacebuilding”.

Nebojsa Jovanovic was born in Loznica in 1963 and participated in the war in Croatia as a member of the Yugoslav Army reservists from 1991–1992.

He says he had not gone to the war of his own choice and his own volition, but as a reservist receiving the order to report.

He vividly describes the mood in Loznica, a border town in the Drina valley, in the days when the flames of the war grew ever higher and when more and more people from Serbia (officially not participating in the war) were being involved in the war: “When we’d heard that we would be mobilised, we wondered why that would happen in Serbia, when everything was so far from us. At that point I thought that a real war wouldn’t take place, that the Yugoslav Army only needed to demonstrate their force and thereby prevent the conflict between the Territorial Defence of the Serbian Autonomous Region of Krajina and the newly formed Croatian army.” The resistance to sending Serbian boys to war was also present in those days, and Nebojsa describes a scene when, at the beginning of July 1991, the citizens of Loznica came out in the streets and stopped a military convoy moving, allegedly, towards Derвента. Still, as was the case in many other places at the beginning of the 1990s, here it was merely one of the attempts to prevent the war, the attempts that were weaker than the battle calls.

September 1991 was the month when Nebojsa left for the front – to Hrvatska Kostajnica at first, and then to Glina, Gornji Vidusevac, Karlovac... Coming back from the war, he hasn’t been spared the inner breakdown, further exacerbated by the situation in Belgrade, where no one seemed to be aware of what was happening a couple of hundred kilometres away. About the ways in which he experienced the war and his own participation in it, he says:

“My participation in the war is the participation of a man who was not led by his own will and who tried to understand the objective of that war, which I haven’t been able to understand to this very day. My prevailing feeling about this war is the insult that war brings to an individual, taking his personal integrity away and turning him into a part of the multitude, a simple figure that one or the other general might need. I felt it as turning myself into a gun-carrying instrument.”

He believes that what he’s currently doing is an aspect of reconsidering the past and adds that he’s of the opinion that this is the way in which the conversations should have been [conducted] after World War II – many things would seem different now if that had been the case.

He doesn’t fail to mention the responsibility of the politicians, but also the “scum from all three sides”, who turned this war into business and had previously arranged deals in it. That’s exactly why it is important, thinks Nebojsa, to overcome the emotional block that exists within us all and for those who participated in the war to find the space to state their opinions.

Sasa Dudovic was born in Belgrade and joined the Serbian Guard and Republika Srpska Army in the period 1991–95.

According to his own words, he was brought up in a patriarchal Orthodox family, who celebrated *slava*, a traditional Serbian religious holiday, and had “some sense of state, nationality and nation”. Apart from the influence of the family and the values transferred there, he emphasises the influence of school and what was taught there about the sufferings of Serbian people throughout various periods.

By the time the interethnic conflicts began to sharpen, he was 25, had his own family, and a job. About his view on the situation at that time, he says: “The war caught me by surprise, but I started to feel anger and revulsion about World War II being repeated with all those extinctions of Serbs. I was of the opinion that this war was forced upon the Serbian people.”

After the armed conflicts in Croatia had begun, he was one of the many citizens of Serbia who received an order to join the armed forces. The potential destination was Vukovar, but Sasa didn't want to answer the call because he didn't want to be in the same squad with the officers who, in his opinion, brought all this about.

At the same time, the majority of the media in Serbia was constantly reporting on the atrocities performed against the Serbian people. Partly under the impression of such an image, Sasa voluntarily joined up and went to Lika. After a short time in the battlefields in Croatia, he started experiencing his first dilemmas about this way of solving the problems, as well as about the relation between the media image and the reality which he found there. He was wounded for the first time in September 1991, but returned to the same front. After being wounded for the second time (in December of the same year), and the recovery that lasted for a few months, he returned to the battle, this time in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Sarajevo front. He remained there until the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Explaining the reasons that drove him to spend so much time in the whirlpool of war, he states that war is a special kind of drug, a kind of opium. “I was getting deeper and deeper into it. You start thinking you're big, strong, you have the uniform, the weapon.... All the time I was being bitten by a doubt, but opium is stronger than the doubt and it goes on until you see a dead friend and start asking yourself WHY?”

He says that his feelings during the participation in the war were mixed and divided. “I often wonder if I'd been cheated, and if yes, by whom. Was it my dad who brought me up as an Orthodox Serbian, was it the society, history? I felt obliged and took the gun at that point. It was the worst possible way to chose. I'm not sorry for being in the war, because I thought I was doing the right thing, but I'm sorry this war ever happened.” Thinking about how to deal with the burden of the past, he accentuates the opinion that we all bear responsibility for the previous events because we have lightly accepted what had been served to us by the politicians from the “travelling caravan”. That's where he starts from his own responsibility for taking the gun in his hands so easily.

After the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended, he returned to Belgrade and was forced to face extreme hardship and a completely unsolved status, because, for the current regime, Serbia never took part in the war. At that time he began a struggle to assert the rights of the invalids and the families of the soldiers who perished, and it's the struggle he fights to this day.

Abstracts from CNA 2002b:6-15 (edited).

The number of visitors to the first public forums reached between 50 and 70. The reactions were quite mixed and often very encouraging, also according to statements concerning the public forums in random interviews which the CNA team conducted the day after the events took place. The media presence was satisfying. TV stations, radio and newspaper journalists took part either in the press conferences or the forums. The forums were broadcast and the public hearings were widely discussed as they were documented in special reports published by the daily *Vreme*.¹³

During the pilot phase in Serbia, CNA also had to deal with resistance to the project on two occasions: at one public hearing, a journalist seriously questioned the credibility of the panel moderator by complaining about her past employment in a newspaper close to the Milosevic regime. In this situation, the team could build on the trust that had already developed with the moderator, which proved to be very important. On another occasion the right-wing faction of the local war veterans' association tried to obstruct the panel debate. But the debate continued as planned and the team invited the troublemakers to participate. Some of them accepted the invitation. In the end, the discussion was held and proved to be successful.

After the first series of public forums, CNA started to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the approach. Based on internal and external evaluations, the team identified a number of important lessons and conclusions for the further development of the project. The team decided to spend more energy on communication with journalists, to give high importance to cooperation with associations of former soldiers and disabled veterans, to involve more local organisations in arranging the panels and to balance the discussion by focusing more on topics related to the future ("How to reach sustainable peace").

An important lesson that CNA learned was how important it is to find the right speakers for the public forums. Some of the speakers in the first forum held public positions (one was the vice-president of one of the two major Serbian war veterans' associations, the other had a reputation as a history expert), and CNA had the impression that they tried to use the public forums for their own agendas. The team therefore concluded that it would be important to better prepare the speakers and to bolster the process of mutual empowerment between the speakers during the public forums. CNA decided to conduct *preparatory training workshops* with the intention of creating an additional element of trust and a mutual relationship with the former combatants. In 2002 and 2003, several training courses were held. They focused on communication,

¹³ See *Vreme* No. 600, 4 July 2002. CNA translated these articles, see CNA 2002b.

mutual perception, personal experiences related to the war, violence and peacebuilding, expectations and fears regarding the participation in the process of “Dealing with the Past”. The training included simulation of panels. The preparatory workshops contributed much to the success of the forums in Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia.

In 2003, two further public forums were held in Bosnia-Herzegovina (one in the FBiH and one in the RS), two training-workshops with former combatants were held in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and a further round of public forums was conducted in Serbia (3) and Montenegro (2). In 2004, CNA held another round of public forums in Serbia and Montenegro.¹⁴ CNA also continued organising public forums in Bosnia.

3.2. Public Forums in Bosnia-Herzegovina (2003–2004)

In 2003, two public forums were organised in Bosnia, in Zenica and Banja Luka. Another three public forums were held in Nevesinje, Gornij Vakuf-Uskoplje and Sarajevo in 2004. The places where the forums were to take place were selected according to the following principles: CNA only organised forums in towns where they found truly motivated local partners. Moreover, they wanted to select “small and closed communities that in a way offer a micro-picture of the war that was going on in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, and “that are outside of main media, cultural as well as political happenings”. CNA also wanted to include communities with a difficult or divided political context (like Nevesinje and Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje). It wanted “to tear down the cliché according to which those communities are mentioned only when an [interethnic] incident occurs, and give them the chance to be mentioned by the media in the context of peace initiatives”. Finally, the team tried to organise the forum in Sarajevo, “which is not only (the) media and political centre of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also has quite a special place in this region when it comes to the story about crimes and dishonour of the wars of the 1990s” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:8).

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Public Forums in Zenica and Banja Luka (2003)

The first forum was held in Zenica (FBiH) on 15 March 2003. It was organised in cooperation with the Zenica-based partner organisation Sezam. The second forum was organised in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska) on 30 March 2003 with assistance from the Centre for Informative Decontamination

¹⁴ One forum was held in Vlasotince (Southern Serbia) and another in Novi Sad (North Serbia). A third one took place in Kraljevo in Central Serbia in November, followed by two forums in Montenegro.

of Youth. The reaction of the audience and the media varied widely. In Zenica, about one hundred visitors came to the forum. Most of them were young people and NGO activists. The media showed high interest: federal TV even initiated a panel discussion that was broadcast directly after the main evening news. In Banja Luka, only 40-50 people attended the forum; however, many representatives of the media were present. Reflecting upon the two forums in Bosnia-Herzegovina, CNA felt highly motivated to continue the project, due to the open discussions and encouraging statements from the audience and the media.¹⁵

Public Forum in Nevesinje (November 2004)

The forum was held on the local Municipal Hall premises on 19 November 2004 with the help of the Info-Centre Nevesinje as a local partner.¹⁶ For CNA it was very important to have this forum in Nevesinje, as “rigid nationalistic structures are still in power there, while the difficult economic situation affects the majority of the population. Therefore, it doesn’t seem like there’s too much space for discussion about war crimes and [the] exile of [the] non-Serb population from that area, while the past is still seen through the nationalistic glasses” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:9).

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As in the previous forums, the debate consisted of three parts: 1) speakers’ stories regarding their motivation to go to war, 2) their views on the need to build sustainable peace in the region and the ways in which they can contribute in their own communities, and 3) questions from the audience. The speakers re-examined their own “side” and condemned the war crimes committed by the armies they had belonged to during the war. They also mentioned various forms of discrimination in their own communities which contributed to the war. Speakers tried to send clear messages of peace, which, judging by the atmosphere, touched the audience. It was much appreciated that these stories were told by “ordinary people who had fought in the war and who were ready to talk about the painful things and ... share their own reflections with the others” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:10).

Although there were not that many questions from the audience, some

¹⁵ The speakers at the forums were Adnan Hasanbegovic and Nermin Karacic from Sarajevo, both former members of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Army, a veteran from Banja Luka and former member of the Republika Srpska Army, a former member of the Croat Defence Council from Mostar and a former member of the Republika Srpska Army from Sarajevo.

¹⁶ Speakers of the forum were: Novica Kostic from Vlasotince, Serbia (former reserve soldier of the Yugoslav Army), Nermin Karacic from Sarajevo (former member of the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina), Marko Martinic from Split, Croatia (ex-soldier in the Croatian Army) and Vojo Vukovic from Nevesinje (former combatant of the Republika Srpska Army).

people wanted to talk to the participants afterwards and shared some of their dilemmas regarding the war in these private talks. In conclusion, CNA regarded this forum as “a small step towards an honest and open discussion about the past and the war ... , [as] it opened up some other perspectives for people when they think about their own responsibility for violence committed in the past and the existing discrimination in the societies” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:10). Unfortunately, no one from the veterans’ associations and no representatives of the local authorities attended the event, although they all declared their support and welcomed the organisation of the forum in Nevesinje.

Public Forum in Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje (November 2004)

This forum was held in the local post office in the municipality of Gornji-Vakuf on 30 November 2004.¹⁷ The town is a community divided between Croats and Bosniaks after the armed conflicts between the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Croat Defence Council. Although the local authorities and some institutions were formally united in 2002, it did not affect the atmosphere amongst the people who remained firmly within their “tribes”, each on their side of the street that divides the town into two imaginary parts. Nevertheless, CNA found that there are people ready to break new ground for communication and, through their activities, help other people to get to know each other and spend time together, thus slowly melting fixed prejudices between people of Croat and Bosniak ethnic identity. From this group, the Youth Centre Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje (Anita Grabner and Jasminka Drino Kirlic) functioned as local partners.

Although CNA had been afraid that no one would come to the forum because of this background, when the hearing started the auditorium was full of women and men of all ages who were listening attentively. The speakers expressed the fear and sorrow that war brings and said that any combatant could identify with this, regardless of the army they had once belonged to. The panel speakers stressed different aspects of social processes and problems in societies, and expressed their wish for peace. According to CNA the atmosphere was full of “heaviness” and it could be felt that people avoided talking. Someone from the audience wrote in a feedback questionnaire: “Gunfire has stopped in our town, but the war still continues” (CNA Sarajevo 2005a:11). But when the panel debate was finished, people from the audience came up to the speakers and offered them their support. CNA had hoped to gather more people of Croat ethnic identity in

¹⁷ Panel speakers at the forum were: Nermin Karacic from Sarajevo (former member of Special Forces of the Interior Ministry and the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina), Dzevad Budimlic from Sisak, Croatia (ex-member of the Croatian Army), Vojo Vukovic from Nevesinje (ex-member of the Army of Republika Srpska) and Marko Martinic from Split (former member of the Croatian Army).

the audience, and was somewhat disappointed that this did not happen. But at least some representatives of this community came which can be regarded as a tangible contribution to a symbolic break-through across the line of division.

The CNA team concluded: “Even though it seems at first sight that the atmosphere in many small communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina is unmovable, closed and supported by the power circles that defend ‘the endangered national interests’, thus supporting the solidifying of discrimination and violence against anything different and other, there certainly is a space for peace work in those communities. Let us hope that this was a good impulse that would inspire some other people to use it” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:11).

Public Forum in Sarajevo (December 2004)

The forum was held in cooperation with the Centre for Education and Training from Sarajevo on 11 December 2004.¹⁸ Preparing for this forum, CNA noted more difficulties than in the previous cases. A few days before the actual event CNA received calls from one of the veterans’ associations (Green Berets) whose members clearly opposed the idea. The forum was held at the Main Auditorium of the Police Centre in Sarajevo which was filled with people of different age and identities, including former combatants, representatives of the Association of the Families of Missing and Dead, and also NGO activists. Most of the people present at the forum experienced in various ways the horrors of war and many of them are still immersed in this experience. CNA concludes its impression: “From the very beginning of the forum right up to the end it was as if one could almost touch the heaviness in the air. In some way it also affected the speakers’ stories that remained partly ambiguous and a little bit unclear. But still, one could hear the message about the refusal to justify the crimes and violence committed by ‘my own’ [constituency], as well as readiness to call things their real names, without vagueness or avoidance, as well as a willingness to take one’s own responsibility for what had happened, what was going on now and what would happen” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:12).

Some visitors commented and offered support to both the idea and the need to talk about the past. Nevertheless, some were not ready to hear the speakers’ messages, especially people who were related to the nationalist Green Berets faction: “A smaller number of visitors was loud enough to create an atmosphere in which many others could not say what they were bothered with

¹⁸ Panel speakers were Marko Martinic from Split, Croatia and Amer Delic from Zavidovici, Vojo Vukovic from Nevesinje and Nermin Karacic from Sarajevo, all three in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The moderator of the forum was Alma Masic.

nor were able, with their questions and comments, to turn the discussion in some other direction, [unrelated to] the need to “confirm” who was the aggressor or to hear about participants’ honoraria, but towards the wider theme about what we could do together to change something.”¹⁹ Still, these persons, even though they claimed a lot of time, did not manage to destroy the essence of the event, according to CNA.

There remained some frustration for the team and the panellists for another reason. Although they were supported by different media institutions before and after the event, none of the reporters showed up at the press conference that preceded the forum. Only a few people from the media covered the event itself. CNA can only guess the reason and attributes it to several factors, such as “the overload of the war stories, disinterest and pursuit for other more exclusive themes and non-support for this kind of activity that can shake up the accepted stereotype, according to which everything about the war is clear and there’s nothing new to tell or to talk about” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:12). Regardless of the fact that there were few reporters present at the press conference and the forum, cooperation with some media before and after the forum was good and CNA’s work in general received a lot of support from this side (see also section 3.6 on “Media and Peacebuilding” below).

3.3. Public Hearing for Diaspora Community (Vienna 2005)

Recently the message of CNA’s hearings and reports from ex-soldiers were also spread among a broader European public and ex-Yugoslav diaspora communities. A public event was held in the Austrian capital Vienna in June 2005. This first public hearing with war veterans in a place outside the post-Yugoslav region followed an invitation of Austrian partner organisations. The event was titled: “*Wir waren Feinde*” (“We were enemies”). A large part of the audience belonged to the ex-Yugoslav community living in Austria. Their reactions and the open discussion mirrored what had already been experienced in the regional forums. Participants remarked on the uniqueness of the event and the emotional impact it had on them. Three war veterans were on the panel. The debate was broadcast by the Austrian Broadcasting Service ORF (see Box 3, which illustrates the speakers’ original contributions).

¹⁹ Some of the questions that were asked were the following: “What was your true motivation to go to war? Did anyone make you do it? What was, in your opinion, the nature of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina? Do you suffer any kind of pressure in your community because of what you do and how do you handle it? Where were you fighting in the war, what were you defending... and how much did all this cost? Would you go to Potocari [Memorial Centre] and pay your respect to the victims of Srebrenica?” (CNA Sarajevo

Box 3: Views and Voices of War Veterans (Public forum in Vienna, June 2005)

Nermin Karacic: “It became normal”

Nermin Karacic has spent his whole life in Sarajevo – in a multiethnic environment as he recounts. He says he considered it his duty to take up arms. He was fighting with the Bosnian Army which was itself multiethnic. When, in May 1992, he first saw with his own eyes people who had died in the fighting, it was, as he says, a deep shock. Yet the situation was changing and developing so rapidly that he went through “fast adaptation”. “It became normal that someone died, or that someone else just wasn’t there any more from one day to the next”, says Karacic who was himself wounded twice.

Vojo Vukovic: “I always wanted it to stop”

31-year-old Vojo Vukovic from Nevesinje in Bosnia tells how he was still in school when the polarisation among the population was becoming more acute. When the first Serb refugees came from the Neretva valley, he says, he felt obliged to defend his city. He had not fully grasped what war really meant until his best friend was killed. “I always wanted it to stop and was wondering whether there were people on the other side who thought the same.” Vukovic believes that the media have played a particular role in inciting people.

Gordan Bodog: “Fighting between ‘us’ and ‘them’”

“It is important that we are aware that every single fate is valuable. All victims need to be known by their first and last names, all perpetrators need to be sentenced”, emphasises Gordan Bodog from Zagreb. Bodog, like the others, enlisted of his own free will, in his case with the army in Croatia. It was a way to show local patriotism, he says. He had not considered it as a fight against the Serbs, but a fight against existing power structures. “When you are fighting, you forget how it started, you lose sight of the arguments, and it turns into ‘us’ against ‘them’”, Bodog explains. He also speaks about the strong psychological burden on those participating in the fighting. Many had problems reintegrating once they had left the army.

Criminals are criminals, not heroes

More than ten years after the war ended, no one is interested, in Gordan Bodog’s opinion, in confronting what really happened during the war and in learning from it. Bodog complains that public opinion still embraces the official story that Croatia won the war and that it had been “a sanctified and heroic battle”. Nermin Karacic too stresses over and over again that there is a need to question one’s own responsibility. He thinks it is important that the Tribunal in The Hague exists, yet even more important that nations acknowledge that criminals are criminals, not heroes. This would be an important prerequisite for peace. The path towards peace, Vojo Vukovic thinks, is truth. “Only truth will lead to peace, truth about what happened, truth about war crimes.”

The power of the individual

All three participants in this peace project give an impression of how difficult their processes of self-reflection are. “I try to atone for what I did through this kind of work.” Goran Bodog has chosen the affirmative path of peace activism and emphasises the power that each single individual has. “The power of the individual should not be underestimated. Everyone should ask what he or she can do.” He would rather not answer questions from the audience as to “why Yugoslavia fell apart”, since he believes that one would always have to go back to interpretations of what happened. He wants to overcome that. “We should deal with what we really know”, is his message.

Responsibility and forgiveness

Nermin Karacic participates in the project so that, in his own words, the question “whether he would once again take up arms” will become obsolete. He is trying to find his own truth, his own responsibility so that he can make peace with himself. Vojo Vukovic, too, thinks that the time is ripe for people to know what has happened and to condemn the crimes that were committed. Asked about forgiveness, Vukovic answers that his religion allows him to forgive others almost more easily than to forgive himself.

Translated by Hillary Crowe from the Report on the Public Hearing “*Wir waren Feinde*” in Vienna, 10 June 2005, Tatjana Koren for Austrian Radio Station ORF.²⁰

3.4. Motivation and Impact of the Project on the Former Combatants

According to the evaluation, participation in the public panel debates was a major motivation for the former combatants to engage in the “Dealing with the Past” project (Wils 2004:20).²¹ They actively strove to tell their story and address the public. Participation as a speaker gave rise to strong emotions and sometimes cathartic feelings. One reported that he felt sadness – because he was reminded of the consequences of war and the subsequent loss of things they all previously

2005:12).

20 For more information see homepage of ORF: volksgruppen.orf.at/integration/stories/32708/.

21 The strong interest in speaking out publicly in some cases was surprising, as speakers reported very mixed reactions from their social environments. Some could count on support from their families and close friends. Others experienced strong criticism, especially those living in very small and close local communities. One speaker from Mostar encountered heavy criticism from members of the local Croat community. Another speaker, a faithful Muslim, came under severe criticism from members of local Islamic groups. Both speakers were eager to discuss the issues at stake with their critics and none of them considered dropping out of the project.

shared – and at the same time he felt happy, having the chance to speak out in front of a public audience. He felt that by doing so he would contribute to preventing further war and motivate people from different sides to engage in a common learning process.

In sum, participation in the CNA project, and especially the active role of addressing a public audience during the panel debates, had a strong individual impact on the war veterans. The speakers agreed that the panel debates and training contributed to change their individual lives. Participation in CNA's project also helped to deal with individual traumatic experiences. It might even give some new meaning to the suffering and "victimisation" resulting from the past. One former combatant explained that since the project started, he feels happier. Similarly, another described that he feels great relief because he has realised that he is a normal person who is able to have normal contacts with other people. Yet another former combatant said that the days after these events he is able to sleep well, whereas he normally has a lot of bad dreams.

Moreover, participation in the project contributed to individual *empowerment*, encouraging a normalisation of contacts to former "enemies". Contact with people from "the other side" proved to be not only possible but also desirable. For example, two former combatants who were involved in fighting in the same region, but on different sides, have visited each other privately. Others said that they grew more open toward the outside world or that they were encouraged to speak about things more openly. Some veterans even felt encouraged to discuss their experiences with opponents in their respective communities.

Furthermore, according to the ex-combatants, both the public forums and the training workshops contributed to a shared experience and created some common ground among this group. They explained that this was due to the method that was chosen, e.g. individual story-telling, in contrast to the generalisations and abstract discourses which usually dominate (nationalist) public debates and media speeches. All veterans who participated in the initial phase went for further involvement in the project and decided to continue active involvement in peacebuilding activities. Some of them mentioned that nonviolence was a powerful new message for them. It seems that the project opened an entire new world to them.

3.5. Impact on the Audience

The number of visitors to the public forums ranged from 40 to 100. According to CNA's experience so far, the audience represented different segments of society and included young peace activists, members of NGOs, war

veterans, ordinary citizens and members of local authorities.²² The reaction in *Serbia-Montenegro* was mixed but in general encouraging for the CNA team: “The reactions of persons from the audience were diverse – from curiosity to the honest wish to hear and understand, from anger and opposition to some of the expressed opinions to the opinions that it’s all very nice, but we were all merely players in major worldwide games. But, there’s a thing that certainly deserves attention, and that is a very high intensity of different emotions appearing in the interaction of the audience and the participants, which only points out the vast sea of things unsaid and troublesome fears about the previous wars that lie hidden in most of us”(CNA 2002b:16).

The feedback at the public forums held in Serbia in October 2003 was very positive. In the feedback forms which have been posted to CNA some people said that the panel was very “successful and of high quality”. One person admitted that he came “with a certain sense of incredulity, believing the panel would have a national or a political accent” and that he was glad that this did not happen. But feedback also included sceptical and critical remarks. Some argued that the panels were more than necessary but that it would be also important to have them in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. They asked why peacemaking and tolerance are primarily or exclusively expected of Serbs. These reactions were quite typical for panel debates in Serbia, underlining the importance of a regional approach to peacebuilding. The suggestion to include more “hardliners” and people with a more nationalist leaning was also regularly put forward. One person who was very grateful that CNA organised the panel expressed a general dilemma and suggested “the audience should also include those who do not think the way we do ... The problem is not those who do come to the panels, but the ones who were not present. Of course, it is still too early for such a thing, but do try!” He also proposed bringing journalists from all three sides to the speakers’ table at some point.

It is interesting to evaluate the answers to one question that was asked on almost all the panels: “Would there be a war if the four of you said *I don’t want this war*, and if all who were carrying the weapons said the same thing?” Answers to that question were for instance: “I believe the war would still take place. All of that had been cooked and fried for a very long time. There would always be someone who would initiate it, and then the devil’s ring in which

²² The composition of the audience very much depended on the partners who organised the debates. At a panel in Vlasotince, South Serbia, for example, which was organised by a respected war veteran, many members of the local veterans’ associations joined the discussion. In Novi Sad, Central Serbia, a local NGO (Association for Nonviolent Action) organised the event and was very active in promoting and advertising the public forum. As a result, more than 100 people came, including war veterans and refugees (Serbs originally from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina).


many have danced would start”, and: “When the war starts, it’s too late. The things are already screwed up by then. We should have been working on that a lot earlier, as early as 1987. The order to report to service was a pure formality then, because the line had already been overstepped. At that point the mere refusal of the gun is not enough, although that too can be a significant step” (CNA 2002b:18).

As CNA reported, during the panels in Serbia some people also expressed clear peace messages, for example, when someone in the audience questioned the nationalist discourse and stated that people have been “misused by politicians”. In Novi Sad, the audience even intervened in cases of provocation.

In *Bosnia-Herzegovina* reactions from the audience have been slightly different. Audiences have been more closed and cautious. Moreover, in Sarajevo, CNA also experienced what it is like to deal with open opposition by a war veterans’ association to this type of peace work. But, “however hard and stressful it was, it helped us to realise the complexity of relations between the political interests and readiness to act destructively against the activities that aim to change the existing social atmosphere of interethnic hate” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:8).

Reviewing all the panels held in Bosnia, CNA expressed a general satisfaction with the public debates and with the levels of cooperation that could be reached with local partners, media, veterans’ associations and local authorities: “Just like many times before, the support of the local authorities was ... formal, while the cooperation with veterans’ associations was again like walking on an icy road – done very carefully and looking around in fear [of] bumping into some power players” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:8). According to CNA Sarajevo, the social climate upon which the possibility of organising these and similar activities depends has changed significantly since the first forums in Bosnia-Herzegovina, now almost two years ago. All in all, the issue of the war, war crimes and the responsibility for these crimes seems no longer to be a taboo but an every-day “mantra” of most politicians in the Federation and even in the Republika Srpska. “It is unanimously repeated by politicians, academics, journalists, intellectuals, etc. every time the question pops up: ‘where are we going to and how?’ It is sure that this tendency (without getting any further into the various and often dubious motives for emphasising it) made it much easier to implement the forum in Nevesinje, for instance” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:8).

But the team also states that an entire complex of both painful and crucial issues regarding the process of “Dealing with the Past” remains untouched by this trend. Questioning individual roles – in the sense of “where I was, what I did, what I didn’t do, what other acts of violence (beyond war crimes) were committed by ‘my own’ constituency, how people from the ‘other’ side were perceived back



then (and how they are perceived now)” – is still unpopular. So is the question of how much all that has to do with the war. The public panels raised exactly those kinds of questions, and the staff of CNA’s Sarajevo office concludes: “That is the most sensitive area on which the conflicts between different values and standpoints occur. If we scrape [the surface], we’ll go back to the starting point and become aware that even though there’s quite a loud public discourse about the responsibility for the war, not many things have changed inside people’s heads when it comes to understanding the pain and the position of the other one. Not even a hundred Hague Tribunals or other courts will help until people from all sides are ready to take also personal responsibility for the crimes committed in the name of their ‘collective’, without misuse of victims by weighing them for the sake of justifying the injustice done by their own side” (CNA Sarajevo 2005:9).

3.6. Media and Peacebuilding

A big challenge was to involve the media in support of the project. This was not an easy task for several reasons: “During the wars in these regions all the media have had their war themes, whether anti-war or war-provoking. Peace activities, however small or big the steps they might have been taking in the process of establishing trust and lasting peace, are not interesting enough to the media. Unfortunately, the peace activities are not sensational, they don’t make for [a] good news story, and hence they are almost completely absent from the media. However, any kind of violent incident (for instance, a hate-filled speech of a celebrity or a racist action) will almost certainly provide a media space for itself. ... The news on activities directed towards the prevention of violence are very rare” (CNA 2002a:19).

Wishing to change the rule that “war is more interesting than peace” CNA decided to invite media representatives to join the project. When approaching the media in Serbia, the first experience was “that they (with few exceptions) are still unable to recognise their role in a process that can be called work on building a sustainable peace and opening cross-border communication in the post-war circumstances” (CNA 2002a:19). Some have not answered the invitations at all. Most of those who did reply wanted to charge (most often at high commercial rates) for each “service” they would provide. CNA felt that some of the media representatives did not quite understand the ways in which peace groups operate. Its reaction to this was twofold. On the one hand, the team stated the “need for work on sensitising the editorial as well as executive media structures to these problems” (CNA 2002a:20). On the other hand, thanks to funding provided by the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CNA could partly support the *active*

involvement of media representatives by paying fees in some cases. But the project also received a great deal of *pro bono* support from individual journalists. “This support was incredibly significant ... and it gave us the motivation to carry on” (CNA 2002a:19).

The interest of the media in covering the public forums has been generally high in *Serbia*. For all panel debates, press conferences were organised in advance. Often, on the day after the forums, a TV or radio appearance took place. TV, radio and newspaper journalists were present at all the panels. In most cases, reports were printed and broadcast. In the pilot phase, reports were published mostly by the local media. Some articles have been published in national news magazines (e.g. *Vreme*). Some speakers were invited to TV shows that were aired state-wide. Serbian state television also reported on the event at Vlasotince, and Radio Free Europe covered it in its online news magazine. After the events in Vlasotince and Novi Sad, many people called the regional TV stations asking for a repeat of the reports. As a result, in Vlasotince a one-hour TV documentary was broadcast five times over the following days. The media reported what actually happened at the panel debates, avoiding any positive or negative assessment of the events.

During the recent panel series in *Bosnia-Herzegovina*, media feedback was also satisfying. Both Federal TV and the TV of Republika Srpska reported on the hearings. The public forum in Gornij Vakuf-Uskoplje received strong support from the Kiss TV station based at Kiseljak, which is the highest-rated station among the Croat population in the area. They produced an hour-long TV documentation. In Sarajevo, before the actual forum, speakers appeared in a TV show called “Without Anaesthesia”, on channel BHT 1, and in a live talk-show on students’ radio. On the very day the forum was taking place, CNA also had a chance to announce it in the morning programmes on NTV Hayat in Sarajevo. On the following day, participants of the forum were guests at the live talk show called “Central Jail” on Radio 202 from Sarajevo (CNA Sarajevo 2005:11). Journalists from those media invited the panel speakers of the forums to appear in their programmes and thus helped to create some space for CNA’s messages.

It would definitely be too ambitious to expect that CNA’s “Dealing with the Past” project would have initiated a broad public debate about past wars. Nevertheless, in sum it can be said that media coverage and the reactions from the audiences at the public forums have been very encouraging.

4. Conclusions and Wider Perspectives for CNA's Peace Work

CNA's approach to "Dealing with the Past" differs remarkably from other initiatives that have been established. Firstly, it is a *civil society approach*; secondly, it is a *regional, cross-border initiative*; and, thirdly, it addresses a *target group – war veterans* – that is not frequently addressed and has not been recognised so far as a potential contributor to social change by NGOs in post-war regeneration programmes in the Balkans.

CNA's experience shows that some former combatants are motivated to participate in activities enabling them to address their war experiences together with others who share a similar experience. Moreover, some of them are very interested in bringing their views to a broader audience. Former combatants can help to facilitate a public debate and thus make an important contribution to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. They often enjoy respect and acceptance in their local communities and are legitimised to a high degree to talk about issues related to war. Therefore they can function as strategic "door-openers" to encourage engagement with "Dealing with the Past" and peacebuilding. They have a chance of getting the attention of individuals and groups whose initial reaction to peace and reconciliation initiatives is usually negative. It has been shown that former soldiers who agree to engage in constructive dialogue have a strong potential to explore common ground and build bridges between the different national and religious groups in former Yugoslavia.

CNA also found that war veterans' associations, who are very often considered "spoilers" rather than promoters of peace processes, can function as cooperation partners for approaches to dealing with the past. Cooperation with some of these associations worked out very positively. A few of them also blocked or hindered dialogue activities. It became clear that cooperation depends very much on the individual personalities in the association. In Serbia, CNA had full support from the board of one of the two major associations, but since the associations compete for resources and power, it proved to be difficult to cooperate with both. In Croatia, veterans' associations at the national level are often linked to extremist or radical nationalist groupings, but on the local level there is relative openness to similar approaches. In Bosnia, some veterans' associations also supported the project, but in the case of the public forum in Sarajevo, one organisation also turned out to be an important "spoiler".

An important lesson which can be learned from CNA's work is that it is certainly not sufficient to gather people to talk to each other about the past and the future. Careful preparation is needed. This includes, first of all, *proper selection and training of participants*; secondly, *analysing the specific local*

context and involving *local partner organisations*; thirdly, *talking to all the major actors* (like *public administration, media and veterans' associations*); and, fourthly, *professional facilitation*. This is why CNA spent much time on public relations and developed an approach whereby former soldiers from different sides of the war first underwent training and gained respect for each other's "truth" and biography. Only in a second step, these persons critically reflected on, their experiences in front of public audiences. The procedure was based on individual stories that help to underline commonalities as well as individual responsibilities. As such, the public forums have helped to question the attitude of collective discrimination that is part of the dominant nationalist construction of history.

CNA's approach has proved to be effective due to several factors: it was based on *long-term training experience* which proved to be an important precondition. Success is also due to the principles which underlie the "Dealing with the Past" project, namely *transparency* and the emphasis on *learning from experience*. In evaluations, several war veterans said that one of the reasons why they have a great deal of trust and respect for CNA is that the motivation for and implementation of the project are based on a high degree of openness, thereby taking the war veterans and their opinions very seriously. CNA does not only discuss the projects internally, but follows the principle of asking for feedback and suggestions after all major activities as part of its self-evaluation, in order to adapt its projects and programmes accordingly. Evaluation results and documentation are accessible to the public.²³

The intensive, three-year work on "Dealing with the Past" and the public forums programme have started to become CNA's public "trademark" because of the wide media coverage the forums received as well as due to the "attractiveness" of ex-combatants, now engaged in peace work, in all parts of the region. However, the CNA team decided to stop organising this kind of activity as they did not want to be recognised exclusively as "those who do the forums". They did not want to become a kind of "travelling circus" which follows this one and only pattern. The team concluded:

"We assess that we've opened and cleared some of the ways, showed, together with many of our local partners and participants, as well as collaborators from media, that things can and should be done in this way, we've made some nucleus of partnerships in different parts of the region that we want to support in the future... That's where the story about forums ends, while the crucial one, and a more important story about

²³ Internal reports, evaluation reports and other documentation of CNA's work can be downloaded from CNA's website in different languages.

dealing with the past, surely continues. It continues through our future activities and through the ideas and initiatives of many other individuals and organisations ready to [tackle] this problem themselves.” (CNA Sarajevo 2005a:8-9).

During a strategic planning workshop that the Sarajevo and Belgrade teams held together in October 2004,²⁴ the focus was on prioritising and balancing different aspects of their future work. One of the important issues was how the values that CNA seeks to promote can become more influential in the public sphere. Another issue was which target groups the educational work of CNA should henceforward focus on. Given current staff capacities, CNA will not be able to continue to carry out all its activities with the same intensity as previously, so that strategic choices become even more necessary. This decision should not be made merely by considering “marketing” aspects or asking, “what are the international agencies funding this year?” The decision should be based on what is needed most by society, i.e. “what makes most sense given the current situation and this specific context, what is needed and what is useful in terms of peace policy?” As in many peace initiatives, CNA’s internal discussions focus on the questions: “How to get from the individual level to the social level” and “Does our work contribute to social change? Shall we try to improve capacities of ‘more people’ or shall we rather focus on ‘key people’? Who are key people and why? Is it possible to reach ‘more people’ by involving ‘key people’?”²⁵ One of the crucial questions is how to involve those who do not belong to the circle of “likeminded people” already.

The CNA team decided to continue to devote about half of its capacities to training teachers and education staff, journalists, NGO activists, politicians and ex-soldiers. In these training workshops, They plan to increasingly, and more systematically than before, use trainers who have been trained by CNA and who belong to its regional network. The core members of the team, on the other hand, want to concentrate on working with more “difficult” target groups (such as representatives of extremist religious or nationalist groups) and on working with persons who have the strongest impact in society (at grassroots and middle

²⁴ Workshop on Strategic Planning: “View of the Future”, Belgrade, 2-3 October 2004, facilitated by Martina Fischer, see CNA Belgrade 2005:8.

²⁵ The terms “more people” vs. “key people” have been introduced in the discussions of the “Reflecting on Peace Practice” Project (RPP). RPP was led by the US-based NGO Collaborative for Development Action in the period 1999–2002 in order to collect scholars’ and practitioners’ experiences on measuring impact and developing criteria for success and failure in peace processes. The results have been presented in a report entitled “Confronting War” (see Anderson/Olson 2003). CDA has developed a matrix consisting of “more people vs. key people” and “individual/personal level vs. socio/political level” and argues that connections need to be made across the two dimensions in order to be effective (ibid.:64).

levels). Networking initiatives will be continued and intensified, particularly in the Vojvodina region.²⁶

The remaining half of the team's capacities will be devoted to activities which, they hope, will help root the values that CNA stands for more firmly in society. Among such activities is the production of a wider range of educational "peace tools" to be used in the media and in training, e.g. documentaries that will be used in peace education. A first documentary, which addresses the issue of "Dealing with the Past", portrays the experiences of ex-combatants. It is called "*Tragovi*" ("Traces") and was completed in 2004 by Nenad Vukosavljevic. Currently, the team is working on two more films in which "ordinary people" from Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, who are rarely represented in the political discourse or the media, reflect on the recent past. They are invited to think critically about their experience of direct and indirect violence, and enter a virtual dialogue by posing (and answering) questions for each other.

Moreover, the CNA team is preparing the publication of a book with the twofold purpose of reflecting upon experiences with peace work in the region and of eliciting the expectations of various actors regarding the concept of "reconciliation". The book is based on interviews with groups and individuals from all post-Yugoslav states and will be published in three languages: Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, Macedonian and Albanian. Around 20 persons from Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia have started to work together with CNA members on this project. Many of them belong to CNA's informal network and participated in the "Training for Trainers" programme. They expressed their motivation for this as follows: "People from this region have a chance to learn something new about the official politics of the neighbouring countries, to hear statements from high officials in media (especially those that provoke an outrage), or to hear about some incident that occurred in the neighbouring state. However, they almost never get a chance to hear what citizens of the neighbouring country think, especially if those voices speak affirmatively about the sustainable peace and "Dealing with the Past". In these societies with twisted social values, [a] story about peacebuilding doesn't make it into the news headlines because there are no incidents, scandals, adrenalin rush caused by hate speech or blood in it. We are aware that we cannot change this situation at once. However, with this project, we want to contribute

²⁶ A number of NGOs active in Vojvodina have asked for support with peace education and training in order to counteract growing nationalism and exclusion of minorities. CNA organised a regional meeting with these groups in November 2004, with discussions and strategic planning of activities to deal with incidents against the minority groups in Vojvodina; see CNA Belgrade 2005:10.

to making a path and raising public interest, and especially the interest of the media in values that are not ‘news material’” (CNA Belgrade 2005:9).

CNA’s personal perspectives on the current situation in the post-Yugoslav region as well as on challenges for peace work ten years after Dayton are reflected in the following interview with CNA Sarajevo staff. The interview took place on 7 July 2005 in Sarajevo.

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