

The Costs of War & Challenges of Peace

By Linda Garrett

When the guns are silenced, the numbers of dead, wounded, missing, refugees and displaced are tallied. But the social devastation in the aftermath is incalculable, the trauma is trans-generational. Vukovar, Croatia is an example of the enduring legacies of war.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Balkan wars of the 1990s have similar characteristics. Both had economic and ideological roots and in both national identity determined destiny — are you Ukrainian or Russian? Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian? In simple terms, the essence of each conflict was the desire of one country to dominate — to “liberate Russians” or “liberate Serbs” — and the other to separate.

Destruction of the multi-cultural town of Vukovar in 1991 was the prelude to the ethnic-religious-nationalist nightmare about to be unleashed in the Balkans. A 1995 settlement ended the violence but realpolitik agreements signed in far-away places do not provide solace for the millions of civilians and combatants, — and their communities — forever changed by the brutality and psychosocial trauma of war. Nor do they prevent post-war profiteering, corruption, political opportunism, and long-term violence from land mines, unexploded ordnance, and the proliferation of black market weapons.

Decades later Vukovar resembles its pre-war Baroque charm, but multi-cultural community life was shredded in 1991. Flowers adorn tidy but empty streets. Young people abandon the war-time trauma at first opportunity; elderly survivors

isolate in their homes. Croats and Serbs self-segregate in neighborhoods, schools, bars and restaurants. Anti-Serb sentiment is strong in the Croat-majority town, where identity still trumps community. The town’s many war memorials honor Croats but there is no recognition of Serb victims.

During the time of Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic friendships and marriages were common across religious and ethnic lines. Young people interviewed after the war said they weren’t aware of their

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Steps Toward Peace

- Decommissioning of weapons; clearance of land mines and unexploded ordnance;
- Communal reconstruction projects, gardens, playgrounds, cultural and sports events;
- Multi ethnic local government administration with emphasis on inclusion of women;
- Formation of an inclusive Peace Committee comprised of local religious, educational, cultural leaders, again with priority on women;
- Immediate and long term access to mental health support for civilians and combatants, adults and children;
- Pedagogical and emotional support for teachers;
- Ceremonies and memorials to honor all victims
- Transparent, timely process of truth, justice and accountability;
- An accounting of all missing combatants and civilians with full information from both sides of the conflict.



graphic: Kami, www.wanderlust.pl

“identity” until 1991 when they asked their parents, “What am I?” With the collapse of Yugoslavia everyone was forced to choose: Serb or Croat. The option of neutrality – Yugoslav – no longer existed; the Serbo-Croatian language was “purified” to the point where pronunciation, slang words and idioms reveal identity.

There are levels of social segregation in Vukovar. Status depends not only on ethnicity, but also participation: Were you a defender, an aggressor, a partisan? A victim? A perpetrator? A relative of a missing person? Were you a remanée or a returnee? Were you a survivor, a casualty, a first responder, a collaborator, an informer, an infiltrator? Post-war, everyone was labeled and those labels passed on to the children and grandchildren who inherited not only the trauma of war but also their place in society.

For ex-combatants the possibility of “normalcy” is complicated by PTSD and the paucity of mental health professionals. One Croatian said he had been “addicted to the adrenaline of combat,” which he replaced post-war with drugs and alcohol. Others from his unit resorted to criminal activities, domestic violence and suicide .

In the end two separate narratives of responsibility, of victims and perpetrators, are discussed over kitchen tables and taught in segregated schools. For Croats, Vukovar is a national symbol of heroic resistance to Serbian aggression. Until Serbia provides information on the 1800 Croats still missing, reconciliation is not on anyone’s agenda.

The over arching, most shameful and enduring crime was then, and is now, the unleashing of ethnic violence and nationalism. Croat-Serb and Ukrainian-Russian relations will be tarnished for generations to come: “They kill us and we kill them,” Ukrainian President Zelensky said in the early months of the invasion. “I just don’t understand war.”

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