

## Introduction to Special Issue on "Social Workers and War in the Balkans"

by Michael Reisch

For nearly a century and a half, the development of organized social welfare and the evolution of the social work profession in the United States have been closely connected to issues of war and peace. As scholars such as Richard Titmuss and Theda Skocpol have pointed out, from the formation of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and the American Red Cross during the Civil War to contemporary responses to "Gulf War syndrome," wars have stimulated the creation of state-sponsored policies and private sector interventions to address the needs of military and civilian victims of conflict. These programs, in turn, have often served as models for a wide range of peacetime initiatives directed towards the casualties of a largely unregulated market system. Concerns for the well being of soldiers and their families lead to the creation of veterans' and widows' pensions, the forerunners of modern social insurance. For these and other reasons, it could be argued, somewhat perversely to be sure, that wars had a positive influence on the development of 19th and 20th century social welfare.

Wars have also played a major role in shaping the social work profession, particularly in the U.S. During World War I, social workers discovered a need for their services among soldiers of

all social classes suffering from shell shock. This enabled the profession to expand its client base beyond individuals and families in poverty and contributed to the growth of psychiatric social work in the 1920's and, some scholars assert, the profession's retreat from social reform. During the same period, outspoken opposition to military intervention among settlement leaders, notably Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and Lillian Wald, lead to attacks on their patriotism and contributed to the demise of their influence on social policy.

World War II also produced an expansion of both the welfare state and of occupational social welfare benefits. This expansion continued during and after the Korean War despite the maintenance of higher levels of military spending. In addition, wartime experiences inspired a generation of men and women to enter the social service field. Many of the key figures in the 1960's War on Poverty and modern leaders of social work education emerged from this cohort. During the 1950's and early 1960's, fears of global nuclear conflict motivated some social workers to advocate for disarmament and a reordering of national priorities. In the McCarthy era, they were frequently persecuted for such views.

In the mid-1960's, Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament (now called Social Workers for Peace and Social Justice) was created under the auspices of NASW. Over the next decade, the war in Indochina produced an outpouring of protest over the senseless waste of human life and the diversion of national resources from human needs to the military-issues that persist today. U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1980's and the Persian Gulf in the 1990's provoked similar responses on a lesser scale. Increasingly, concerns about the long-term effects of war on military personnel and civilians prompted social workers to advocate for the creation of services to address war-related traumas such as PTSD.

Ironically, the recent war in the Balkans-the place where the first global conflict of the 20th Century began-produced widely varying responses among social workers. Some actively protested NATO bombing of Serbia. Others supported international action to end atrocities like "ethnic cleansing." Other social workers organized to stop the inhumanity by both opposing the NATO bombing and demanding UN action to protect the human rights of all those in the region. Some social workers became active in humanitarian endeavors.



ors, often working in concert with professional colleagues from the region and other nations on behalf of rape and torture victims, and refugees.

This special issue of *Reflections* attempts to capture the voices of some of these social workers and to reflect the variety of personal and professional reactions the war provoked. Despite the different backgrounds of the authors, the narratives echo remarkably similar criticisms of war and its consequences. Authors from the Balkans wrote three of the twelve articles. Five Americans and one Israeli wrote about their work in the Balkans. Three other articles concerned practice and research in the U.S. with refugees from the Balkans. All the accounts, however, reflect themes similar to those that have emerged over the past century.

The narratives focus on the horrible personal consequences of the war—particularly on women, children, and the elderly. What makes these observations so powerful is the awful "everydayness" of the tragedies, even when survivors have struggled to establish a sense of "normal life." Many of the narratives describe the effects of the war on the distribution of scarce resources and on critical organizations and services that address war-related human needs.

Catherine Sexton (a pseudonym) recounts the story ("Psychotherapy in the Shadows of War and Gang Conflict") of an 18-year old client and gang member, Katya, who fled Bosnia with her parents. Through her life,

Sexton links the violence Katya experienced in the war with the violence she now encounters daily on the streets. Margaret Oakes's summary of her interviews with Bosnian refugees ("A Trail to Bosnia, War Trauma, and Qualitative Research") expands upon Sexton's observations regarding the lasting effects of the war. Her discussion of the consequences of the war on couples from "mixed marriages" is particularly poignant and her comments on the war's impact on the process of qualitative research underscores the importance of self-reflection. Danica Boskovic-Djukic ("The Experiences, Expectations and Realities of People Treated for Alcohol Abuse During the War"), a Yugoslavian psychologist, focuses specifically on the effects of the NATO bombing in spring 1999 on patients dependent on alcohol. By integrating an account of the therapeutic process with the effects of the bombing, she offers new insights into issues of survival in the face of mass violence.

The themes of survival and violence are also at the heart of Jennifer Erickson's narrative of her work as a volunteer in Bosnia ("Activism in Bosnia: Violence and Feminism"). She, too, describes her shock upon witnessing the magnitude of losses people incurred and her admiration at their struggles merely to survive. By sharing her experiences with other women, Erickson gained new insight into the meaning of the war and strengthened her commitment to a feminist analysis of its causes and consequences.

Three other essays also explore the authors' experiences

working with refugees from the Balkan conflict. Eve Weisberg's detailed account of her work in Croatia draws a stark contrast between the beauty of the country and the ugly personal consequences of the war. Shelly Perry, Rene Drumm, and Sharon Pittman ("Three Social Workers and an NGO") present a story of hope among the squalor of a refugee camp in Albania. Like so many contributors to this special issue, they remark on how they learned from the individuals with whom they worked. The themes of hope and education are also at the heart of Nancy Ayer's narrative, appropriately titled "A Journey to Hope." Through the experience of one young Bosnian man and his family, Ayer depicts the everyday horror of war in Bosnia, such as the discovery of mass graves. She also brings the roots of the conflict "home" to the U.S. in recounting an incident of "ethnic cleansing" in Maryland.

Several essays compare the authors' responses to the Balkans war with the personal impact of other contemporary conflicts. Vered Kater ("Window View from Jerusalem"), a nurse from Jerusalem and a war survivor, volunteered to teach nurses in Kosovo how to care for sick children. Her memories of childhood and of wars fought by Israel are interwoven with a journal of her work. Petar Opalic, a physician from Belgrade, uses memory in a strikingly different way in his narrative ("Dreams in Traumatic Reality"). His account of the dreams of Serbian and Montenegrin patients provides



vivid images of the insanity of war. By concluding with some of his own dreams, Opalic brings the war's consequences down to the most intimate level.

Like their professional ancestors, several of the authors place the Balkans conflict in broader historical and political context and focus on education as a means to avoid future wars. Ivan Segota, a professor at the University of Rijeka ("Ethics Education to Counter War"), describes his efforts in the 1990's to create the field of bioethics in Croatia as a countermeasure to the experience of war. He believes that he has "contributed to the struggle against war...[by] introducing my students to ethical issues in their practice and spreading these ideas not only among professionals, but also among the lay public..."

Julia M. Watkins, President of the American University in Bulgaria ("Responding to War: An Educational Imperative") also emphasizes the importance of education as a preventive strategy against future wars, particularly with young people. Her diary entries provide a vivid picture of the NATO bombing through the eyes of a neighboring country that feared being drawn into the war. This "dual perspective" gives new insights into the meaning and effects of the war.

Finally, Richard J. Smith, an MSW student at the University of Michigan, incorporates in his narrative ("Peace, the Only Durable Solution to War") accounts of his experiences working for UNICEF in Mongolia during the bombing campaign and in Michi-

gan working with Balkan refugees in its aftermath. Smith's description of people-to-people efforts to build a multi-ethnic community in his home town as the only lasting solution to war is reminiscent of Jane Addam's call to link democracy and peace nearly a century ago. And so, the work continues. □



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