

Peace Event Sarajevo 2014

*Nicole Morris
Bernard Dréano
Abi Rhodes*

Nicole Morris and Abi Rhodes represented the Russell Foundation at Peace Event Sarajevo 2014 (6-9 June), an open conference prepared by an international co-ordinating committee to mark the centenary of the start of the First World War. Bernard Dréano, one of the co-ordinators, drafted his remarks for the closing session.

Appointment in Sarajevo

Nicole Morris

City lights careening past the taxi windows were our first glimpse of Sarajevo. Disorientating as this was, we were simultaneously treated to a mini-tour of the city by the driver, who pointed out landmarks which became familiar by the end of the weekend. It was good to have the long day's travel coming to a close, and with an early start on the cards, we settled into our hotel for the night.

Friday morning broke hot and clear. Rested, we set off to find the start of the Peace Walk, to be held partly in solidarity with victims of the country's recent floods. Sarajevo itself was not as badly affected as other regions of Bosnia and Serbia, and in the blazing sun any signs of the reportedly worst flooding in a century were no longer present.

The map provided by the event organisers was, though well-intentioned, not quite as accurate as we'd hoped. Eventually finding a large group congregating around some freebies (t-shirts, tote bags and an updated but still suspect map), we waited to set off. Ten minutes or so later, the group began to move – in every direction imaginable! Whatever we had stumbled upon was apparently not the starting point, and those gathered dispersed to go on their various merry ways. However, we managed to join in with another march just beginning, this one organised by a women's peace group. A banner reading 'To be a woman is to live at a time of war' formed the frontline of several group photos along the way.

As the procession snaked through the old town we passed stony courtyards, shisha cafés, and a fascinating walled bazaar offering some modern wares as well as traditional slippers and pottery. Though bearing the theme of the walk in mind, it was impossible to ignore the beauty of our surroundings. Even the route to most of the workshops was a walk along the incredibly clear Miljacka River, old-fashioned trams clunking past in the dusty air, with green hills encircling everything.

Later in the day, keen to hear some first-hand impressions of the Bosnian War of the 1990s, I attended *Reconciliation and Dealing with the Past*, a workshop held in the city's eerie Historical Museum, a squarish building set between newer-looking office complexes and apartment blocks. Its stone exterior was scarred, crumbling in places and graffitied – a living testimony to the past conflict.

Speakers Adnan Hasanbegovic and Pete Hämmerle introduced the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), operating in Belgrade, Sarajevo and other outreach areas, and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation in Austria, where many citizens of the former Yugoslavia live today. Together these organisations run focus groups for veterans of the Bosnian War, where participants can meet others from all sides of the conflict in a supportive environment, share their own experiences, and work through prejudices and misconceptions. While this format does not appeal to everyone, there has been enthusiasm from veterans of all sides, and many are now willing to be involved in a peace movement, even to meet those they once would have considered 'enemies'. This is not to say that these meetings are easy; a willingness to join in is the first step, but there can be difficulties in reconciling one perspective of the conflict with another. There are disagreements. They are not free-for-alls, however, and meetings are moderated by members of CNA and IFOR, who help guide discussions in a constructive way.

Following the workshop, there was dialogue with members of the audience who were involved in similar schemes in their own countries, such as with ex-paramilitary in Ireland. It seemed as though some useful ideas were swapped and concerns addressed.

The evening was rounded off by the Peace Event Sarajevo opening ceremony, with musical performances, video presentations and messages of hope and peace delivered by officiators and supporters from around the globe. '... As we disarm our hearts and minds, we can also disarm our countries and our world' said Nobel Peace Prize recipient Mairead Maguire.

It transpired that the Peace Event was also hosting the annual

Conference on Women in War, and on Saturday I sat in on this for two very interesting hours. As I arrived a speaker from Brazil was describing the social position of women in *favelas*, with some incredible claims. A certain respect for women as mothers is deeply ingrained into the collective psyche, stemming in part from the Biblical association with Mary. In certain situations, the voice of a woman is in fact more likely to be heard than that of a man, for instance in appealing for mercy for those who have crossed the drug cartels. She also gave examples of peaceful resistance in these communities. Individuals (men) who are apprehended by police at night, and taken into woodland or other secluded areas, are assumed to be going to their execution; groups of women gather to follow them, without interfering with the officers, but asserting through their presence that there are witnesses. It sounded as though this essentially thwarts the efforts of the police, although she didn't say whether these tactics have been met with hostility before or not. I didn't get a chance to ask her. Regardless, the picture painted of *favela* life shows incredible risks taken to ensure peace and justice, and hence incredible bravery, to say nothing of the distrust of local authority.

Later, disappointingly, a discussion on the integration of Romani people into society was a no-show. The subject of the Romani (known to many as gypsies) surfaced a number of times over the weekend, and for many attendees it was clearly a burning issue, particularly in Germany. Given this interest, as I arrived at the Catholic Medical School and found the signposted room, I expected a decent turnout. After twenty minutes of waiting, my only constant companion a model skeleton loitering at the back, I had to give it up as a case of crossed wires. In the same building I found a livelier atmosphere in *Stop fascism in Europe*. Golden Dawn's rise in Greece was an obvious point of debate, but we also heard of the rise of far-right parties in Hungary, and in Poland, where for the past few years Polish National Independence Day has seen a fascist march take place in Warsaw, attracting thousands of supporters.

A general point made was that 'fascist intellectuals' are increasingly exploiting weaknesses in leftist thought, trying to blur the distinction between left and right. One panellist noted the need for groups to defend themselves when attacked by supporters of the far right, though what form this 'defence' should take would need to be considered very carefully. There was a collective decision to appeal to the closing ceremony committee for more awareness meetings similar to the Peace Event, with wider advertisement where possible.

Our final day in Sarajevo left us time to attend Sunday's workshops, and

one of my choices was *Snaga Žene* (Women Strength) on the social construction of gender roles. What drew me there was the hope that the talk might go into depth about the distinction between sex and gender, two oft-mistaken terms. This was indeed covered, in the sense that they outlined sex as a number of biological factors, and gender as a sort of position somewhere on the scale of masculinity and femininity, though psychologists Sanja Petrovic and Sabrina Duman did not go into much further detail. *Snaga Žene* primarily provides support and counselling to refugees, returnees and others displaced by the 1990s wars, and what followed was an application of these sex/gender assumptions to the groups they work with. I came away knowing a little more about how these roles are perceived in parts of Bosnia, and how some communities have retained their traditional sex-stereotypical roles throughout and after conflict; Petrovic and Duman frequently work with families where only boys attend school, for example. The group is working to encourage wider support for women and women's development in the country.

Venturing out to the busier part of the city, the swanky Hotel Bosnia was a far cry from the leafy, provincial area where we were staying. Here, a light-hearted workshop exploring personal identity gave rise to some surprisingly deep observations. Similar to the Centre for Nonviolent Action, the Touch of Hope project, co-ordinated by Rev. Clive Fowle, seeks to enable reconciliation and positive exchange between citizens of former Yugoslavia. In its *Who do You think You are?* workshop, one activity saw us writing statements of identity on postcards and sticking them on the board at the front of the room. As it happened, the cards were anonymous, perhaps encouraging us to submit what we otherwise would have been reluctant to do. When going up to view the cards, there were the usual offerings ('I am a woman/student/happy person', etc.), and one or two others that really stuck out for me – 'ex-prisoner of war' being one. The idea that such an event does not simply remain as a memory, but becomes part of one's very identity, goes some way towards understanding the psychological effects of war – how it can become an enduring chapter of an individual's life. This highlights how vital movements such as Touch of Hope, the Centre for Nonviolent Action and *Snaga Žene* are, in enabling people to realise how such experiences can shape their sense of self, and to find ways of accepting this new identity.

Sarajevo's generous hospitality and the extensive organisation by the committee and volunteers made a big impact, and were much appreciated. Through them, the valuable experience of meeting with peace activists from around the world was made possible. We were lucky to have been

brought together in such a beautiful place, and to see how Sarajevo has regenerated: a symbol of what can be achieved in peacetime.

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No to NATO. No to War. No to Austerity!

Bernard Dréano

After an event like this one, people often ask ‘what has been achieved?’ Why did you invite people from Bosnia Herzegovina and the Western Balkans to come to Sarajevo and deal with global questions? Why did hundreds of participants travel to Sarajevo from abroad to study local experiences? What are you planning for the future? Campaigns? Publications? New visions of the past? New projects for the future?

Of course, we cannot report on the work done in more than 150 workshops, 40 cultural events, all the activities of the youth camp. Some reports or minutes will be published on the Peace Event website.

Peace Event Sarajevo 2014 is not a decision-taking body. It has provided a space to share ideas and experiences, experiments and practices, to collect information, and acquire skills; a means to encourage existing networks and build new alliances. Some participants have issued declarations such as the one initiated by the International Peace Committee of Sarajevo, signed by people from several countries, which is circulating in this assembly.

While we were together in Sarajevo, the threat of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, continued above our heads; wars were still going on in several regions of the world. Barrels bombs were falling on civilians in Syria; multitudinous rapes and massacres were used as warfare in Central African Republic and South Sudan; violent attacks were perpetrated in Iraq; violence escalated in Ukraine ...

While we were together in Sarajevo, trying to have a better understanding of what’s going on in the world, inequality was growing, with corruption and bad governance undermining societies. And while we were speaking of justice and democracy, one could witness the growth of racist, xenophobic and sectarian ideologies and political parties in lots of countries from India to North America, including France and the United Kingdom in wealthy Western Europe.

In Sarajevo we have spoken about all these questions. We have been looking for ways to help the actors for peace everywhere, to work locally and globally against militarism and war, and to struggle for justice and human security.

Many participants in Sarajevo 2014 were already active in their own societies and at a global level, and they will be involved in future actions, meetings, and campaigns. They have deliberated on declarations or actions, singly or in co-ordination with others, and a lot of proposals were presented at the final Assembly for Peace.

The conference 'Women in War' took place in Sarajevo during the Peace Event and was a great success. A second session is planned for Beirut next year. Other networks also met during Peace Event 2014: International Co-ordination for Non-violence and Peace, Pax Christi International, the Citizens' Network for Peace, Reconciliation and Human Security (CLAIM), etc. And they will continue after Sarajevo with new projects and initiatives

Resisting the arms race and the arms trade is also on our agenda, like the fight against drones in several countries, and the 'move the money out of the militaries' campaign, initiated by the International Peace Bureau, and the action against the big Eurosatory weapons market in France. The ICAN campaign for nuclear disarmament is organising an important conference in Ankara in late June 2014. And in September, we will face the NATO summit in Wales with the Protest: 'No to NATO. No to War. No to Austerity!'

Militarised policies against migrants have also been raised, migrants being considered as imaginary enemies by some European states. They face growing social insecurity with all its consequences in terms of frustration, hate and conflict within societies and between societies. This requires action in every country. The social, democratic and peace movements will meet in Europe with the European University of Social Movements organized by the ATTAC network in Paris, and in Canada in the Forum of the People in Ottawa, both at the end of August 2014. These campaigns, mobilisations and proposals will be documented on the Peace Event Sarajevo website. I want to underline some major rendezvous for us in the coming months, where we can all participate.

In Tunis in March 2015 there will take place the World Social Forum Tunis 2. In 2013, the WSF Tunis 1 was a big success with 60,000 participants. Next time we can imagine within the Forum a big Peace Village, a Youth Camp and other initiatives. And we can prepare the following World Social Forum, which will take place in Montreal in 2016.

In December 2015, Paris will host the 21st Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP21), the world summit on environment. After the failure of Copenhagen conference in 2009, confronted by worsening environmental catastrophe, world civil society must respond and propose

alternatives for peace, social justice and sustainable development.

We have been working together, thinking together, sometimes praying together, and singing together during these three days of the Peace Event Sarajevo 2014. We will return to our countries, ready for action and for another occasion to meet and co-operate, like those I have just mentioned. And prepare another Peace Event, after the success of Sarajevo!

Let's go! Allons-y! Yala! Haymo!!!

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Eyewitness in Sarajevo

Abi Rhodes

We landed late in the evening in Sarajevo and were greeted with the heat of the air and the warmth of the people. On the drive into the heart of the city the taxi driver, whose English was much better than he thought, pointed out some of the different sights that form part of this intriguing place. This hospitable welcome to the country infused the rest of the trip with a kindness that was reflected in the 'culture of peace' that the organisers wished to convey.

Our long-standing comrade Panos Trigazis of SYRIZA in Greece had informed the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation about Peace Event Sarajevo 2014 and so two of us were dispatched to Bosnia in order to attend a myriad of workshops. The event was prepared by international, national and local co-ordinating committees and more than 100 groups from Bosnia Herzegovina, each of whom co-operated to create a Network for Building Peace (*Mreža za izgradnju mira*).

The peace event that these volunteers built successfully realised its aim of appealing 'for a culture of peace ... for disarmament, civil conflict resolution and non-violence, as well as social and ecological justice'. Several thousand people from Europe, including many from the Balkans, from Canada and the United States gathered together to speak out against war and violence 100 years after the start of the First World War, triggered by the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. Around 200 workshops, various cultural activities, and five roundtables were co-ordinated throughout the city. The core issues up for discussion were Peace and Non-violence; Gender, Women and Peace; Militarism and Alternatives; Social Justice; and Reconciliation and Dealing with the Past.

Following our initial orientation expedition and a short March for Peace we headed to the *Zgrada Općine Novo Sarajevo* (Municipal) building to

attend our first workshop. Speakers for the *Peace in the Balkans and European Security* workshop included Panos Trigazis (SYRIZA), Claudia Haydt (DIE LINKE) and representatives from the Nazim Hikmet Foundation in Turkey. Around 30 people attended the workshop, which considered the best way to promote peace in the region. NATO's persistent presence in the Balkans and the recent announcement of a European Reassurance Initiative by the US Defence Department were causes for concern. Claudia Haydt suggested that Germany should look to take more responsibility for helping to reduce military intervention by NATO/US forces in Europe.



There were no questions from the audience at this event but that was to prove the exception rather than the rule. After this meeting we were once again outside in the glorious sunshine on our way to the next workshop. Here our small delegation parted company and I hopped on a tram back to the old town and to the *Bosanski Kulturni Centar* (BKC). This centre was the hub of the event; maps, programmes, t-shirts, event bags and information could all be procured from the team of tireless volunteers based here.

My second Friday session was hosted solely by Monika Karbouska from the French organisation *Comité pour l'annulation de la dette du tiers monde* (CADTM) as other speakers were unable to attend. Monika's presentation was delivered in French, which was fortunately translated for English speakers by a member of the audience. *Debt, crises and ways of people's organising* detailed the economic war that is being waged on the poor by the rich via the public debt that many European countries currently face. CADTM seeks the abolition of the public debt that is imposed on nation states in part by private banks. The loan repayments that are made by some of the countries in the EU, such as Greece and Ireland, are so high that it is crippling them and forcing large-scale cuts to many vital public services. Monika went on to suggest that the austerity measures faced by many countries in the EU provide fertile ground for right-wing political movements to flourish. This point is strengthened by the results of the recent European Parliamentary elections. At the end of this workshop the floor was opened to the audience and many suggestions as to how to

reduce public debt were given. The air was ripe with solutions to the difficulties currently faced by society. This enthusiasm rolled over into the Opening Ceremony, which began at 6pm that evening. The main auditorium of the BKC was filled with hundreds of participants from all over the world for the ceremonial start of the four-day peace event.

‘A Message for Peace’ was delivered by Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire, Noam Chomsky (via video), Joseph Gerson, Hildegard Goss-Mayr, Verdiana Grossi, Chico Whitaker, and Jasmila Žbanic. The messages were interspersed with music and songs from Pontamina, the Sarajevo choir.



At the second roundtable, *Militarism and Alternatives*,

held on Saturday morning, Mairead Maguire and Joseph Gerson discussed the alternatives to confrontation and to NATO in light of the crisis in Ukraine. Ukraine was revisited in a late afternoon session that examined the *Comparison between new social movements, starting from the examples of Bosnia and Ukraine*. A number of the people who had been involved on the ground in the protests gave testimonies as to the brutal treatment that they experienced. In both countries, what began as peaceful protesting against corrupt élites and/or authoritarian regimes soon descended into violence as those in authority tried to disperse the crowds with brute force. Stories of police brutality in both Bosnia and Ukraine, and kidnappings by the latter’s government, provided a graphic picture of the tyrannical nature of those in power.

This workshop also highlighted the contradictions found in mainstream reporting of these events when compared to the real life accounts of what happened. In Bosnia the protestors were portrayed as being subversives and there were even claims that other countries were paying the protestors to undermine the government. The reality was that the majority of people in the country had become disillusioned with the current Bosnian government because unemployment was rife and those in parliament were doing nothing to help. The same was true for the Ukrainian movements but the aftermath in this country was different. After the protests in Kiev

ceased, new laws were passed to suppress blogs that criticised the government. According to one of the speakers, some bloggers have been imprisoned for expressing anti-government views.

On Sunday morning the *Peace and the Internet* workshop hosted by Mikael Böök dovetailed neatly with the previous day's discussion. The Internet, the host reminded us, is a vital tool for the promotion of peace around the globe because it is a means of co-ordinating protest movements and creating a collective consciousness between the different groups. It helps disseminate information about the corruption and exploitation of workers that is perpetrated by those in power.

In my final workshop, hosted by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung South-east Europe, the subject turned to retiring NATO. Lucas Wirl, one of the many industrious organisers of the event, was in the chair with Joseph Gerson, Dave Webb (CND) and Claudia Haydt as speakers. The title of the workshop was *NATO 2014: It talks of peace but wages war* and the discussants made their case for disbanding the outmoded institution which is perceived by many to be an additional arm of US/UN military might. It was argued that if NATO were retired then international funds would become available for a more sustainable society. Sarajevo Peace Event 2014 was officially closed with a ceremony featuring music from the Youth Camp and videos of the workshops held over the previous three days. Sarajevo has been transformed by violence. The scars of war are still

visible on the sides of many of the blocks of flats along the main road that leads out of the city. In between these are the modern steel and glass structures that house the new high-rise apartments, banks and shopping centres. The juxtaposition of the old with the new provided the perfect backdrop to an event that was seeking solutions to change the way the long-standing system operates.

