

Anarchist solidarity and anti-war initiatives in post-Yugoslav countries

(personal recollection from Croatia)

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A few important notes: I am writing from my own personal perspective, meaning that I lived at the time in Croatia and that all of this is my point of view. I will note if something is a quote or reference.

Also, it's important to note that this is not a historical text. There's no such thing as objective history. This is a personal overview of activities and events that were organized to oppose war, nationalism, militarization and to show and practice solidarity with all those suffering directly from war or its (side)effects.

Most of all, this is not an analysis of the war(s) in former Yugoslavia, neither an attempt to discover why they happened. It was never really a question – as any war in the past it was all about power, wealth and control over territory and people, no matter which side in the war you look at.

For a better understanding of the context in which the events that I'm writing about take place, it is important to note that in the years before the war(s) in former Yugoslavia there was no anarchist movement, just few individuals and initial groups being formed at the very end of 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's. So, the time of war(s) was also a new beginning (after almost 60 years) for organized resistance coming from anarchists.

Still, anti-militarist resistance was not new; it was present for years, the 1980's were the time of broad campaigns against the militarization of society and obligatory military service that every man older than 18 had to do for 12 months in Yugoslavia. In that time, terms like "conscientious objector" were new, at least in public discourse and in the media, people were put in prison, demonstrations were taking place, newspapers that would stand behind the arrested were banned... For the first time, the position of the army was put into question on a wide and open scale. Most importantly, this campaign was coming from an anti-militarist and pacifist position and not from a nationalist one, which will be the case in years to follow, since the Yugoslav national army (JNA – Jugoslavenska narodna armija) was opposed at the beginning of the 1990's also from a so called "anti-war" position while at the same time new national armies were built with support from these so called "anti-war" protests that were mostly motivated by the new rise of nationalism.

Of course, this nationalist opposition in Croatia to JNA was nothing but pure "performance", as it was manipulated by new rising political elites so as to create a situation in which one army is the enemy and the other army is "ours". All this started as an attempt by mothers to get their sons out of the JNA, since it was clear in the Spring of 1991 that war would start and some claim (and I have no reason not to believe them) that this initiative was without the influence of political elites, but just a pure grass-root initiative by parents. Still, as soon as it started, it was clear to those in power in Croatia that they could use it for their political goals, so they started to provide free bus transport, help organize demonstrations in Brussels and distribute hundreds of new national flags to demonstrators. After few months, even if this movement was grass-roots, it turned to nationalist rhetoric and lost any potential for calling itself anti-militarist or anti-war.

Anarchist and other anti-war initiatives

At the same time, in late Spring of 1991, a new anarchist group was formed in Zagreb under the name (at the time) Zagreb anarcho-pacifist organization (ZAPO) and they organized the first anti-war and anti-militarist protest in front of parliament in Zagreb. This was something totally

different in approach without any national flags (of course!) and with a clear message against the war politics which were loud and clear at the time from all sides. That was June 1991, just few weeks before the start of the war in Slovenia, and only two months before the start of the war in Croatia (although, random shooting and low-scale warfare were already going on without being called “war”).

ZAPO was mainly organized by young, subcultural people from Zagreb, and in first months of war, many of them went out of the country to avoid mobilization or military service so, soon after it was formed the group was reduced to only a few people. Still, this didn't mean the end of activities, but rather a slowing down and focusing on immediate needs like helping people avoid mobilization, doing small-scale leafleting on the streets, and putting up anti-war and anti-nationalist posters. All this was small and symbolic in some sense, since full-scale war was going on, most of the country was under bombing or close to the front-line; military was everywhere on the streets and the media was only covering the war. The atmosphere of war was full and heavy, it became normality, as if there was nothing else but war. At least it seemed so.

I will not go further in explanation of general atmosphere, since it would take too much space, but it's important to mention it for a better understanding of the conditions under which all these activities were going on. Also, the war didn't happen with same intensity all of the time and was not same intensity in all places, but the last four months of 1991 were heavy in most of the country. If nothing else, it was a totally new situation full of stress, fear, death and strong propaganda by nationalists. After some time, even the worst conditions become normalized; people would say “What to do? You have to live somehow.” War was the new reality.

In July 1991, the Anti-war Campaign of Croatia was formed in Zagreb as a loose network of different organizations and individuals, ranging from anarchists to feminists to anti-nuclear activists, environmental groups, pacifists, human rights groups and more. It attempted to create stronger opposition to the normalized logic of war although it recognized that we live in war, it was important to establish something that would keep ideas of peace, anti-nationalism, and anti-militarization alive and present in public discourse and not to let everything be dominated by this new war normality. But not everything was left just on the symbolic level. Many groups and individuals were working on direct protection and solidarity with people who were victims of war, no matter which side made them victims or who they were. It was important work, since non-Croatians, mainly Serbs, would get in trouble just for having the wrong name.

One example of solidarity was helping people who were about to be evicted from their home because they were the “wrong” nationality. The scenario was often same – guys in camouflage uniforms come with some sort of paper saying that they have right to move into the flat. If the eviction isn't successful, they come back with cops and more armed people until it is.. All this was possible because of new regulations so the whole process was legal (at least during the four years of war). the only way to stop this was to attract as much attention as possible and try to prevent it with the presence of more people. Most of the time this wouldn't help; hundreds of people were evicted and whole families sent into the street. Still, solidarity actions kept some people in their homes.

In early 1992, ZAPO also joined the Anti-war Campaign, meaning that it was listed as a network member. All groups that were part of the network organized all activities in full autonomy, coordinating only when they had the need (or want) to do so.

From the very beginning of the war, one of the main steps of those in power was informational blockade, meaning that no news from the “other side” was coming through. In practice, that

meant that no news from Serbia, or SAO Krajina (part of Croatia that was under Serbian control) and later Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) could be found in any mainstream media. That was part of the effort to demonize other side, preventing any news that could show how suffering happens on all sides and, most importantly, that there was active resistance to war. For example, in Croatia you couldn't find any news about anti-war protests or the huge number of people escaping mobilization in Serbia. Friends from Serbia can write/say more about these events as I have no personal experience in them.

As short description about what kind of events I'm writing I'll use quote from book by Bojan Bilic "We Were Gasping for Air: (Post)-Yugoslav Anti-War Activism and Its Legacy" (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012) :

(...) in June 1992, thousands of Belgrade citizens poured into the streets to protest against the siege and express solidarity with Sarajevans. They carried pieces of black paper which — once united — formed a kilometer long ribbon, a symbol of their condolence and compassion (...). A couple of years later, some of those who took part in this undertaking also traveled via Croatia and Hungary, crossed the Igman Mountain and walked through the Sarajevo Tunnel to enter the besieged city and bring to its people a message that many "on the other side" were against the senseless destruction.

The informational blockade wasn't formed from a lack of information in media alone, there were also no phone lines, no internet (it didn't really exist yet, at least not in sense that we know it today), and no direct postal service.

In response and as a solution to the information blockade and mainstream media propaganda, a few major initiatives were created as a means of communication. In 1993, ZAPO participated with other anarchist groups from former Yugoslavia in the publication and distribution of a newspaper called *Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars* (*Preko zidova nacionalizama i rata*), which was printed in Italy (with financial support of anarchists there) and distributed in all former Yugoslav states wherever there were people willing to distribute it. It was spread on the streets in Croatia, in military barracks (among soldiers serving military service) and left in public spaces. Though a few thousand copies of newspaper couldn't do much, it was punch in the eye for local censors and nationalists as well as a strong voice of solidarity among people living on both sides of front-line who did not support war or the political power of any side. Texts that were published in the newspaper covered political views of people living on all "sides" concerning war, nationalism, and economy, but more importantly it was a joint effort of people from the "other side". By the time this project happened, "solidarity" was considered to be a dirty word and a "communist left-over" so any solidarity action was seen as an act of treason. And I guess it was, but there's nothing wrong with treason against those in power or against the state and its institutions. Still, no matter what anarchists thought, it was hugely problematic to start any solidarity initiatives, as most of the people in Croatia thought of themselves as victims of a war which was started by the "other side" and solidarity was not an option for most people. On the other hand, anarchists were talking about all victims of war, no matter who they were. Most of the time, this was just too much for a lot of people in Croatia.

The idea around *Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars* was to publish it every now and then, depending on the money and initiative of different groups, but unfortunately, just one issue was published. At least on its own resources, since the second issue was published in 1995 as part of ZAPO's zine *Comunitas*. Still, it was done like that so as not to lose all material that was collected for it and the effect was not the same, of course.

Still, this was not the end of the idea around Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars: anarchist punk bands and d.i.y. music labels continued with a project of the same name through organizing tours together. Both tours happened in Slovenia (the only post-Yugoslav country for which there was no need for visas or it was easier to get one). The first tour was done in 1997 by bands called Bad Justice (Croatia) and Totalni promašaj (Serbia). In 1998, the same tour was done by the bands Radikalna promjena (Croatia) and Unutrašnji bunt (Serbia). These tours were open political events with a clear message rather than just another music tour. Two 7" records under the name Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars were put out in those years, one as a split 7" of Bad Justice and Totalni promašaj, and other as compilation of bands from former Yugoslav countries.

Still, this was not the only project coming from the d.i.y. scene; earlier, some time in the first months of 1994, a few people from Pula went through Hungary to Serbia (there was no direct way to get there, since you would have to cross front-lines) to make interviews with people from the underground (or not so underground) scene and compile it in a fanzine called Distorzija which included an audio-tape compilation named "No Border Compilation". This was a brave and good attempt of breaking lack of communication that existed at the time.

Just about the same time (1992) as Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars, another similar project started within the Anti-war Campaign, called ZaMir (ForPeace), which was the first BBS (Bulletin Board System), which from today's perspective we can call a simple version of internet (let's just keep it because of my technical ignorance on this level, OK?). A bunch of donated computers connected with old-school modems and phones, being servers for communication that did not exist at the time. This was our introduction to the world of e-mailing. It didn't just help connect people in former Yugoslavia who were opposing war and nationalism, but also divided families and friends. It was a great help and organized by a few international and local activists with technical knowledge and also proved to be of great importance in events to follow.

One more newspaper is important to mention: Arkzin. It was the zine of the Anti-War Campaign, its first issue was published in 1991. By 1993 it looked like a regular newspaper with "irregular" content since it was writing about things that were not considered to be part of Croatia's normality or dominating values. Although not anarchist, it was open to anarchists and strongly opposed to the regime so we found common ground for cooperation. At its peak, print-run was 10.000 copies every two weeks.

In 1994, ZAPO decided to change its name so from Zagreb Anarcho-Pacifist Organisation it became the Zagreb Anarchist Movement (ZAP – Zagrebacki anarhisticki pokret) – not pacifist, but anti-militarist and anti-war. Within Anti-War Campaign this was accepted but never really discussed. There was no real need for this, since each group was acting autonomously.

Around that time, two new projects started the newsletter Necemo i nedamo (We don't want and we don't give) and its English version, Zaginflatch (Zagreb Information Potlach). In next 7 or 8 years these two newsletters were important sources of information, being published every few months, depending on money and other resources. Print-run was from a few hundred to a few thousand. The main idea was to continue with a similar idea to that which was behind Over the Walls of Nationalisms and Wars, but in a more informative way. In 1999, during the NATO bombing of Serbia, Zaginflatch proved to be very important (with a lot of help from e-mails and technology provided by ZaMir). Since Serbia was under sanctions for years and now under direct attacks by NATO bombs, all communication was cut-off, foreign journalists had to leave country, and our only connection with anarchists there was ex-yu-a-lista (hosted by ZaMir), an

informative e-mail list/forum for anarchists from former Yugoslavia. People would send news, stories, texts, and analysis to the list and ZAP crews and some other friends would translate it into English and publish new issues of Zaginflatch every day during bombings. For us it was important as it was something that we could do from a distance to show solidarity and help in some way, and after we got feedback from Serbia and other people saying that this broke the total isolation they live in, it was clear that this daily publication had to continue; and it did, for two months.

In order to further understand why this was important, it would be good to describe the atmosphere in Croatia during NATO bombing. A lot of people were celebrating the fact that Serbia was getting “punished” for all the wars in former Yugoslavia and this, in turn, was the mainstream image of how people feel about it. Again, this logic of war was brought to the surface (it was already four years since war ended in Croatia) with the demonized “other side” and the idea that “all of them are same”. So, solidarity was once again seen as act of treason.

Anyway, Zaginflatch was done regularly for all 75 days of bombings and distribute internationally, but also translated into many languages.

In all that time, people who were communicating through ex-yu-a-lista mostly didn't know each other personally, at least those living in countries that were at war, but just through the e-mail list. After some time, there was an initiative to organize a meeting of as many people as possible and to establish stronger cooperation. The main idea was to connect people from Croatia and Serbia. After two smaller meetings in Hungary (the obvious choice, since people from both countries didn't need visa to get there) organized in 1997 and 1998 were not really well attended for various reasons (lack of money and organizational problems) and in May 2000 the first big meeting (over 100 people participated) was organized in Bosnia and Hercegovina in the ecovillage of Zelenkovac. For most of the people it was the first time that they met in-person people with whom they were cooperating for years. Although the meeting didn't bring many concrete conclusions or projects, it was a very good point of discussion and a political statement in of itself. After all, mutual solidarity and local projects that were going on continued, this was the most important fact.

But let's go back once more to the earlier years of the war in Croatia, to be more specific, to the summer of 1993, when a few local anti-war activists and their international friends came to the town of Pakrac, divided in two by the front-line running through the town center. In July of 1993, they formed the Volunteers Project Pakrac. It's important to say that this project was not anarchist, but many anarchists did participate in it. It was, before all, a community, peace and solidarity project. The Anti-War Campaign was standing behind it and the first volunteers started to come in during the summer of 1993. Until summer, 1997, around 400 volunteers passed through the project; some were there short-term (3 weeks), or long-term (from a few months to a few years). The special quality of this project was that a bunch of utopian kids (and not so young kids) arrived in this demolished town where social connections were broken, the economy was destroyed, houses were burned down, blown-up or hit, and they decided to work on creating new social connections, peace, rebuilding houses and, to put it briefly, on all kinds of solidarity and community projects together with local people. Let's not forget that war was still going on, “peace” (well, cease-fire, really) was controlled by UN “peace-keeping” units, but life was far from “normal”. Thousands of land-mines and un-exploded devices were still in and around the town. The frontline was still there, it just wasn't so active any more.

One of the main “jobs” for most of the volunteers (mostly international) was to clean demolished houses and prepare them for re-building. This was done in cooperation with local people and home owners. Typical daily work would mean having a group of 5–10 people cleaning old/burned plaster off the walls, cleaning trash (tons of it) from houses, burned stuff, bricks, personal items (photos and toys were always a rough reminder of the real people who lived there). And then a break: coffee, rakija, food and conversation with the people whose house was getting prepared for rebuilding.

So physical work was not the only important thing – interaction with people, the opportunity to talk about their problems, fears, and experiences. I guess this was somehow the most important thing. They had a chance to say things about which they otherwise couldn’t speak about with their neighbors and they were “exposed” to people who got there from places where reality was very different. Where normality was not war. Not to forget the sense of international solidarity and communication that goes far beyond issues of war, nationalism and the everyday misery most of the people were facing at the time.

It would take a whole book to do a proper analysis and discuss the full importance of this initiative, so I’ll just stop here and leave it at this short description.

And what about conscientious objectors? There were quite a few, but not really public at the time; most of the people were trying to find their way around and avoid mobilization or military service (in following years), since in first year of the war there was no regular military service. The situation in Croatia was specific, social pressure was hard, same as the propaganda, and the general atmosphere was that the country was “under attack, so everyone should do their part in the war”. Add patriarchal culture to that, some mythology about “men-warriors” and you have more-or-less the idea about how things were seen. “Conscientious objector” was same as “deserter”. Even if there was a legal way to do it in early 1990’s, it wouldn’t really have mattered, since social pressure was harder than any law at the time.

Just to elaborate on what I mean by this, let me mention one event that tells a lot about the situation.

In 1993, the Anti-War Campaign organized public discussion under name “The Destruction of Bosnia” that talked about Croatia’s aggressive politics towards BiH and conscientious objection as a practical opposition to war politics. Afterwards, Drago Krpina, at the time one of the more powerful members of HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union, right-wing party that ruled Croatia through the nineties) publicly said to one of the anti-war activists “You sir should be drafted, sent to front and shot in the back of your head as soon as you turn your back!”.

This threat aptly describes the social context in which all of this was happening, since a high government official was openly describing a model of dealing with political enemies without any fear of doing so in public, not to mention completely without legal problems. On the other hand, pressure on all people involved in anti-war and anti-nationalist activities was always present. From public threats to secret surveillance, from attacks in the mainstream media, to “discreet” threats through neighbors, family or directly towards them. The spread of fear and paranoia by any means possible. But that is how the State works, it’s just that in extreme times they use more extreme measures.

Not really a conclusion

So, this was just a short personal recollection of a few moments of anti-militarist, anti-war and anti-nationalist struggles in the 1990's, just to get the main idea about some of the initiatives and groups involved in it. Also, I was focused on those that involved anarchists. It's important to say that scope of these efforts were much wider. For example, I didn't mention feminist/womens groups working specifically with women who were either raped or otherwise victimized in the war. And that's just one more chapter of the story that has yet to be told. Also, I didn't mention other important aspects of the struggle, like the first squatting attempts which were organized in 1994 in Zagreb and Split, while the war was still going on or the huge d.i.y. subcultural punk scene (which was quite political at the time) and its network of 150+ 'zines (just in Croatia, the total number in post-Yugoslav countries is much bigger) that were published through the 1990's. Also, ZAP organized a series of actions and protests against NATO in early 2000's which was a direct consequence of all these activities in earlier years. Still, this would take too much time and space to mention all in one place. There is much history of resistance.

But this was not meant to be a historical text, as I said at the beginning.

So, this text can't end with a conclusion, but rather a few important questions: what did we learn in all these years of war(s)? What has come of that experience now? Is everything really over?

It's hard to give definite answers. It's clear that nothing is really over, nationalism is still around, just a bit more silent, getting louder every time those in power need a new distraction, something spectacular and adrenaline-raising for masses that might rebel. War is always something to talk about. Wounds and fears are still fresh in people's minds; even 20 years later, the war still hasn't finished for some people. And for many (including those in power), war is sacred thing, something "good to remember" – the "glory days".

After all, that's an important base for nationalists all around the world. All states, no matter how small or big, celebrate their war efforts, victories and loses, as something sacred.

There's nothing good or sacred in war. There's just misery and destruction. That's the main lesson we learned. War is the health of the state. Nothing is more true than this simple quote, which always reminds us that the only reason for war is more power and wealth for those already in power.

On the other hand, one of the things that we learned is the importance of solidarity. No matter what the situation is or what direct effect action has, solidarity is the only thing that matters in the long-run.

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