

Petar Opalić  
Qualitative and Psychometric Research of Refugees and  
Traumatized Subjects in Belgrade

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## Preface

Social circumstances in the Western Balkans have always been complex and contradictory, significantly influenced by various cultures and global centres of political power. Therefore, the Western Balkans continuously remain a battlefield of social misunderstandings and even conflicts. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, on the global scene, marked by the disintegration of the communist system and disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Former Yugoslavia was, politically speaking, a typical totalitarian creation, which, combined with the above-stated, resulted in several wars that took their toll – tens of thousands of innocent victims on all sides of the conflicts, followed by several waves of refugees, the number of which is expressed in hundreds of thousands. All these were followed by a whole range of socio-pathological phenomena – crime, grey economy, drug abuse, alcoholism, divorces, suicides and other social and psychological indicators of social anomie.

This paper aims at determining, in a scientifically valid, objective and reliable way, mental effects the above-mentioned social crisis leaves on refugees after a relatively long time period of time (on average, eight years have elapsed since the main traumatic events), since refugees are, after those who lost their lives to the conflicts, certainly one of the most affected social groups in one of the countries of the seething Western Balkan region.

In order to determine the mental state of refugees, we compared it to the same status of the somatically traumatised (both at war and in peacetime), and, unavoidably, with the mental state of a part of the population of the same or similar social-demographic features who denied any significant trauma in their lives. Therefore, the study, in various combinations, investigated the subjects comprising refugees (placed at refugee camps, which is believed to be definitely the most unfavourable way of taking care of the expelled and refugees), wounded during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, finally, the persons from Belgrade and its vicinity who have been injured in traffic accidents, at work, or in their spare time. The third group of subjects comprised the persons without any experience of trauma whatsoever. The group, of course, was used as a control group. However, it has to be noted that, bearing in mind the stressfulness of general conditions of life and social conditions in Serbia during the nineties, the group could be used at the same time as an experimental one, that is, as the group that could be used to investigate the effects of the general high-risk stress (wars in the region, NATO bombing, external sanctions, economic and political transition, all taking place at the same time) in comparison to the population of the prosperous and peaceful countries experiencing no such problems for a long period of time. Therefore, the group could be an interesting one to the researchers analysing the ef-

fects of the overall stressful factors on the mental state of people from a trans-cultural and international point of view.

Taking into account the results obtained by similar researches, we endeavoured to shed some more light on the subjective – more difficult to notice and understand – effects of refugeeism as a forceful, multilayered and, in our case, long-term trauma causes in relation to the interior world of an individual. In other words, we endeavoured to determine, in a scientifically and methodologically diverse sense, devastating effects on the mental life of the people exposed to expulsion and compulsion of adjusting to new and more difficult living conditions. The comparison of their mental state with the subjective status of the so-called healthy population of the domicile population of Belgrade, as well as with the subjective status of the somatically traumatised, was aimed at determining the nuances in differences of mental responses to various accidents, especially refugeeism.

Having in mind that the subject matter of the research was the individual's internal world of experience, never comprehensible in its full entirety, we believed that the research should be, in a methodological sense, both qualitative and quantitative. Namely, the former methodological approach is based on the statistical objectivity, precision and reliability of data, primarily psychometric research, while the latter is to provide qualitative depth, that is, to shed some more light on the specificity of mental life of the traumatised. While the former is, despite its reliability and objectivity, neutral and »cold«, the latter method is illustrative and vivid. Both of them are, in their own ways, universally understandable.

Using the human figure drawing as a method of research located somewhere between the analysis of dreams on one side, and the application of the set of psychometric and similar research instruments (such as the PTSD-10 Scale, Brief Eysenck's Personality Inventory, Late Effects of Accidental Injury Questionnaire, Family Homogeneity Index) on the other side, should contribute to the insight into the mental state of the subjects obtained through both qualitative and quantitative research.

Although the sample was varied, depending on the focus of our research of certain parts of the study (some of which have already been published in journals or presented at scientific gatherings), we did not change the theoretic framework of interpretation, which, we believed, was a *conditio sine qua non* of the persuasiveness of the research results' interpretation and discursive integrity of the whole text of the study. The theoretic framework is an existentially-analytical one, already used in our previous papers. It is most outstandingly recognisable in the last chapter, case studies or in biographies of our subjects. Besides, we believe that dreams and human figure drawings of very distinctive or typical subjects, presented *in extenso*, contribute to the authenticity and vividness of presenting the results of quantitative or psychometric data processing, and equally support the stated theoretic position of the study.

Lastly, it is my great pleasure to thank, most of all, my subjects – especially the refugees, the wounded and the injured, who patiently replied to a series of questions taken from several instruments. I am also thankful to my colleagues, Assistant Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Lešić, surgeon of the Orthopaedic Hospital of the University Clinical Centre, Belgrade and Lazar Nikolić, who spared no efforts in helping me test certain parts of the sample. I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Ljubomir Žiropadja, psychologist, for his support in statistical data processing, as well as to all health care workers who supported me, more or less noticeably, in my efforts to publish this study.

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**Petar Opalić**



# 1. Problems of Refugees in Serbia

## The social position of refugees in Serbia

In relation to massive disasters (refugeeism certainly being one), the World Health Organisation (WHO 1992) called attention to the fact that the intensity and other features of trauma did not have an upper limit. On the other hand, when discussing the issue of refugeeism, one must know that it is a complex phenomenon which involves disorders in the psychological, economic, political and social sphere, but primarily in the organisation of one's life. Destructive effects of such a disaster (i.e. refugeeism) are such that they imply harmful consequences which cannot be overcome by regular social measures. Therefore, what is considered a disaster also directly depends on the capacity of the society, culture and times in which it appears to overcome it. Moreover, the United Nations have called attention to the fact that if a disaster kept on repeating, it would raise the upper limit above which an event was considered a disaster. The World Health Organisation also noted that the so-called disasters caused by human factor (war and the like) produce mental disorders in nearly 30% of population, which is significantly higher than in so-called natural disasters (earthquakes, floods and the like).

Refugeeism does not imply only the loss of homeland and home (house or apartment) and massive material impoverishment, but also the loss of employment. It also dramatically decreases general social security. Besides, refugees in Serbia and Montenegro are entitled only to health care and education under the same conditions as the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro, without any of the political rights they used to have.

Today, every 10<sup>th</sup> refugee in the world is from the territory of former Yugoslavia. It is considered that around 3.5 million people had to leave their homes in former Yugoslavia. According to the UNHCR and the International Organisation of the Red Cross, Germany received 320,000 refugees from the territory of former Yugoslavia, Sweden received 86,000, Austria 79,000, Italy 36,000, and Denmark 28,000 refugees (Morina 1997, page 8). In other words, all foreign countries (with GDPs, on average, 5-7 times the Yugoslav GDP, and populations 15 times the population of Serbia and Montenegro) took care of a little over 700,000 refugees, that is, approximately the same number of refugees the small and poor countries Serbia and Montenegro provided for, where, at the time, around 5,500 war invalids lived.

More precisely, since March 1992 around 180,000 people from the territory of former Socialist Republic of Croatia took refuge in FR Yugoslavia, mainly from the parts

of the country controlled by a new – mildly put, nationalistic – regime in the former Yugoslav republic. Another 250,000 refugees are to be added to the above-stated number – people who had to leave the territory of former Republic of Srpska Krajina (Northern Dalmatia, Lika, Kordun, Banija, Eastern and Western Slavonia). Therefore, out of the total number of 800,000 Serbs who had lived in the Socialist Republic of Croatia until 1990, around 400,000 had taken refuge in the FR of Yugoslavia by mid-1995. During the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina – 1992-1995 – an additional 300,000 Serbs refuted or were expelled, among which were several thousand Croats and Moslems. During the Bosnian war, it needs to be mentioned, Serbs were expelled from around 15% of the territory of former Bosnia and Herzegovina from several municipalities in which they comprised 95% of the domicile population. It should also be mentioned that Serbs were during this war decimated in the very same territories in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as during WWII. These territories were struck the most by both the war in WWII and the civil war during the 90's and Serbs had been the ethnical majority in these regions, especially in Croatia, for centuries. Therefore, for the third time in the 20th century, the Serb population in these areas suffered a threat of utter physical extinction (Marinković 1993).

Refugeeism in Serbia and Montenegro has been a mass phenomenon for over a decade. Almost every 10<sup>th</sup> inhabitant of this country is a refugee, whereas only 570,000 of them have the internationally recognised refugee status, while 100,000 have no status whatsoever. If it be of any comfort, in the period of 1967-1991, there were 171 million people struck by war worldwide, out of which only 700,000 lived in industrially developed countries (Farlane A. 2000). Until 1993, there were as many as 40 million refugees registered among them, with a tendency of constant growth (Flatten et al. 2001). The growth in the number of refugees worldwide resulted in a growing number of researches investigating the refugee issue (Dyregrov K., Dyregrov A., Raundalen M. 2000).

According to the official sources (Čavić 2000; Ilić 2001), the overall number of refugees in Serbia and Montenegro at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium amounts to nearly a million, compared to the present 200,000 ones in Croatia. Sociologist Ilić V. (2001) maintains that there are around 800,000 officially registered refugees, while the remaining 200,000 appear as the so-called grey figure. Excluding nearly 200,000 refugees expelled from Kosovo during 1999, all the refugees living in this country belong to the category of the so-called »extremely traumatised«, as mentioned by Becker (1997), paraphrasing the author of this expression, much better known Bruno Bettelheim for whom »extremely traumatised« implies, beside long exposure to stress, the fact that the trauma is deeply personal, that it is of social, that is, human origin, and last but not most importantly, that it involves the experience of possibility of the loss of one's own life. It should be stated that, in terms of this population, refugeeism,

beside combat experience at the front lines, belongs to the most intensive stressful experiences (Kaličanin, Bjelogrić, Petković 1992).

The experiences of sudden and major changes in life are difficult to overcome – unpleasant and painful ones even more – which was confirmed by many authors (Peretz, Kaminer 1991; Becker 1997, Priebe, Bolze, Rudolf 1994). Traumatic experiences, in their narrower sense, remain more present in sensory than in symbolic memory, making intimate traumatic experiences difficult to verbalise, that is, to translate into the language of communication. Trauma therefore continues to »live«, not only in subjective life of an individual, but, according to some authors (Farlane A. 2000), keeps on transferring from generation to generation as a heritage of collective experience.

Refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were coming to Serbia and Montenegro in three major waves. It is interesting to note that the first-wave refugees from Croatia and Slovenia (until April 1992) had had higher living standards prior to the war conflicts than the domicile population of Serbia who received them. Besides, there were more accommodation capacities in the FR of Yugoslavia at the time, and solidarity of the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro was more prominent. On the other hand, the second-wave refugees (from 1992 until mid-1995), as well as the third-wave ones (august 1995, mainly from Croatia) had already had lower living standards than the domicile population, or managed to take only a minimum of their assets when leaving their homes due to war operations of the Croatian army supported by NATO forces. Therefore, when they arrived in Serbia and Montenegro, they had significantly less resources than the domicile population. On the other hand, the reserves of the population that received them had in the meantime been exhausted, while the majority of capacities of refugee camps in Serbia had already been filled, which additionally aggravated the already serious situation.

The distribution of refugees in Serbia (Jovanović Z. 1994) was such that Belgrade received as much as 36.8%, Central Serbia 25%, and Vojvodina 37%, while an insignificant part was sent to Kosovo. It should be noted that according to the current Law on Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, passed on April 1, 1992, every expelled person is to lose his refugee status if refusing the accommodation provided by the state (Filipović 1996). The fact that the Milošević regime took no systematic care of refugees is supported by the following data: refugees, prior to their expulsion, had had employment in 80% cases – when becoming refugees, only 10% of them had regular employment (Milosavljević 1997).

There is no doubt that the first-wave refugees were warmly welcomed by the domicile population of Serbia, especially by their relatives and friends, whose natural and spontaneous reaction was to lend a supportive hand to their nearest in their misfortune. However, neither refugees nor those who offered their generous support could foresee that their refuge status would last that long, which created, and still creates

even today, a whole range of specific problems and phenomena which deserve the attention of researchers dealing with massive disasters. These refer less to the aspect of forcible change of living conditions than to the forced adjustment to the new living conditions. More precisely, these phenomena are related to conflicts within the population of refugees and the expelled, and their conflict with the domicile population, even with those who offered them immediate help.

In 1993, 42.6% of the total refugee population were children (Rudić et al. 1994). The majority of them experienced the loss of a family member and changed several places of residence during their refugeeism. These children were also exposed to long-term separation from their fathers (who were mainly at the front-lines) and short-term separation from their mothers (involved in solving existential and material problems of their families).

The whole population of refugees was, doubtlessly, exposed to an external destructive impact. Two thirds of refugee families in Yugoslavia were even separated – a part lived in various refugee conditions, while the other part remained in Croatia or Bosnia (Milosavljević 1994). One research (Popov, Mitrović, Stokić 1994) showed that those the most often absent from the remaining family were the father or one child. 10.5% of these families remained in war zones, 21% in their previous place of residence, while as many as 26% were transferred from one accommodation centre to another. Conflicts in such families grew significantly – from 29% prior to their refugeeism to 60% following their becoming refugees. Refugee families living in collective accommodation centres (around 20%) show a lower degree, in terms of statistical significance, of manifestation of closeness among their members, as well as a significantly lower degree of the need to be active, with increased rigidity, more precisely speaking, a decreased ability of adjustment to the new living conditions.

The mortality rate among refugees is today almost ten times the rate of the remaining population of Serbia (the same rate in which it is also increased) – 10% of the refugee population die annually, out of which, as much as 2% commit suicide (cf. magazine ›Humanist‹, published by Red Cross, Belgrade, July 1998). The suicide rate among them is nowadays 60 times the rate of suicide prior to their refugeeism (it was around 15, now it amounts to 1,000 per 100,000 people). The previously quoted datum that 90% of the refugees found family accommodation is more than dubious since it leads to the conclusion that refugees live with other families. The truth is that their number is decreasing and providing for their own accommodation is more and more present. The state and humanitarian organisations do not provide for a slightest part of their living costs, making their rather scarce money reserves thaw at a dramatic pace since the main part of their assets (real estates, furniture, livestock, means of production), the total value of which amounted to between 10 and 25 billion US dollars, remained in Croatia (›Humanist‹, 1998, page 12) and Bosnia. The position of refugees is further burdened by the fact that half of the expelled population (those from the