

Book Reviews

Barbara Muller, *The Balkan Peace Team 1994-2001: Non-violent Intervention in Crisis Areas with the Deployment of Volunteer Teams*, Ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart, 2006, Pp. 284, US\$29.90, ISBN 3-89821-615-6.

Suppose there is a human disaster in a nearby country: intimidation, forced evacuations, beatings, arrests, killings, massacres, war. What can a peace movement do? Protest against war and human rights violations? However, the crisis seems to be unfolding without much attention to foreign protests.

This was the situation in Europe in the early 1990s. Yugoslavia was splintering in the aftermath of the collapse of the state socialist regimes, with different parts seeking autonomy or independence. Key entities were Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo.

European peace and human rights groups were horrified at the disaster on their doorstep. Some of them came up with the idea of sending teams of volunteers into the area to assist local groups. This project became known as the Balkan Peace Team. Barbara Müller, a peace researcher and activist from Germany, has written a comprehensive account of the Balkan Peace Team experience.

There were several teams over the period 1994-2001, undertaking different tasks in different circumstances. Each team had just a few members. In the early years, there were two teams in Croatia with a primary focus on working with Croatian grassroots groups and documenting human rights violations. Later, there was a team in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, and one in Kosovo, where a key task was bringing together Serbians and Albanians, in a situation of extreme tension between the two groups.

What can outsiders do that locals cannot? One great advantage for outsiders is being seen as independent, not directly embroiled in local rivalries and racial divides. Furthermore, they had contact with and support from international constituencies, providing an extra influence for their role as witnesses and neutral brokers.

Many others have entered conflict zones with the goal of preventing human rights violations. There are agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Reporters Without Borders that witness and report on human rights violations. In the

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nonviolence tradition, Peace Brigades International has arranged for volunteers to accompany local activists threatened with violence.

The sponsors of the Balkan Peace Team wanted to do something a bit different: to support volunteers who would undertake a variety of tasks with the general goal of strengthening the capacity of grassroots groups and civil society. Principles of the team were independence and supporting local initiatives rather than an outside agenda. This involved a range of activities, including meeting with local activists, documenting problems, providing information and assistance, helping activists meet with others across polarised divides, and writing reports for their sponsors telling what was happening.

Müller's book gives a detailed account of the history of the Balkan Peace Team enterprise. There are really two histories, one of the Balkan crises and wars and the other of the activities of various teams. The story of the Balkan wars is highly complicated. It may be familiar to Europeans who followed it at the time, but for most outsiders it would be useful to have a clear summary with some maps, so that locations such as western Slavonia and Prishtina make more sense.

However, it is the second history in the book, of the Balkan Peace Team, that is more important. There are two sides: the difficulties and the successes. The difficulties were overwhelming. What can two or three volunteers, usually spending just a year in a new location, do to shift the huge forces pushing towards expulsions and massacres? Realistically, a small number of peace team members could not do much to affect large-scale political dynamics, from the massacres in Bosnia to the NATO bombing of Serbia.

However, the teams could make a difference at the level of individuals and communities, helping families retain their homes or helping displaced families return, helping local activists groups gain access to equipment and arranging meetings between activists from different nationalities. Stories of such successes are a highlight in the book.

The larger impression, though, is of obstacles. Whereas governments could deploy thousands of troops and had available vast amounts of money — usually deployed according to a security paradigm rather than nonviolence and grassroots capacity building — the Balkan Peace Team operated on a shoestring. Some 15 organisations were involved in the sponsoring the team, but their capacity to contribute or raise money was limited, which meant that finances were precarious throughout the entire operation. Teams needed resources, including vehicles, offices and communication technology, plus basic living expenses, but frequently grants and reserves were enough for only the next few months, which was not

good for morale or recruiting new volunteers.

As well, there were coordination and communication problems. If 15 organisations were involved in sponsoring the team, how would decisions be made? Team members welcomed direction, but secretariat members were a long way from the day-to-day experience of the teams. As the circumstances in ex-Yugoslavia changed, it was not always obvious what would be a useful intervention. Added to this were challenges in recruiting, training and selecting team members, and dealing with conflict within teams.

Müller draws on extensive documentation about the team, interviews with key people involved as well as her own experience. The book is comprehensive, with a large amount of information, which can be overwhelming at times. Luckily the concluding sections of the book provide a nice summary of the lessons from the Balkan Peace Team experience. The open assessment of the weaknesses of the team is extremely valuable considering the usual inclination of most organisations to hide shortcomings. The organisers of the Balkan Peace Team are to be congratulated for opening their files to Müller and thereby encouraging a full and honest appraisal.

So when a crisis next develops in your region and you think, let's send some volunteers to help out, it's wise to realise that what seems like a simple idea involves a major effort with a multitude of complications. Studying the story of the Balkan Peace Team is one way to be better prepared.

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