



THE BROKEN RIFLE

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15 May 2002: International Conscientious Objectors' Day Special Focus on conscientious objection on the Balkans

15 May around the world

■ Andreas Speck

In many cities all over the world anti-militarists and CO groups will be active on 15 May, marking International Conscientious Objectors' Day. WRI received some information on activities in different countries - a small hint on what will be happening.

BELGIUM

International action to mark International Conscientious Objectors' Day, organised by War Resisters' International

BRITAIN

The Right to Refuse to Kill, Ceremony at the Memorial Stone for conscientious objectors at Tavistock Square, London, 12pm (with speakers from WRI)

MACEDONIA

Action for conscientious objection in Skopje, organised by Group for Antimilitarist Action.

POLAND

Happenings and speeches on CO in Warsaw, Wroclaw, Katowice, and Lublin, organised by Amnesty International Poland - CO Team.

YUGOSLAVIA

Food not Bombs and open air punk concert (unplugged!) in Belgrade, organised by Group of Conscientious Objectors.

War Resisters' International wants to know more about your actions on 15 May 2002 - please send your reports and/or photos to:

*War Resisters' International
5 Caledonian Road
London N1 9DX, Britain
email: info@wri-irg.org*



Solidarity action for total objectors. CO activists close a court in protest against criminalisation of total objectors. The banners read: "good weather instead of criminalisation" and "court closed today"

Photo: Andreas Kiefer

■ Andreas Speck

15 May is International Conscientious Objectors' Day. For War Resisters' International and its affiliates this is one important opportunity to act for the right to refuse to kill, to raise awareness for conscientious objection and against militarism.

In 2002, War Resisters' International focuses its activities on the situation of conscientious objectors on the Balkans - not just former-Yugoslavia, but also Turkey and Greece. Although the situation in these countries differs in many aspects, most of these countries have one aspect in common: the struggle for the right to refuse to kill is somehow stuck. War Resisters' International's decision to focus on these countries in our activities for 15 May 2002 is meant to support these CO movements, to get the struggle for *the right to refuse to kill* moving again.

This issue of *The Broken Rifle* provides background information on some of the countries: Croatia, Serbia, and Greece. In

addition, this issue looks at the history of 15 May - International Conscientious Objectors' Day - and includes a discussion on the human rights approach versus the antimilitarist approach to conscientious objection.

For the first time we also provide a list of imprisoned conscientious objectors - similar to our *Prisoners for Peace*-list on 1 December, but more limited to the issue of conscientious objection. Support these imprisoned COs - and support us in our work to support COs!

Andreas Speck works at the office of the War Resisters' International.





Total objection against total war preparations

Photo: Andreas Kiefer

Conscientious Objection in Croatia

(April/May 2002)

■ Natalie Sipak

On 6th April 2002 a new Defense law was passed in Croatia. One of the most important facts from this law is that it clearly states that civil (alternative) service will be regulated by a separate law, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice (at present) or the Ministry of Labour and social welfare.

As far as our information goes, a final draft of the Civil service law is done. ARK has only seen a rough draft of it, and it did not look too promising. We have already filed an official complaint to the Ministry of Justice (together with Amnesty International Croatia) for not being included/invited to join the working group that is writing the draft. No official response so far.

It seems now that the Ministry of Justice is under pressure to produce the final version urgently, for there is a big increase in applications for conscientious objection. Last year 4009 applications were submitted (in 2000. it was only 680!) which is about 20 % of the total number of conscripts.

This year, by 15 March there were already 1,500 applications (7,5 %), and the number is increasing rapidly. The Office for civil service (at the Ministry of Justice) is totally swamped with applications, and since there is still no new law yet, no new institutions were added to the list of places where civil (alternative) service can be carried out. According to the present regulations, the Minister of defense has to sign any application from institutions that would like to be on that list. He has refused to do so in the last 2 years so everything is blocked until the new law on civil service is passed and the present procedure changed.

In the last period there has also been an increasing number of complaints from CO's

about social discrimination. A large number of CO's does not have any source of income while being in civil service (they do not get any form of material compensation from the government, besides public transportation costs), which means their families are being endangered by lack of financial means to survive. According to the present law, CO's are not allowed to work while serving civil service.

The debate on abolishing conscription is still quite alive, and of course there are different opinions. It is looked upon from different angles; it involves national security issues, money issues, NATO membership, etc....

ARK openly & consistently speaks in favor of the abolishment of conscription (and the military itself, of course ☺), so questions on civil control of a "professional" army were raised in various occasions by various NGO's.

ARK and other NGO's working on CO issues in Croatia are consistent with their "politics" of demilitarization. We openly address and support the term of total objection, being in favor of civil (alternative) service as a voluntary, not compulsory way of contributing in the community.

The CO movement in Croatia is quite "informal and loose", meaning there is co-operation among individual NGO's working on this issue, and even support from NGO's that are otherwise engaged in other topics. But there is no consistent "visible movement", more individual daily work with common actions/campaigns at different occasions. The informal network of CO groups in Croatia links Zagreb-Vinkovci-Vukovar-Porec-Osijek-Cakovec-Karlovac-Pula.

ARK is trying (but not too successful due to the lack of activists ☺) to seek contact with different NGO's in all parts of Croatia

(especially the former "Krajina" area & Dalmatia) who would be willing to take up CO work (counseling, legal advice, actions, campaigns, etc.).

The lobbying for the Civil service law will continue together with Amnesty International Croatia and other CO groups.

There are quite good contacts with CO groups from the region (Bosnia & Hercegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia) and different ideas for co-operation and exchange of experiences.

For the International CO day on 15 May ARK is starting its public campaign "Civil service is safer" which will be the national campaign for promotion of civil service and conscientious objection in Croatia. The idea is to spread about 5000 condoms (in collaboration with the NGO network for CO: Zagreb-Vinkovci-Vukovar-Porec-Osijek-Cakovec-Karlovac-Pula) to the public. Each condom will be packed in a carton box with written information on sexual health and proper use of condoms, and a leaflet with information on how and where to apply for civil service and where one can get additional information about CO in their local community. The campaign will be done in cooperation with the women's NGO CESI - Center for Education and Counselling of Women based in Zagreb.

The logo of the campaign is a machine gun stuck inside a condom ☺

Natalie Sipak works with ARK and is a member of the WRI Executive.

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Yugoslavia: new law, but nothing's new

Conscientious objection in Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)

■ Igor Seke

Yugoslavia passed a new law on the Yugoslav army in January 2002, but this law still doesn't include any regulation on conscientious objection. Conscientious objectors can only perform a service without arms within the Yugoslav army - clearly not satisfactory for conscientious objectors.

Media reports lead to quite some confusion. Some media wrote about a "military civilian service", and some even presented this option as a genuine civilian service, so that many conscripts got quite confused. In reality, the only substantial change is the shortage of the military service: now 9 months for military service and 13 months for military service without arms.

It's still hard to see whether we are approaching our mid-term objective (implementation of a genuine civilian service) especially in political situation like ours:

- With the arrest of Momcilo Perisic, former chief of the Yugoslav Army and member of the Security Council of FR of Yugoslavia, the intelligence service of YU Army showed that it is still very well organized and informed.
- The agreement between Serbia and Montenegro to create a new union of two countries resulted in slowing down the work of the federal institutions that are supposed to work on federal laws (for example the Law on Civilian Service). The new union will have a new constitution and all the laws will have to be adjusted to it, so at the moment only the law on cooperation with the tribunal in The Hague was passed, because Yugoslavia was facing new economic sanctions. Our government believes that all other laws can be passed after the introduction of this new union.
- The Law on cooperation with the Hague tribunal brought back old divisions of "traitors" and "patriots". Polls show that a large amount of the population of Serbia is against the extradition of those who are accused of war-crimes, especially of Karadzic, Mladic, Slijivancanin... posters of Karadzic are all over Belgrade, as well as posters of armed "chetnik" - Serbian nationalist guerrilla, saying "Don't worry - we are waiting for you".
- The suicide of Vlatko Stojiljkovic, former Minister of Serbian Police, in front of the Federal Parliament, who was first on the list for extradition, and his hope that his suicide will provoke clashes between citizens of different political



Belgrade is full with posters declaring "We are all Karadzic", protesting against extraditing the former Bosnian-Serb leader to The Hague. Photo: Andreas Speck

opinions, as stated in his suicide letter, is an obvious example of how cheap life is in Serbia. If he didn't appreciate his own life, we can only imagine how valuable were lives of others to him, lives of police officers he commanded, or lives of the people he fought against in Kosovo and elsewhere, regardless of whether they were in uniforms or not.

Maybe we shouldn't pay so much attention to what seems like daily politics, but it is important for one to see that rules that are highly valued in our society are far from "democracy" and "legality" that our authorities are speaking or dreaming of, and that in reality we are facing a completely militarised society.

Concerning conscientious objection, we had many activities during the first trimester of 2002:

- on 19th January we had a whole-day meeting at the office of Women in Black. More than 30 activists from 14 towns from all over Serbia attended the meeting. At the meeting the representative of YUCOM announced that the Legislative Initiative for conscientious objection, signed by more than 30,000 supporters, is still stuck somewhere in the bureaucracy of the Federal Parliament. We decided to try to act more from the local level and to collect information on institutions where a civilian service might be performed; we were also discussing the recruitment of the under-aged for military high schools which are under jurisdiction of Ministry of Defence and not the Ministry of Education, and concluded that this is against all declarations on children rights, and that we should start a cam-

paign against any kind of military use of the under-aged.

- In February we published the 9th issue of "Prigovor", newsletter for antimilitarism and conscientious objection. At <http://prigovor.tripod.com> we uploaded one test version of the on-line edition of "Prigovor" - at present only in Serbian.
- In mid February we also printed 20,000 leaflets with the aim to clarify the terms "conscientious objection", "civilian service" and "service without arms". The media, as mentioned before, caused a lot of confusion with their misinterpretation of this terms, and they were unwilling to make any corrections, so we had to print this leaflets and distribute them throughout Serbia and Montenegro. These leaflets immediately gave us good feedback, because many new people called us and expressed their willingness to take part in our activities.
- Action of collecting the information on institutions where future civilian service could be performed was rather good. So far we received replies from over 50 organizations that are ready to accept conscientious objectors. We still haven't collected information in Belgrade, so we expect this number to increase when our action is finished.
- We made contact with representatives of Yugoslav Red Cross. YRC handed over their proposal to the Yugoslav Army, in which they asked the Yugoslav Army to allow conscientious objectors to serve the civilian service in YRC. Representatives of the Army were very negative about the idea, and were asking under whose command would objectors be if they serve in YRC. Still, YRC has very well-organized informa-

tion service that could be very helpful in our future campaigns.

- Several meetings of CO group were held in order to prepare activities for 15th May - international CO Day. So far we have decided to organize activities in several towns of Serbia and Montenegro, and for this occasion we will make a new set of leaflets with our new demand: end of conscription and of compulsory military service. We think that with this demand we should clearly take anti-militarist and pacifist positions. However, this is not necessarily the end of our work for the introduction of a civilian service, because there are some people who have nothing against civilian service, but we think that choosing between any kind of service (either military or civilian) or no service at all should be the basic right. Also, we have agreed to put an emphasis on military expenditures (66% of the federal budg-

et goes to the Army!) because wars in this region are finally over, hopefully for good.

- In March we sent our representative to antimilitarist forum in Zaragoza, Spain named "Lets Desert the Global Empire!" organized by MOC.
- At the end of March, as a part of visit of Women in Black - Italy delegation, we organized an open discussion on anti-militarist movements in Italy and Serbia. New forms of militarism in Italy after the end of compulsory military service were discussed, and possible ways to fight it as well. We discussed about new interpretations of the terms "security" and "safety" that NATO and Western governments are using. We explained our specific problems on this issue, and we concluded that our military structures as well, in their own way, are trying to find their place in new systems of collective defence, but the past 10 years and the

involvement of the Yugoslav Army in wars in former Yugoslavia and war with NATO in 1999 are slowing down this process, and make it less visible for the public. We are aware that the integration of the Yugoslav Army in a system of collective defence (like NATO or Partnership for Peace) are against the interests of local population, because they don't mean less but more militarisation of the region, and our safety will not be improved with the presence of more soldiers in our country (either our or foreign soldiers). But, this integration of the Yugoslav Army might improve the image it has of the West, and maybe it gets chance to buy new weapons and modernize, while NATO can finally have all the Balkans under its occupation.

Igor Seke works with the conscientious objectors' group within Women in Black Belgrade.

Greece: Conscientious objector on trial

■ Union of Conscientious Objectors

Greek conscientious objector Lazaros Petromelides stood trial again on 16 April 2002, but the trial was postponed again to autumn 2002.

Lazaros Petromelides was called to serve in the Greek Navy in 1992 and, following the practice then recommended by the Greek Union of COs, he sent a letter detailing the reasons that forbade him to serve in the Armed Forces. In the same letter he asked to be placed in an alternative, non-military national service. There was no provision for such a service then. The navy declared him "evading the draft" in March 1992 and 3 months later he was forbidden from travelling abroad. At the time it was common practice for conscientious objectors to move house so as for the authorities to lose track of them, but Petromelides chose to remain at his known address.

Around Christmas 1996 he was called to the Naval Court, where the public prosecutor charged him with "evading the draft during a period of general (military) mobilisation" (Greece has remained in a state of "General military mobilisation" ever since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 for reasons of international politics.). Presenting himself to the Court would mean certain arrest, so Petromelides sent a written statement explaining his opinions. The public prosecutor did not admit this statement. He produced instead an arrest warrant, although the Minister of Defence had already promised to bring to Parliament a law that would recognise conscientious objection. Law 2510/97 was passed only four months later. One month after the warrant, however, the Judicial Council of Peiraeus ordered Petromelides

to be remanded to custody, characterising him a "particularly dangerous person".

In April 1998, and while the new law was in force, police men from Drapetsona station (where Petromelides lives) arrested him for "evasion of draft". According to the Greek law they were obliged to let him go and at the same time notify the Navy recruitment office of his arrest. However, the police wrongly interpreted the order of the Judicial Council as overriding Greek law and illegally detained Petromelides in the Corinth Military Prison. This imprisonment attracted great publicity and as Petromelides remained available for civil national service, the Peiraeus Naval Court decided after 5 days to let Petromelides out of jail so as to formally apply for alternative service.

Petromelides was granted conscientious objector (CO) status in January 1999 but was ordered to serve for 30 months at Kilkis Old People's Home, in a town 550 km (340 miles) away from his family home. If he would make himself available for military service he would serve for 4 months fairly near his family. Petromelides therefore considered that the law under which his order was made contravened the Greek constitution. He therefore did not present himself for service, but instead took the only legal action available to him. He applied (within the appropriate time limits, in March 1999) to the highest Greek court (Symbolio tis Epikrateias, StE). The Naval Court of Peiraeus took none of the above into consideration. According to the provisions of law 2510/97 Petromelides was deprived of CO status and was called to court again in April 1999. He presented himself to the court, was convicted to four years imprisonment for "evading the draft during a period of general (military) mobili-

sation" and was detained in Corinth Military Prison.

A large wave of solidarity developed while the official Ombudsman (Sinigoros tou Politi, StP) clearly expressed that the requests of Petromelides were just in a special report on conscientious objectors. These developments resulted in the release of Petromelides from prison by the court of appeal (the military 'Review Court') after 2.5 months. The Review Court trial was interrupted in order, ultimately, to wait for the decision of the constitutional court. In Parliament the Minister of Defence answered a relevant member's question by saying that the government was working for a change of law based on the ombudsman's report. Despite all, on being released from prison Petromelides was called to start military service again. He didn't comply and a further arrest warrant was produced for the same offence, which hasn't been implemented yet.

Now, nearly three years later, nothing has changed. The StE has not come to a decision as yet, which is indicative of how serious the matter is.

The position of Petromelides is representative of the legal status of many Greek COs, as successive arrest warrants and prosecutions for draft evasion have produced a situation that not even the courts can successfully resolve. Radical solutions are necessary, including the unconditional release of jailed COs, respect of the right to refuse military service for reasons of conscience, trials of COs by civil not military courts and above all the removal of the responsibility for COs from the Ministry of Defence, according, among others, with the proposals of the Ombudsman.

15 May 2002: Conscientious objectors in prison

How the list works

- First are **prisoners' names** (in bold), followed by their sentence (in brackets, where known), then their **place of imprisonment** (in bold), and finally, the *reason for their detention*.
- Information about countries where prisoners have had their sentences suspended, or where sentences have been served or completed during the year are in *italics*.

Armenia

On 12 September 2001, *Gevork Palyan*, a Jehovah's Witness, was sentenced to one year imprisonment for refusing military service on religious grounds. Although Armenia announced an amnesty in summer 2001, which freed many Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for conscientious objection, new sentences occurred since. On 12 September, 13 Jehovah's Witnesses were still imprisoned or in penal colonies due to their refusal to perform military service: *Khachatour Zakaryan, Amayak Karapetyan, Arman Atanyan, Vahan Mkroyan, Armen Yeghiazaryan, Vladimir Kiroyan, Vladimir Osipyan, Edgar Bagdasaryan, Aram Shahverdyan, Vachagan Hovhannisyán, Karen Vardanyan, Samvel Vardanyan and Karapet Harutyunyan*. Four more awaited trial and a further five are living at home on condition that they report regularly to local police.

Finland

There are presently seven total objectors in prison in Finland.

- **Tuomas Tahko** (13/03/02–30/09/02)
Helsingin työsiirtola, PL 36, 01531 VAN-TAA
- **Lauri Uusitalo** (07/01/02–24/07/02)
- **Ville Laakso** (29/01/02–16/08/02)
- **Tuomas Mäki** (07/01/02–07/07/02)
Satakunnan vankila, Huittisten osasto, Toivarintie 581, 32700 HUITTINEN
- **Valo Lankinen** (15/01/02–02/08/02)
Suomenlinnan Työsiirtola, Suomenlinna C 86, 00190 HELSINKI
- **Ari-Pekka Tamminen**
(06/01/02–20/07/02)
Laukaan vankila, PL 55, 41341 LAUKAA
- **Tomi Tolsa** (04/12/01–10/06/02)
Haminan työsiirtola, Karjakatu 25, 49400 HAMINA

Israel

Since the escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine, the number of refuseniks increased considerably. At average, there are more than 40 COs in prison in Israel. They mostly receive sentences of 21 or 28 days, and receive a new call-up after their

release. Check the WRI website (<http://wri-irg.org>) for updates.

- **Amir Samuel**, Reserves Company
(18/04/02–19/05/02)
- **Victor Sabranski**, Military ID 7312440
(25/04/02–20/05/02)
- **Rafram Haddad**, Military ID 5118505
(29/04/02–24/05/02)
- **Tomer Livneh**, Military ID 5213558
(23/04/02–17/05/02)
- **Amit Grossman** (30/04/02–25/05/02)
- **1st Sgt. Michel Wexler**
(02/05/02–26/05/02)
- **Ro'i Sabbat** (05/05/02–31/05/02)
Military Prison No. 4, Military postal number 02507, IDF
- **Shai Biran**, Military ID 6993743
(25/04/02–20/05/02)
- **Yiftah Admoni**, Military ID 6961658
(25/04/02–20/05/02)
- **Alon Dror**, Military ID 7014088
(25/04/02–20/05/02)
- **Tomer Friedman**, Military ID 6993743
(25/04/02–20/05/02)
- **Capt. Liron Eliasov**
(30/04/02–25/05/02)
Military Prison No. 6, Military postal number 01860, IDF

Korea, Republic of

There are presently around 1500 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison for conscientious objection. About 500 are jailed each year for an average of 3 years. More information is available from: *Solidarity for Peace & Human Rights, 152-053 402-ho yunyoung-building, 1127-33 guro3-dong gurogu, Seoul, Korea, tel. +82-2-851 9086, fax 851 9087, email peace@jinbo.net*

State of Spain

- Although conscription is not enforced any longer, some *insumisios* are still in prison.
- **Alberto Estefanía Hurtado** (2 years 4 months, out 04/03/03)
 - **Javier Rodríguez Hidalgo** (2 years 4 months, out 20/02/04)
 - **Óscar Cervera García** (2 years 4 months, out 03/07/03)
Prisión Militar de Alcalá de Henares, 28870-Alcalá de Henares (Madrid)
 - **José Ignacio Royo Prieto** (2 years 4 months, out 04/03/03)
Prisión Provincial de Bilbao, Lehendakari Agirre, 92, 48870-Basauri (Bizkaia)
 - **Jesús Belaskoain** (2 years 4 months, out 08/08/02)
Centro Penitenciario de Pamplona, c/ San Roque s/n, 31.008-Iruna
 - **Miguel Felipe Ramos** (2 years and 4 months, out 28/05/03)
Centro Penitenciario Cáceres 1, Crta. De Torrejoncillo, s/n, 100001-Cáceres



All imprisoned for "insumision" (total objection) in the barracks; declaring their total objection after entering the military barracks.

- **Ander Eiguren Gandarias** (out 28/01/03)
Prisión Provincial de Bilbao, Lehendakari Agirre, 92, 48870-Basauri (Bizkaia)
Imprisoned for nonviolent direct action (breaking into a military installation)

Switzerland

- **Marino Keckeis** (15/01/02–14/06/02)
Haftanstalt Grosshof, Eichwilstrasse 4, 6010 Kriens
Conscientious objector, was not accepted as CO by the Swiss authorities. Went on hunger strike against imprisonment of COs.

Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan no civil alternative to military service exists. Those who refuse conscription face imprisonment under criminal law.

- **Yuri Yeremeyev** (08/12/00–07/06/02)
- **Ilya Osipov** (30/07/01–29/06/02)
Both are Jehovah's Witnesses, imprisoned for conscientious objection. Their prison addresses are not known.

Supporting COs in prison: co-alerts

War Resisters' International supports conscientious objectors who are imprisoned because of their conscientious objection, or face repression by the state or state-like entities. *Co-alerts*, sent out by email as soon as the WRI office receives information on the imprisonment or trial of a conscientious objector, are a powerful tool to mobilise support and protest.

Co-alerts are available by email (send a message to majordomo@wri-irg.org with the text `subscribe co-alert` in the body of the message) or on the internet at <http://www.wri-irg.org/cgi/news.cgi>.

The debate about conscientious objection - is it basically a human right, or is it an antimilitarist action? - is an old debate within War Resisters' International, but still relevant. Here, Andreas Speck, WRI staff, and Bart Horeman, WRI Treasurer, discuss this question.

CO as a human right vs CO as antimilitarist action

■ Bart Horeman & Andreas Speck

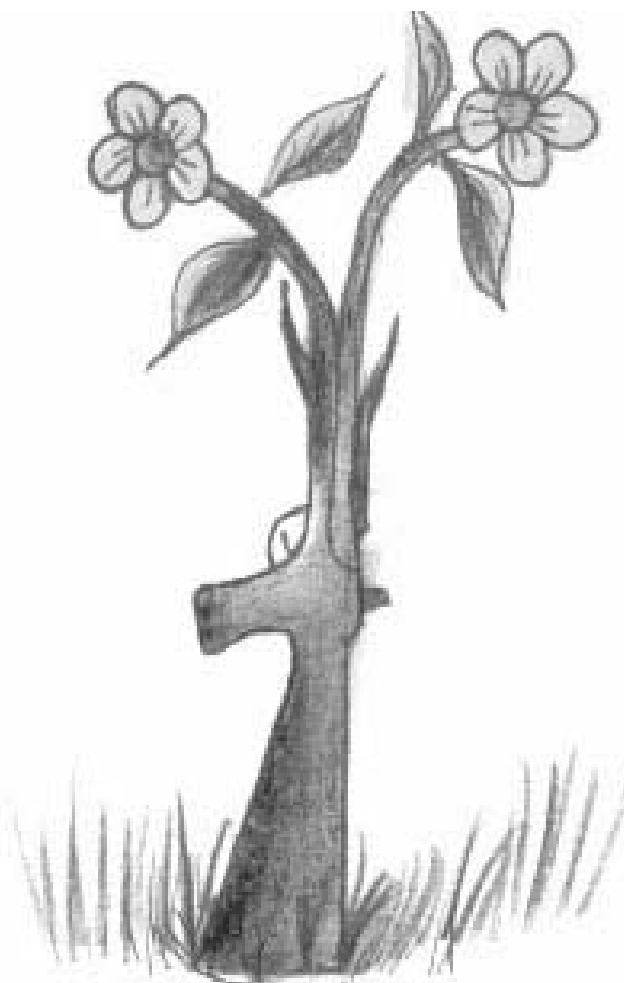
Andreas: When I became a total objector in Germany in the mid-80s, I saw my total objection as an act of civil disobedience against militarism, or more specific against the system of military slavery called conscription. My refusal to serve was aimed at abolishing conscription, I saw it as a small but important contribution to demilitarise the minds of people. And although I certainly acted out of my conscience, I never understood my conscientious objection as a human rights issue. For me, the very existence of the military is the central problem, and (total) objection is one way to address this social problem. The human rights approach doesn't address this - it basically demands that those who have problems with military service need to have the option to do something else. This doesn't challenge the right of the military to exist, it doesn't even challenge conscription (in most countries with conscription, alternative service is one way to fulfil conscription), it just provides an exceptional right for those who have individual problems with military service - in the end it depoliticises the whole issue of conscientious objection, it turns it into an individual problem.

Bart: I knew when I was 15 that I could not go to the military, but I didn't know why I felt that way. I was glad to know that there was a possibility to be recognised as CO - Netherlands had an already 60-year-old CO law. I cannot say I objected for any other reason than a personal one: I felt threatened as a human being. My norms and values were at stake: they needed to be protected. That made me very angry and very stubborn. The state forced me to learn to be a violent person, but I denied the state the right to do so.

It was not until I had been able to set myself free from military conscription I had room to think about the political side of conscription. Of course I wanted to see the end of conscription. It came more unexpected than I thought. In NL conscription was terminated mainly because the broad public thought it was an archaic and stupid system. COs have definitely played a role to achieve this public awareness. I believe that this is the political element of the individual act of conscientious

objection: to challenge the morality of compulsory military service. The act of CO is a public statement to start a debate on military conscription or to keep the debate going.

In my view me conscientious objection can never be challenging the right of the military to exist. A decision to buy only organically grown food, can neither chal-



Eduardo

Antimilitarist art from Colombia - provided by Redes Juveniles

lenge the existence of bio-industry. It can start a debate, it can be followed by others, it can spread like a disease, but in itself it remains an individual act. For me CO is an individual act and not because the "human right approach" does so, but because of the nature of conscription.

Andreas: I agree partly - by its very nature CO is an individual act, because each and everyone has to make his or her decision to refuse to join the military - and to be prepared to deal with the consequences. But when we start to organise ourselves - and War Resisters' International started as an international

network focussing on conscientious objection more than 80 years ago - than it becomes politically relevant, and than it is important how we frame our conscientious objection. Do we see it as an individual issue? Do we promote CO as a political tool to demilitarise societies, or even to stop wars? Or do we frame it as a problem of individual human rights, without even mentioning militarism? Do we pretend that the "problem" of conscientious objection can be solved without abolishing the military? I think individual acts can be highly important politically, but it not only depends on the act itself, but also on how we present and explain what we are doing. The same act can have a completely different relevance depending what we say about it. Osman Murat Ulke's CO was highly relevant, not only because Ossi got imprisoned, but also because he took a very principled position, and didn't link it to the Kurdistan issue.

When I look at the situation in Israel/Palestine now, it is quite different. The increasing number of refuseniks - most of whom just refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories or while Israel is occupying Palestinian Territories - is important, not because they are principled pacifists - most are not, but because they challenge the Israeli policy of military might, and not because it is a human rights problem. The framework of human rights is much too narrow for our approach - it is build on liberal ideas, and focuses on the individual, but it doesn't take into account any social issue.

Bart: "The personal issue is political", was a slogan in the Dutch feminist movement. I think the CO movement has some interesting similarities with the feminist movement. Although I believe that to be a CO is an individual act, I very much value its political impact. In certain circumstances, the impact may be huge.

But I feel very uncomfortable when "we" (I guess Andreas refers to WRI) tend to focus too much on the political impact of individual COs. It is very easy to exploit an individual CO for the sake of our political goals, if - like Andreas says - "we present and explain what we are doing". The strength of an individual act of CO lies in the individual's explanation of what

History of Conscientious Objectors' Day

■ Rudi Friedrich

International Conscientious Objectors' Day is closely linked to the International Conscientious Objectors' Meeting (ICOM). Between 1981 and 1997, ICOM was organised every year by groups affiliated to War Resisters' International. It was held in the Netherlands, Spain, France, Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, Turkey, Colombia, and Chad, among others. While in the first years the focus was on the exchange of ideas and international networking among active conscientious objectors, later an additional objective was added. In countries where the situation of conscientious objectors was particularly difficult (and in some cases still is), the international presence of activists lead to a strengthening of the COs living in the country and their initiatives. Not only the strategy of conscientious objection was developed, but on a very practical level the importance of the group in the country itself was increased. Unfortunately there was no such meeting for years now.

ICOM, in which regulary 100 activists from more than 20 countries participated, forms the background of the International Conscientious Objectors' Day. For the first time ICOM 1985 decided to use 15 May, and to develop a focus for action on conscientious objection. This was meant to

raise awareness for the difficult situation of conscientious objectors in specific countries or for thematical links on the international level. Focus countries were Greece (1986), Yugoslavia (1987), Poland (1988), South Africa (1989), Spain (1990), Turkey (1992), former Yugoslavia (1993), Colombia (1995). There were thematic focusses too: forced service for women (1991), and asylum for women and men who refused military service or deserted from the army (1993). In 2001, the War Resisters' International Council Meeting decided to focus on the situation of conscientious objectors and deserters in Angola. The focus for 2002 will be the Balkans region.

Although ICOM didn't meet for years, 15 May is established as a joint day of action. In many places groups refer to 15

May in their work on conscientious objection. At the same time public meetings, vigils, demonstrations, actions, seminars, campaigns and may other activities are taking place in many parts of the world. Although nowadays many groups use the day for their own specific issue on conscientious objection, and there is only a limited joint focus, it is still a day which highlights that the issue of conscientious objection is not a national, but an international issue, and that international networking provides the special strength of the conscientious objectors movement.

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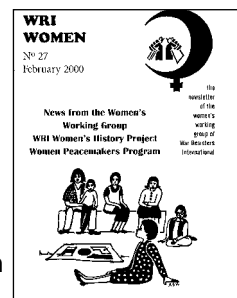
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■ <wri-info>

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■ www.wri-irg.org

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