

# REFUGEES' PERCEPTION OF THEIR SITUATION: THE CASE OF CROATIAN REFUGEES IN SLOVENIA

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## ABSTRACT

The recent war in Croatia has caused more than 500.000 people to leave their homes, some 30.000 of them left for Slovenia. In the interval of two months two groups of them were questioned about their perception of their situation as refugees, about the war, its causes and when and how it will end. The differences between refugees living with families, and in refugee's centres were also examined. While the whole situation was in general highly stressful (more for the refugees in centres) for them, and full of problems (uncertainty, lack of information about their relatives, material problems etc.), they evaluated their current position and relations with Slovenian people as positive. Concerning relations between Serbia and Croatia, their picture was strictly black and white.

Wars in general cause great disruptions in the lives of the involved civilian population, and quite often displace a lot of people far from their homes, for a shorter or longer period of time, sometimes even for ever. Unfortunately the disintegration of Yugoslavia, based on unsolved political and national relations, and on the background of hard economic crisis, produced the war which is, according to its consequences on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in a way even more destructive than the World War II. The former Yugoslav Army supported by a great number of Serbian paramilitary troops has caused the death and suffering of thousands, simply because they were Croats or Moslems, or even Serbs who didn't want to join them. A number of towns and villages in Croatia were completely demolished, and about 500.000 of their citizens were forced to evacuate them, often without anything but the clothes on their backs. Some 30.000 ended their escape in Slovenia, either at the homes of their relatives or in refugee centres. Of these half children, about a

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quarter are women and many are elderly. In the last 50 years Slovenia has not been confronted with such a situation. Before there were evacuations of smaller extent, caused by natural or other disasters, and for only a temporary time. Despite of relative inexperience, responsible agencies in Slovenia effectively dealt with this problem. Their work is without doubt reflected in the answers of our examinees, though our main aim was to find out how refugees perceive their situation as refugees in particular, and its background (war, political situation) in general.

## METHOD

**Subjects:** Only the persons that had recognised refugee status were included in the research. In the first part of the research, conducted in October 1991, 138 refugees were included (75 from refugee centres and 63 from families). The second part was conducted in December 1991 and it included 60 refugees from centres and 60 from families. All examinees were older than 18 years, 203 were female and 55 male. They were of all levels of education, though secondary prevailed. Some data about their being in Slovenia are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Duration of being a refugee and of time spent at particular place (in days)

	OCTOBER				DECEMBER			
	BEING A REFUGEE		AT THIS PLACE		BEING A REFUGEE		AT THIS PLACE	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IN CENTRES	20.81	20.31	7.82	5.17	64.20	28.47	48.08	16.79
WITH FAMILIES	38.70	24.25	33.75	21.97	86.83	37.62	76.67	36.29

All subjects were selected at random basis. Refugees who lived with families of their relatives, had been there almost from the very beginning, while the refugees in centres more often changed their place of living. The reason for differences (beside the ones caused by different times of investigations) lay mainly in the fact, that the refugees with relatives in Slovenia knew where to escape to, while the others were more uncertain about their situation. We must also mention that more than a half of all them, did not receive any financial support from Croatia (salaries, pension). Refugee centres were in that time mainly in B-category hotels.

**Material:** The same questionnaire of the mixed type (mainly closed type questions) was used in both parts of the research, though slightly changed the second time. Questions refer to demographic data, reasons for escape, assessments of their position, feeling, relations with domestic population, contacts with home, military situation in Croatia etc. Beside this general questionnaire, in October session Spielberger's STAI X-I (measure of state anxiety) was used, while in December Impact of Event Scale (Horowitz et al., 1979) was added.

**Procedure:** Investigation was conducted in October and December 1991. Anonymity was guaranteed to all subjects. While refugees in centres were questioned in groups, those who lived with families, were questioned individually, approximately a week later.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons that led them to leave their homes were undoubtedly dangerous life conditions, determined by war operation, and subjective perception of them. All subjects were from places where war operation of different intensity took place. These, highly strong situational pressures, showed themselves also in relative homogeneity of answers of different groups (age, sex, education etc.). Refugees, that found shelter at their relatives, left their homes at a relatively smaller threat, though in general they left when their place was attacked, when killing and destruction began. The majority simply thought, that their life was in danger, and as they mentioned main reasons for their escape were: care for their children and family members, destruction and killing, fear etc. and only rarely lack of food and water. The reasons for escape to Slovenia in particular were: relatives or friends living in Slovenia, proximity, affinity of Slovenia and Croatia and/or example of others from their neighbourhood.

Horvath-Lindberg and Miserez (1991) believed, that often, refugees are not only physically uprooted, but also emotionally and psychologically scarred by their experiences before, during or after their flight. This was evident also in our case. Both, state anxiety and subjective influences of traumatic experiences, were high over average values (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Scores on STAI X-I and IES for all groups of refugees

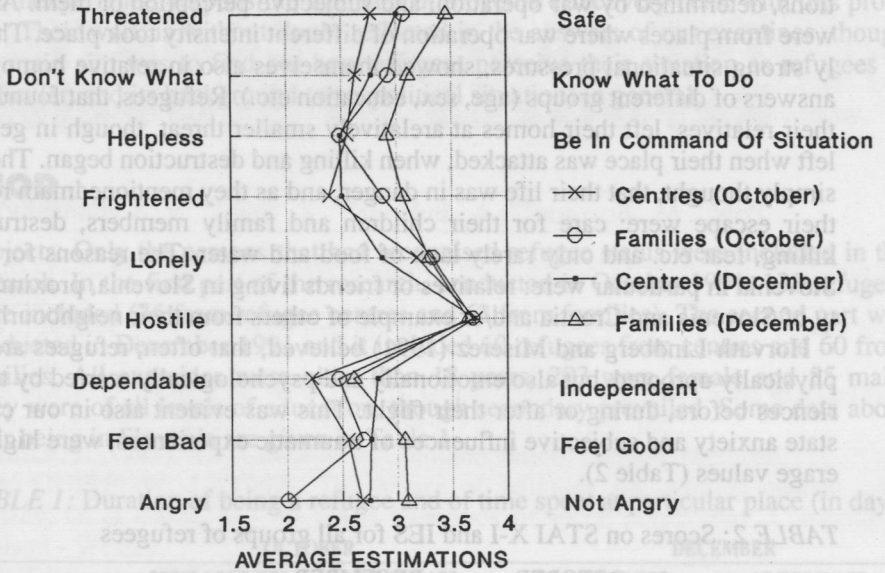
	OCTOBER		DECEMBER					
	STAI X-I		IES		STAI X-I		IES	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IN CENTRES	60.78	10.17			55.04	14.57	47.33	6.12
WITH FAMILIES	58.72	11.04			53.64	11.88	42.44	7.96

It is therefore understandable, that they assessed on semantic differential scales their own feelings as generally more negative (Figure 1). The only exception is friendship, perhaps directed mainly to their fellow-people. This could be supported by the fact that they evaluated their relationships to them as the same (more than 50 %) or even better as before (more than 30%).

Different aspects of Slovenians' relationships to them, were estimated very positive (Figure 2), what is perhaps on one side due to their dependence on them, and on the other side, the result of contrast between earlier hostile circumstances and current situation. During the second investigation, relationship was estimated as less positive. "Honey-moon" was evidently over.

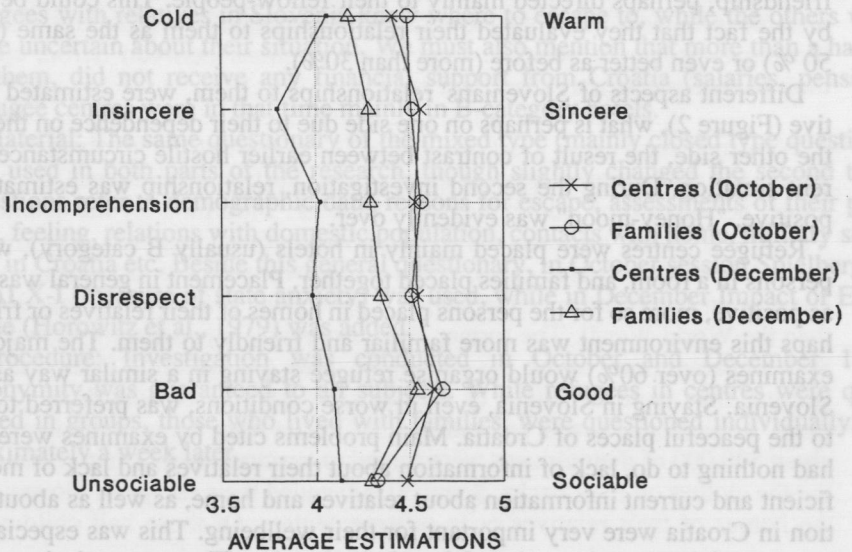
Refugee centres were placed mainly in hotels (usually B category), with 2 to 5 persons in a room, and families placed together. Placement in general was estimated as positive, more so for the persons placed in homes of their relatives or friends. Perhaps this environment was more familiar and friendly to them. The majority of all examines (over 60%) would organise refugee staying in a similar way as it was in Slovenia. Staying in Slovenia, even in worse conditions, was preferred to returning to the peaceful places of Croatia. Main problems cited by examines were, that they had nothing to do, lack of information about their relatives and lack of money. Sufficient and current information about relatives and home, as well as about the situation in Croatia were very important for their wellbeing. This was especially urgent because of the great dynamics of the whole situation. The great majority got their information through TV and radio Croatia (their home station).

**FIGURE 1: Assessment of Own Feelings**



1 and 5 = very, 2 in 4 = a great deal, 3 = average

**FIGURE 2: Assessments of Slovenians' relationships to refugees**



1 and 5 = very, 3 = average

FIGURE 3: Assessment of Accomodation

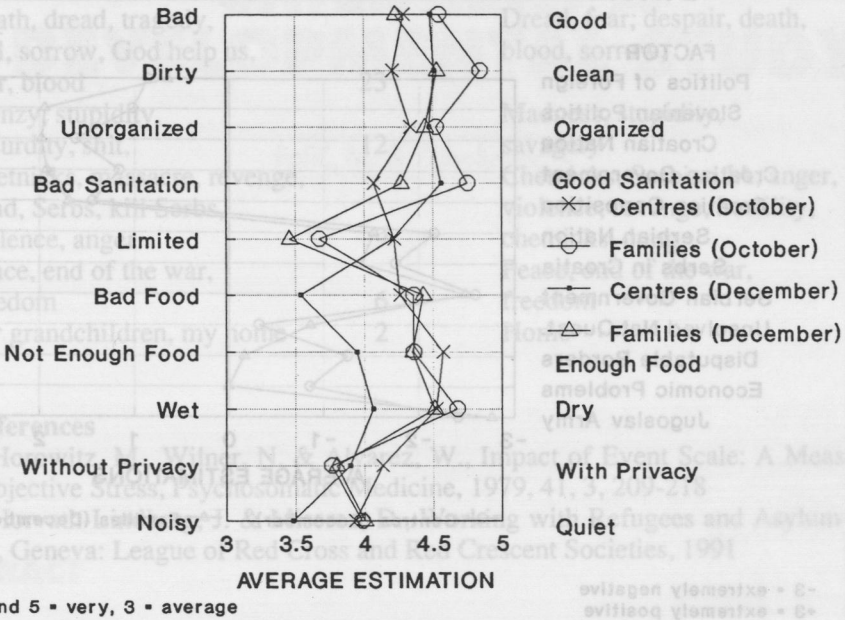
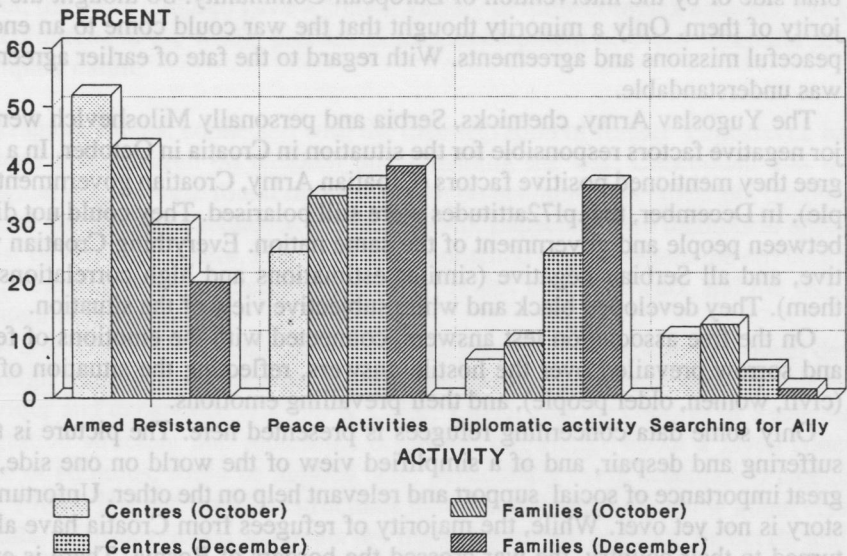
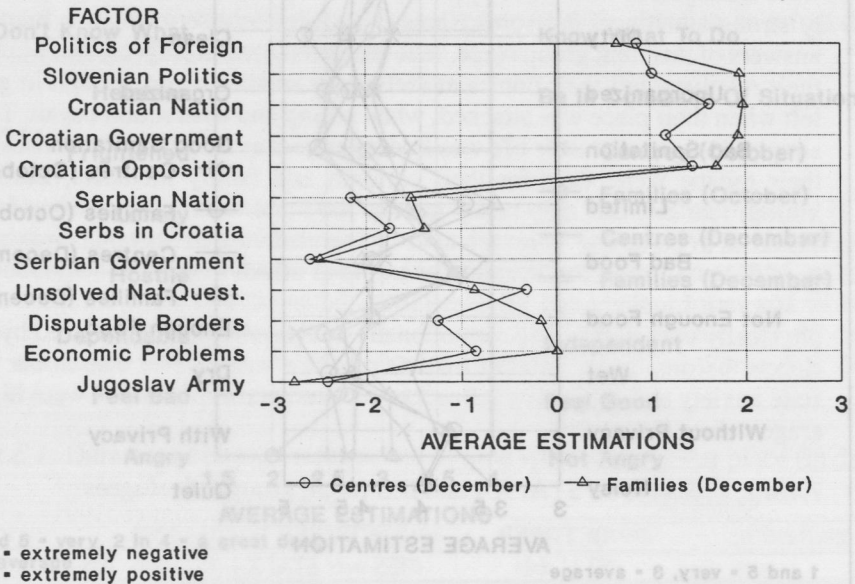


FIGURE 4: How to End the War



**FIGURE 5: Assessment of Influence of Different Factors on Croatian Situation**



At the the time of investigation, they were rather pessimistic about the end of the war. Over 70% from the October group, and over 50% in December group thought, that the war could last for a long time. It would end either with the defeat of the Serbian side or by the intervention of European Community. So thought the great majority of them. Only a minority thought that the war could come to an end through peaceful missions and agreements. With regard to the fate of earlier agreements this was understandable.

The Yugoslav Army, chetnicks, Serbia and personally Miloshevic were the major negative factors responsible for the situation in Croatia in October. In a lesser degree they mentioned positive factors (Croatian Army, Croatian government and people). In December, the .pl72attitudes were still polarised. They could not distinguish between people and government of the same nation. Everything Croatian was positive, and all Serbian negative (similar estimations and high correlations between them). They developed black and white subjective view of the situation.

On the free association test answers, connected with the emotions of fear, dread and sorrow prevailed over the hostile answers, reflecting the situation of refugees (civil, women, older people), and their prevailing emotions.

Only some data concerning refugees is presented here. The picture is typical of suffering and despair, and of a simplified view of the world on one side, and of a great importance of social support and relevant help on the other. Unfortunately, the story is not yet over. While, the majority of refugees from Croatia have already returned to their country, the war crossed the borders of Bosnia. There is even more death and destruction, and many more refugees. Only in Slovenia the figure has reached the number of about 63.000. The continuum of destruction is evidently progressing. The question is, who will stop it?

TABLE 3: Frequencies of words that come to refugees minds when they thought about war in Croatia (October 1991)

Refugees in centres	f	Refugees at families	f
Death, dread, tragedy, evil, sorrow, God help us, fear, blood	23	Dread, fear, despair, death, blood, sorrow,	20
Frenzy, stupidity, absurdity, shit,	12	Madness, stupidity, savagery	4
Chetnicks, massacre, revenge, band, Serbs, kill Serbs, violence, anger	9	Chetnicks, Serbian JA, anger, violence, revenge, hostility, chetnicks' dung	12
Peace, end of the war, freedom	6	Peace, end of the war, freedom	23
My grandchildren, my home	2	Home	1

### References

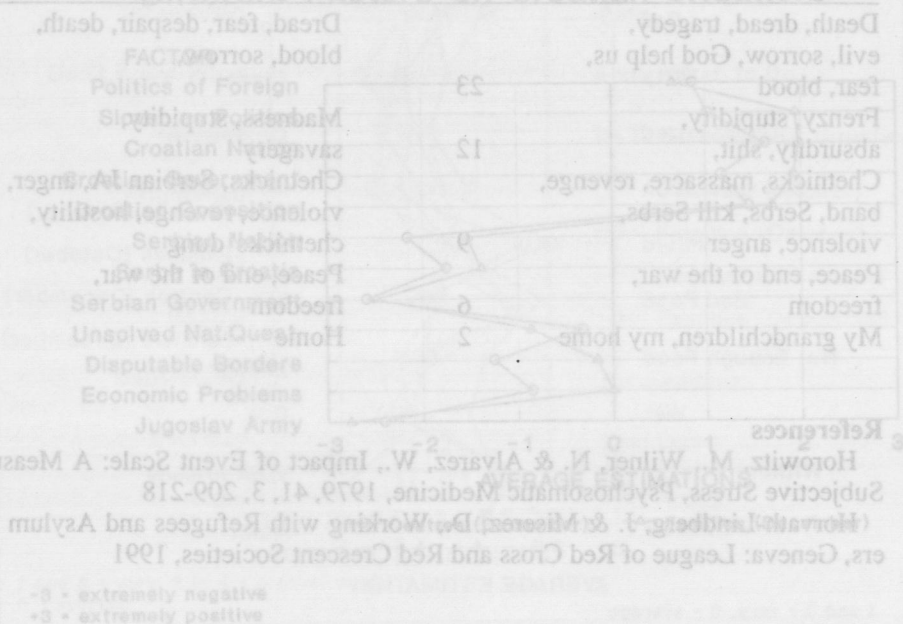
- Horowitz, M., Wilner, N. & Alvarez, W., Impact of Event Scale: A Measure of Subjective Stress, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1979, 41, 3, 209-218
- Horvath-Lindberg, J. & Miserez, D., Working with Refugees and Asylum Seekers, Geneva: League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1991

Children from different age groups (7, 11, and 13 years old) were questioned about the nature and causes of war in general, and about the recent wars in Slovenia and Croatia. Their answers were coded and compared. It was found out that the level of understanding increased with age, but also that it was highly contaminated with current war events. While the knowledge of the youngest group was at a very concrete level, the older children gave a greater variety of more complex answers. We can also comprehend the whole process as the development of event schemata of a very complex nature.

Tragical events, connected with the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, had motivated this research on children understanding the war. Conceptual and methodological origins were found in the research on economic socialisation, conducted by Leiser and others (Zabukovec & Polič, 1990). Especially two theoretical approaches must be mentioned here, Piagetian developmental-cognitive and the environmentalistic learning theory, where the former provides the framework and the second the content of socialisation.

While socialisation could be defined as a process by which an individual develops through transaction with other people, his specific pattern of socially relevant behaviour and experience (Ziegler & Child, 1969), also the concept of a schema, as a cognitive structure that represents organised knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus, could be applied here, particularly event schemata (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). The last ones are structures that describe what we know about classes of events. Well-developed schemata are more organised, abstract, moderate and complex. Human knowledge about the war could be termed war schemata. As Peterson (1990) mentioned, human experience, our life spaces, help to shape our views of the

FIGURE 5: Assessment of Influence of Factors on Croatian Attitudes about war in Croatia (October 1991)



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