

## Conference report

# War and peace: social psychological approaches to armed conflicts and humanitarian issues

Geneva, Switzerland, 9-11 September 2004

### Introduction

The purpose of this meeting was to bring together current research and theoretical perspectives in the field of social psychology, in order to debate issues related to armed conflict and associated humanitarian questions, and to highlight the contribution of social psychology to their understanding. In addition to providing such an opportunity for scholars, we wanted to expose this theoretical framework to some of the difficulties that practitioners are currently facing. The challenge was taken up by the *International Committee of the Red Cross*, which made a significant contribution to the conference. The meeting provided a unique opportunity for researchers to meet, exchange ideas and debate with ICRC personnel. ICRC staff also had the opportunity to present their experiences and concerns.

The meeting took place at the *University of Geneva*. Geneva has a tradition of humanitarian work and a specific position on the international stage, as exemplified by the presence of international human rights and humanitarian organizations and, in particular, the ICRC. More than 30 people attended. The event started with a welcome from *Juan M. Falomir* (organizer) and *René Kosirnik* (head of the ICRC's education and behaviour unit), highlighting the aims of the conference.

The contributions covered armed conflicts at various stages. They took a number of theoretical and methodological approaches, examining conflicts of various types and in different parts of the world. Contributions were structured into five overall subjects.

### Thursday 9 September

The morning session on the first day addressed 'social representations of armed conflicts and identity issues.' *Daniel Bar-tal* started the meeting by analysing the relationship between ethos and identity. He described the changes in the ethos of conflict and discussed the implications of these changes for the meaning of the Israeli Jewish identity. *Stephen Reicher* proposed an analysis of the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews during the Second World War in terms of a social identity model of helping. *Marina Herrera* examined social mobilization as a function of category definitions, as proposed by self-categorization theory, and argued that the way in which categories are construed influences attitudes toward war. We examined the effects of fairness and group identification on aggression in an inter-group situation during the fourth talk, by *Tomohiro Kumagai*. Finally, *Gerasimos Prodromitis* analysed issues of legitimacy and queries of legitimation in the war in Iraq as a function of individuals' ideologies.

The afternoon session was devoted to factors underlying public support for armed conflicts. *Alexander Todorov* talked about the discrepancies between actual and perceived public opinion as they affect the perceived legitimacy of American foreign policy support for unilateral military action. *Christopher Cohrs* discussed individuals' attitudes towards military intervention in Afghanistan as a function of moral disengagement. *Felicia Pratto*

analysed individual differences in tolerance for war and peace as a function of four factors: social ideologies, threat, social identity and social values. *Juan M. Falomir* dealt with the perceived legitimacy of collective punishment and collateral damage as a function of group characteristics such as their political structure (democratic/authoritarian). *Lyle E. Bourne* gave the final talk of the day in which he examined how individuals understand and react to press reports about episodes of armed international conflict. *Willem Doise* and *Xenia Chrysochoou* reviewed the day's contributions, and we finished with a rich and stimulating discussion with *Antonella Notari* (the ICRC's head of media relations).

### **Friday 10 September**

The second day's morning session focused on social psychological factors related to an understanding of violence in armed conflict. *David R. Mandel*, giving the first talk of the day, proposed a distinction between instigators and perpetrators and offered a situationist view of the origins of collective violence. *Daniel Muñoz-Rojas* then examined the psycho-sociological factors underlying violations of international humanitarian law in different international conflicts. *Joyce Silva* re-examined arguments used to justify and legitimize the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka, in the light of the narratives of participants/survivors. *Emanuele Castano* spoke on the de-humanization of victims, after considering the killing of out-group members by the in-group. Finally, *Herbert C. Kelman* gave a talk on the social context of torture: when torture becomes an instrument of state policy and how the authority structure of the state is fully utilized to implement that policy.

The afternoon session was on victims' reactions to military conflicts and issues of community reconstruction. *Christian Staerkle* analysed factors leading to the endorsement of ethnic nationalism and authoritarianism in a region with recurrent armed conflicts (the Southern Caucasus), and *Dean Ajdukovic* talked about social factors affecting reconstruction of communities destabilized by war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Nelson Molina Valencia* explained how community resistance strategies help to transform armed conflict in Colombia by restoring social contracts, allowing coexistence and new forms of citizenship. *Hanna Zagelka* presented an intervention programme aimed at improving the relationship between the Mapuche and non-indigenous Chileans, while *Alina Mitskovska's* talk on the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine looked at the social psychological factors preventing conflict. These contributions were followed by a general discussion led by *Daniel Bar-Tal* and *Stephen Worchel*, in which *Balthasar Staehelin* (the ICRC Delegate-General for the Middle East and North Africa), discussed the potential contribution to the ICRC's activities of the social psychology work presented during the day.

### **Saturday 11 September**

On the final day, the conference addressed the social psychological factors underlying conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace building. *Arie Nadler* gave the first talk, about the effect of trust, expressing empathy and accepting responsibility on inter-group reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and proposed a model based on the different psychological needs of victims and perpetrators. *Ed Cairns* spoke of the role of cross-community (Catholic-Protestant) contact in conflict reduction and reconciliation, stressing such concepts as guilt, trust and forgiveness. *Giovana Leone's* talk covered inter-group reconciliation processes based on socio-emotional negotiation of guilt-forgiveness in in-group situations, plus instrumental collaborative exchanges in inter-group

situations. *Spyridoula Ntani* then discussed social psychological factors (individual differences and group power) leading to a lack of trust between groups with a history of conflict (e.g. Greeks and Turks). *Ifat Maoz* looked at how news coverage of the other side's reaction to a proposed concession can affect the way that concession is seen, in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, *Stephen Worchel* talked about the social psychological factors underlying the effects of camps that bring together adolescents from ethnic groups engaged in violent and protracted conflicts. The day's general discussions were led by *Herbert C. Kelman*. *Marion Harroff-Tavel* (ICRC political adviser) discussed the role of the social psychologist in ICRC work.

## **Conclusion**

The meeting was a motivating and fruitful experience, which thoroughly achieved what it set out to do. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to compare the theoretical assumptions of social psychology with the particular nature of contemporary armed conflict. Secondly, it brought together social psychologists from different perspectives to discuss conflicts that differ in both type and location. Thirdly, it provided a forum for scientific exchange and essential debate between academics and humanitarian workers, thereby creating a network and fostering collaboration on research that will be meaningful to both the theoretical and the applied domains.