

## Editors' Introduction

---

William Collins Donahue/Rolf Parr/Georg Mein

Almost a quarter century ago, novelist Ulrich Woelk and photographer Bettina Keller accompanied soldiers on the annual »military pilgrimage to Lourdes,« which to some seems a contradiction in terms. What does it mean to convene thousands of wounded warriors, active-duty soldiers, veterans and others at this historic site of sacred healing? Why do they (including many non-Catholics) converge of all places here, where, according to Catholic tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the young peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous in 1858? What exactly are these pilgrims seeking, and what do they find? Woelk and Keller embedded themselves, as it were, for three days within the international cadre of troops visiting Lourdes in order to explore these questions and ostensible contradictions. They did so as outsiders, yet with remarkable sensitivity, tact and warmth.

The reportage below was first prepared in 1999 at the behest of *Stern* magazine during the war in Kosovo – one of the five brutal military conflicts that erupted over the course of the breakup of Yugoslavia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At this juncture, as Woelk obliquely notes, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer – Green Party member and former 68er – was arguing that Germany's »lesson« from the Second World War was not pacifism, as so many in his party claimed. Instead, Germans are called to apply military force to defend democracy and oppose autocratic incursions, he insisted. Fischer's message, perhaps timely again in 2023 (18 months into the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine), was not widely embraced at the time.

NATO bombing ended the war in June of 1999, and with that *Stern* (whose editors were apparently primarily interested in the simultaneous practice of pilgrimage and prosecution of war) dropped the story without further ado. The editors of *andererseits* only became aware of this piece incidentally during casual conversation with award-winning novelist Woelk and prolific photographer Keller, who happen to be husband and wife, regarding their parallel and sometimes intersecting careers.

The annual military pilgrimage continues to this day, and its apparent contradictions are no less perplexing. Woelk and Keller's coverage from 1999 has in the intervening quarter century lost none of its poignancy or relevance. We are pleased to present it here – belatedly, yet also quite timely.

