

The War in Croatia, 1991-1995

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Any attempt to resolve the controversies surrounding the war in Croatia is complicated by the absence of accessible documentation. There are also major disagreements not only between Croats and Serbs, but also within each group. Hence, this report treats not only Croat-Serb controversies, but those among Croats and Serbs themselves. Although the team welcomes this opportunity to expose obvious exaggerations, manipulations and outright myths, it respects the equal validity of Serbian and Croatian views and interpretations of known facts. Although some remaining controversies can and should be resolved by additional research, others may never be resolved.

Causes of the War. There are clearly two sides to the debate over the Serb insurgency, in which both side had legitimate concerns. On the one hand, the republic's Croatian majority felt very insecure and was increasingly worried that Milošević would use the JNA to attack Croatia. Since they lived in an environment where the concept of the independent citizen was virtually unknown, and where people existed only as members of a group, it was easy for them to equate all Serbs with Serb nationalistic policies. The Serbs' overrepresentation in critical services and institutions (police, military, Party) was, therefore, seen as a threat that had to be remedied if Croatia wanted to gain and retain independence. Decimation of the republican police and other forms of overt discrimination were thus more the consequence of perceptions and mistrust between ethnic communities than it was a political program. Nonetheless, the Tudjman regime was clearly insensitive to Serb interests and fears of becoming an oppressed minority in a Croatian nation state. By pandering to fringe elements that sought to rehabilitate the Axis-supported Ustasha puppet state, it fostered genuine but imaginary Serb fears of a repeat of the atrocities committed against them in World War II.

Belgrade played on these fears with a massive propaganda campaign that portrayed Croats as "genocidal killers" bent on a campaign of violence and genocide. At the same time, however, Serbs were motivated not only by an understandable fear, but by the desire to be part of a Greater Serbia, regardless of how they were treated by Zagreb. Much as the quest for a Greater Serbia had helped drive Yugoslavia toward dissolution, it now played an equally important role in the war's outbreak.

Civil War and Aggression. Ethnic Serbs in both countries understood the ensuing conflict as a domestic, civil war that operated on two levels with a Croatian rebellion against the legitimate government in Belgrade and a second struggle by Croatian Serbs to avoid being included and oppressed by the secessionist government in Zagreb. By October 1991, the international community's incremental recognition of Croatian independence transformed the war into an international conflict. Under international law, Rump Yugoslavia and the JNA became aggressors, who were being aided and abetted by Croatian Serb rebels. This confusion was exacerbated by deep divisions within the European Community -- particularly between Germany and France -- which failed to prevent or impede the process of dissolution and war.

The War in 1991. Although a July 1991 truce temporarily halted several months of sporadic fighting, all sides remained bent on achieving their objectives by force. The events surrounding the Borovo Selo incident and the murder of Osijek Police Chief Riehl-Kir, illustrate the determination of extremists on both sides to resort to violence. The violence in Borovo Selo sparked renewed fighting throughout Croatia. Whereas the fledgling Croatian army (HV) was relatively weak, the JNA's effectiveness was undermined by unwarranted troop reductions, mass desertions and unfocused operations that sapped its strength, combat morale and credibility.

The siege of Dubrovnik proved an even greater public relations disaster. Despite Gen. Kadijević's insistence that JNA forces were prohibited from taking Dubrovnik's historic city center, the 3-month siege and bombardment of the city offered no strategic value. The damage to historic structures, death of 80 civilians, and massive looting of the surrounding countryside by JNA forces led to the ICTY's conviction of two top commanders, the increasing isolation of the Milošević regime, and the degradation of the image of Serbs around the world.

The War in 1995. Four years later, the RSK leadership committed equally grave errors in political and military judgment, with catastrophic results. At the end of January 1995 Western negotiators tried to promote the Z-4 plan, a comprehensive peace settlement between the Croatian and the Krajina Serb governments. They also arranged for the resumption of traffic on the Zagreb-Belgrade highway that passed through RSK-held Western Slavonia (UN Sector West). Zagreb welcomed Z-4, but the Krajina Serbs demurred. Hence, Tudjman ordered systematic preparations for a final showdown in case peace negotiations failed, which included the seizure of several strategic points along the RSK's contorted borders.

- **Operation Flash.** When RSK President Martić ordered a one-day closure of the highway, Tudjman opted for an immediate, full-scale attack on Western Slavonia. Under US pressure, Tudjman reluctantly agreed to cancel the operation if the RSK leadership accepted Z-4. With RSK President Martić's refusal to do so, *Operation Flash* began. The surprise attack resulted in one of the swiftest and most humiliating defeats of the whole war, in which outnumbered VSK units fled even before the appearance of Croatian forces. At least half of the Western Slavonia's Serb population fled. Unable to stop the Croatian offensive, President Martić ordered retaliatory rocket attacks on Zagreb that prompted his indictment for war crimes. Although the UN initially accused the HV of atrocities, subsequent investigation concluded that it had not committed war crimes.

- **Operation Storm.** Additional blunders helped seal the fate of the RSK. The VSK's participation in an offensive against Bosnia's Bihać pocket alarmed not only the Tudjman regime, but also the US government, which feared a repeat of the massacres committed by Bosnian Serb forces following the fall of Srebrenica. Having already helped forge a military alliance between the Croatian and Bosnian governments, the US now tacitly accepted an HV assault on the RSK's core territory (UN Sectors North and South) that would break the siege of Bihać so long as the operation was quick and free of crimes against civilians. Meanwhile, sizeable VSK forces tied down around Bihać and unable to assist in defending against *Operation Storm*. In the face of imminent military collapse, the Martić regime again refused to consider an 11th-hour peace based on Z-4.

While the Serbs experienced one of the most bitter and humiliating defeats in their history, the HV lightning victory prompted an outpouring patriotic celebration among Croats. Politicians and pundits alike made fanciful comparisons with the US-led liberation of Kuwait in *Operation Desert Storm* in 1991. Such parallels invariably failed to take into account the impotence of VSK forces, the opportune breakout of Bosnian army forces from Bihać, and fortuitous counterfire by NATO aircraft that had destroyed those VSK missile batteries which had inadvertently locked onto them. Lost in the celebratory discourse was an appreciation of the largely indirect, but decisive role by US policy makers who had imposed crippling economic sanctions on Serbia, while turning a blind eye toward arms smuggling into Croatia and Bosnia. Indeed, retired US military consultants provided tactical training and operational planning under the guise of “democracy training” with the blessing of the Clinton administration.

Storm Damage. Virtually the entire Serb population reacted to *Operation Storm* by fleeing to Bosnia and beyond in advance of the HV forces. Tuđman and other observers had long presupposed that the reconquest would lead to a such drastic reduction in the number of ethnic Serbs. There is, however, no evidence that this was planned or intended by Tuđman, who publicly urged them to remain. But why did they flee? Surely many feared revenge, perhaps for actions committed earlier in the war, including expulsion from RSK territory. It is also likely that the flight of many Serbs reflected the insurgents’ agenda and rhetoric that sought perpetual separation from the Croats and a refusal to live along side them or other non-Serbs. Whatever the cause, the exodus is certainly one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Serbian people.

Whereas the Tudjman regime and military cannot be blamed for the exodus during *Operation Storm*, it must answer for the wholesale looting and murder of several hundred mostly elderly Serbs that followed. Croats and Serbs alike deserve an explanation for the disgraceful aftermath of an otherwise successful campaign. *Storm*’s success does not change the fact that the war was very detrimental to Croats and Serbs, as well as the republic’s other minorities. The Serbs’ numbers and their role in Croatian society were drastically diminished as a consequence of what was an absurd political project.