

4: Ethnic Cleansing & War Crimes, 1991-1995

Executive Summary

Between 1991 and 1995, as many as three million people were displaced in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina by “ethnic cleansing” -- “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” Most scholars concur that “ethnic cleansing” (1) is carried out *systematically*, (2) identifies and *targets specific groups* by ethnicity, nationality, or religion, (3) entails the *deliberate use of violence*, and (4) reflects the intent of the *authorities either to support such a practice or to refrain from prevention*.

Given the extensiveness of crimes committed in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, significant gaps remain in what we know. What follows should be regarded as a preliminary report, which will be updated periodically as additional research by international agencies and individual scholars fill some of the gaps in the historical data. Nonetheless, it is clear that “ethnic cleansing” and other crimes were perpetrated to some extent by all parties in the conflict, and that there were victims on all sides, although the gravity and dimension differed markedly. The great majority of the violations were committed by Serb forces, first in Croatia during the second half of 1991 in Slavonia and the Krajina, then from April to October 1992 in Bosnia, principally against Bosniacs, although Bosnian-Croats and up to 30,000 Roma were also targeted. Within Bosnia, perhaps 70% of all expulsions and deaths occurred in April-August 1992, the overwhelming majority committed by Serbian forces. Of the final tally of 2.2 million expellees and 100,000 killed, a clear majority were Bosniacs. Over 80% of non-Serbs disappeared from the territory of Republika Srpska. Whereas Serb forces were responsible for the great bulk of rapes committed in Bosnia, earlier estimates of 50,000 victims are at least twice the actual number; much more research needs to be undertaken on this subject.

Whereas the published memoirs of several Serbian and Bosnian military and political leaders have long shown Belgrade’s commitment to advancing the territorial agenda of the Croatian- and Bosnian-Serb governments, the minutes of Rump Yugoslavia’s Supreme Defense Council show conclusively that the VJ provided them with extensive logistic and financial assistance, including the payment of salaries for roughly 4,800 VRS military officers. The VJ General Staff held monthly meetings with representatives from the VRS and SVK in Belgrade in order to coordinate equipment, economic and technical assistance. In November 1993, the political and military leadership of the FRY, RS and RSK adopted the “Drina Plan” to coordinate the three armies’ operations and “create conditions for the establishment of a single state of the Serbian people.” Belgrade’s political and military leadership was well aware of the Bosnian Serb armed forces’ policy of ethnic cleansing, which made no clear distinction between military action against Bosnian Muslim troops and attacks against Muslim civilians, and that crimes were committed systematically on a large scale. Indeed, the geographically contiguous areas in which the expulsions occurred coincided closely with prior declarations of the necessity of creating two “corridors of life” in the Drina Valley and the Posavina Corridor. The methods employed included discrimination (*i.e.* in employment, health care), intimidation, repression, beatings, torture, rape, the destruction of homes, detention, expulsion, and summary execution. The single greatest incident of violence against civilians occurred in July 1995 with the execution of 6,500-8,800 Bosniac men and boys, together with the expulsion of over 30,000 civilians from there and Žepa. (See 6: *Safe Areas*)

Croat forces also conducted “ethnic cleansing” campaigns against Bosniacs around Mostar and central Bosnia in 1993, as well as against Serbs in western Slavonia, the Krajina and western Bosnia during the spring and summer in 1995. The ICTY has charged that Croatian authorities “planned, instigated, ordered, committed and otherwise aided” in the persecution of Serbs in Krajina, while individual army units executed at least 150 Serb civilians and razed many thousands of homes during and after Operation Storm. Discrimination against civilians also accounts for at least some of the 78,000 Serbs who fled Croatia in 1991. In a few instances, Bosnian Muslim forces victimized Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but only on an *ad hoc* basis and on a much smaller scale than the other belligerents. A similar pattern manifested itself in the destruction of cultural heritage, with Serbian forces destroying most Catholic and virtually all Muslim houses of worship in areas under their control, while Croatian forces damaged a minority of Orthodox and Muslim sites, and Bosnian government forces left virtually all non-Muslim sites unharmed. Moreover, there is no evidence to support claims by Serbian media in 1991-92 of master plans concocted in Zagreb and Sarajevo to commit genocide against Croatia’s or Bosnia’s Serbian minorities.

Despite its undeniable brutality, “ethnic cleansing” should not *per se* be equated with “genocide” (defined as acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group). To date, only a few of the most extreme examples of “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be characterized as acts of genocide, most notably the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. Forcible transfer does not constitute in and of itself a genocidal act. Only when “ethnic cleansing” implies the specific intent of extermination, does it represent genocide. Politically charged debates over the term and its definition cannot, however, call into question the extent and horror of the crimes committed and recounted in this report.