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How Croatia and the US prevented genocide with 'Operation Storm'

By Marko Attila Hoare, 14th March 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. In August 1995, Croatia, with the US's support, carried out 'Operation Storm', that saved the lives of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims who were under attack in the Bihac enclave.**
- 2. Be that as it may, Croatian forces were guilty of serious war-crimes in the course of the operation. The trial of Croatian war-crimes indictees in the Hague is necessary for Croatia to come to terms with the dark side of its national-liberation struggle.**

3. With this caveat taken into account, Operation Storm should be celebrated as an instance when the US helped to prevent the genocide of a European Muslim population.

The trial of Croatian General [Ante Gotovina](#), who spearheaded the liberation of the Serbian-occupied areas of central Croatia in 'Operation Storm' in August 1995, [began this week](#) in The Hague. Gotovina is accused of playing a leading role in a Croatian 'joint criminal enterprise', whose purpose was, according to his [indictment](#), 'the forcible and permanent removal of the Serb population from the Krajina region, including by the plunder, damage or outright destruction of the property of the Serb population, so as to discourage or prevent members of that population from returning to their homes and resuming habitation.'

Every Croatian democrat should be pleased that this trial is taking place. If Gotovina is innocent, then the trial should result in his acquittal and rehabilitation. If he is guilty, then his victims deserve justice and he should be punished. But either way, the trial will force Croatia to confront the dark side of its national-liberation struggle and the murderous nature of the regime of Franjo Tudjman that was in power while this liberation struggle was taking place. Not only did Tudjman sabotage this liberation struggle at every step (see postscript), but he discredited it with the campaign of murder and terror that he waged against Croatian citizens of Serb nationality. Though the Croatian Serbs have made a [tremendous historical contribution](#) to Croatia, they were treated as an enemy population rather than as a population to be liberated. This resulted in large-scale war-crimes, to which Croatia needs to face up if it is to become a fully democratic country.

The trial of Gotovina is therefore good for Croatia. As for Gotovina the individual: I do not know if he is personally guilty for the crimes that undoubtedly took place, or whether other individuals were responsible. But he is entirely unworthy of any sympathy. His selfish, cowardly attempt to escape being tried, and to become an international fugitive, threatened to derail Croatia's accession to the EU until he was embarrassingly arrested in

the Canary Islands in 2005. In any normal army with a modicum of dignity, a soldier is prepared to risk and, if need be, sacrifice his life for his country. But the governing ethos of the corrupt, criminal Tudjman clique was that the country existed to serve its interests and line its pockets. So it was entirely natural that Gotovina, as a typical representative of this clique, should be prepared to jeopardise Croatia's chances of joining the EU in order to save his own skin. His behaviour may be contrasted with the patriotic readiness of another indicted Croatian general, [Rahim Ademi](#), immediately to turn himself in to the Hague Tribunal. The judges will hopefully take the contrasting behaviour of Gotovina and Ademi into account in the event that either is sentenced.

I say this by way of a preliminary, for despite all the crimes against Serb civilians that accompanied Operation Storm, the fact remains that it was an entirely necessary, legitimate military action that should rightly be celebrated. Although the US under Clinton played a far from glorious role in the war in the former Yugoslavia, yet it deserves credit for giving Croatia the go-ahead for Operation Storm, without which the craven Tudjman would probably not have dared to order it. Operation Storm and its aftermath killed roughly between [700](#) and [1,200](#) Serb civilians. But it 1) saved the lives of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims; 2) defeated the Great Serbian project; 3) liberated Croatia, allowing it to become a normal, independent state (rather than another Cyprus, which it would have become had Operation Storm not taken place); and 4) led directly to the Dayton Peace Accords, which belatedly ended the war in Bosnia. Moreover - and this is usually overlooked - Croatia was legally obliged to carry out the operation. Had Operation Storm not occurred, Croatia's crime would have been much greater. Finally, although supporters of the Great Serbian cause have claimed that Operation Storm was 'the largest ethnic-cleansing operation that occurred in the whole Yugoslav war', not only is this untrue (the Serbian assault on Bosnia in 1992 was an ethnic-cleansing operation far larger in scale), but Croatia's role in the exodus of at least 150,000 Serb civilians from the so-called 'Krajina' region was entirely subordinate and secondary to the Milosevic regime's own role.

Operation Storm was an entirely defensive operation. Its immediate cause was the Serb conquest of the 'UN safe areas' of Srebrenica and Zepa in July 1995, followed by the Serb assault on the 'UN safe area' of Bihac and the surrounding Bosnian-government territory. The conquest of Srebrenica involved the genocidal massacre of 8,000 Muslims by Serb forces, out of a Muslim population of about 40,000. It provided further proof - if any were needed - that the international community was entirely unwilling to take action to protect 'safe areas' or Bosnian civilians in general. The Bosnian government had every reason to fear that, if the assault on Bihac succeeded, the 200,000 Muslim inhabitants of the Bihac pocket would have been subjected to an even larger genocidal massacre. At the same time, the Serb conquest of Bihac would have essentially won the war for Serbia and defeated both Croatia and Bosnia, resulting in the establishment of a Great Serbian state incorporating two-thirds of Bosnia and one-third of Croatia. This represented a deadly threat to both countries. In response to the Serb assaults, Tudjman and Bosnian President Izetbegovic signed the Split Agreement on 22 July, according to which, on the grounds of the 'ineffectiveness of the international community', the 'Republic and Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina called upon the Republic of Croatia to extend military and other assistance to their defence against aggression, especially in the Bihac area, which the Republic of Croatia has accepted.'

The 'Republic of Serb Krajina' was the name of the Serbian-occupation regime on Croatian territory. The [UN General Assembly](#) on 9 December 1994 resolved that it was 'Alarmed and concerned by the fact that the ongoing situation in the Serbian-controlled parts of Croatia is de facto allowing and promoting a state of occupation of parts of the sovereign Croatian territory, and thus seriously jeopardizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia'. Thus, the UN General Assembly itself recognised that the 'state of occupation' was 'jeopardising' Croatia's 'sovereignty and territorial integrity.' The Krajina Serb leadership had failed to abide by the terms of the Vance Plan, on the basis of which Croatia had signed a ceasefire with the Krajina Serbs in January 1992, and instead made use of the UN presence to cement its separation from Croatia. It rejected the internationally proposed Z-4 Plan, which would have

represented a Serbo-Croat compromise establishing Krajina as a state within a state in Croatia. The Croatian government had every reason to believe that there was no alternative to the use of force to restore its control over the occupied territory.

Yet Croatia also had a legal and moral obligation to launch Operation Storm. The Krajina Serb army was engaged in an offensive, from Croatian territory, to conquer the Bihac enclave of the neighbouring state of Bosnia. Had Croatia not acted to prevent this, it would have become an accomplice to this Serbian act of aggression against Bosnia, perhaps even guilty of failure to prevent genocide under international law. Whether or not these considerations entered into the minds of the Croatian leadership, they are undoubtedly reasons why Croatia *should* have intervened. Croatia's action against the Krajina Serbs may be compared favourably to Lebanon's failure to act against Hezbollah's attacks on Israel, that provoked the recent Israeli assault on Lebanon.

Operation Storm resulted in the exodus of at least 150,000 Serb civilians. This was not a case of Croatia rounding up the Serb civilians and transporting them out of the territory; it was a planned evacuation carried out by the Krajina Serb leadership itself. As I do not expect the reader to take my word for this, I shall quote here Milisav Sekulic, a Serbian officer and member of the Krajina Serb General Staff at the time of Operation Storm. Sekulic writes in his account of the fall of Krajina, published in 2001:

At the [Supreme] Council of Defence [of the Republic of Serb Krajina] the worst possible decision was taken - for the evacuation of the population. It would be shown that that was worse even than the decision to capitulate. The Supreme Council [of Defence of the Republic of Serb Krajina] could have taken one of the following decisions. The first would have been: to have continued with the defence and to have, on the night of 4-5 August [1995] organised its units and prepared the command for the action that needed to be taken in the following days. The basis for such an action would have been the taking of all possible measures and actions foreseen by the plan, including action against the Croatian towns. An integral part of this option would have

been to turn to UNPROFOR, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Republika Srpska... [ellipsis in the original] The second decision could have been: to offer a ceasefire and accept negotiations with Croatia, through the mediation of the Security Council. However the negotiations went and however unfavourable they might have been for the RSK [Republic of Serb Krajina], the people would have remained on the terrain and its status would have been incomparably better than going into exile. The third possible decision would have been to have evacuated only that part of the population that was endangered at that time, and those were the parts of northern Dalmatia and the southern part of Lika. Unfortunately, the option that the Supreme Council of Defence took meant the evacuation of the entire civilian population, as well as the police and army, from the entire territory of the western part of the RSK. Those who took such a decision on evacuation must have known well and knew, that they had taken the entire people and army into exile. If this was not realised by certain members of the Supreme Council of Defence, present at the session was the commander of the General Staff of the Serb Army of Krajina, who certainly knew it. It was his obligation and duty to tell members of the council what it meant to take such a decision, to warn them, and that if it was nevertheless carried, to define it as it was envisaged - the evacuation of the people, police and army from the western part of the RSK.

Milisav Sekulic, [‘Knin je pao u Beogradu’](#) (‘Knin fell in Belgrade’), Nidda Verlag, Bad Vilbel, 2001, pp. 178-179.

Note that ‘the western part of the RSK’ refers to the territory of Krajina proper, as opposed to the geographically separate and distant territory of Eastern Slavonia, which was on the border with Serbia. Note also that the commander of the Krajina Serb forces at the time was Mile Mrksic, who had been appointed by Belgrade shortly before to preside over the assault on Bihac, and who then presided over the evacuation of the Serb population.

This does not mean that Croatia was innocent in the exodus of the Krajina Serb population. According to the Hague indictments of [Gotovina](#) and of [Mladen Markac and Ivan Cermak](#), the Croatian Army killed and terrorised

Serb civilians and burned and plundered Serb homes and property, while Croatian broadcasts encouraged the Serb civilian population to leave. These are, of course, the charges of the Prosecution; it remains to be seen whether the Tribunal will convict the indictees. Nevertheless, Croatia undoubtedly encouraged the Serb exodus by brutal means. Had there been no evacuation by the Krajina Serb authorities, the death-toll would undoubtedly have been greater. But although the death toll of up to 1,200 Serb civilians was up to 1,200 too many, the lives of tens of thousands of Bihac Muslims were saved.

The Croatian victory and destruction of Krajina was the turning point of the war. Combined with NATO air-strikes against Bosnian Serb rebel forces later that month and further Croatian and Bosnian military victories, it led to the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995 that ended the war in Bosnia. Prior to these defeats, Karadzic's Bosnian Serb rebels were simply unwilling to agree to even the over-generous Contact Group Peace Plan, that awarded them 49% of Bosnia. Operation Storm hastened the end of a war that had seemed unending, and saved many more lives.

The US, too, played its part in this. Its military collaboration with Croatia, in the fields of training and intelligence, and above all the simple fact of its authorisation of the offensive, all helped make the success possible. The Western powers undoubtedly have much blood on their hands for their collusion in the Serbian genocide in Bosnia, but had the US not enabled Operation Storm, it would have been responsible for an additional act of genocide. The credit for this should not go to Clinton, who wanted nothing more than to go along with the Anglo-French policy of appeasing Milosevic and Karadzic, but to the principled US opposition represented by such individuals as Bob Dole, Marshall Freeman Harris, Steve Walker, Joe Lieberman, Frank McCloskey, Albert Wohlstetter, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and others, whose relentless pressure forced a reluctant Clinton to take belated action to counter the Serbian aggression.

In its ruling last year, the International Court of Justice ruled that the Srebrenica massacre, alone of all Serb massacres in the war, was an act of

genocide. Had it not been for the Croatian Army and the US opposition in 1995, Serb forces might last year have been found guilty of two genocidal massacres, not just one. This is one reason why Serbia, almost as much as Croatia and Bosnia, should be thankful for Operation Storm. As for Croatia and the US, they succeeded in preventing the genocide of a Muslim population. In these times, when being anti-American is often seen as fashionable and when the US is widely demonised as being anti-Muslim, this is a success that needs to be trumpeted.

Postscript: it would be bestowing undue recognition on Tudjman to describe him as having 'led' the Croatian struggle for independence; he was a traitor and a stooge of Slobodan Milosevic and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). Tudjman in 1990-91 sabotaged the plan of his own defence minister, General Martin Spegelj, to defeat the JNA through a pre-emptive strike, preferring to restrain Croatian resistance in the hope of appeasing and collaborating with the JNA and Milosevic; he refused to come to the aid of Slovenia when it was attacked by the JNA in June 1991, ensuring that Croatia would in turn enjoy no Slovenian military assistance when it was attacked; he rejected any collaboration with Ibrahim Rugova's Kosova Albanians, telling Rugova to his face that Rugova should be talking to Milosevic, not to him; he refrained from besieging and storming JNA garrisons on Croatian soil until well after the Serbian aggression had begun, even arresting Croatian patriots who took such actions on their own initiative; he halted key military operations under pressure from the international community, including an operation to lift the JNA siege of Vukovar; he rescued the JNA from defeat in late 1991, halting the successful Croatian Army operation to liberate Western Slavonia and leaving Serbian forces in control of large parts of Croatia for another three and a half years; he maintained his ceasefire with Serbian forces in Croatia while Serbia and the JNA attacked Bosnia; his agents sabotaged the successful operation of his own, Croatian Army in October 1992 to sever the Serb forces' northern corridor that linked Serb-occupied western Bosnia and central-Croatia to Serbia, because he wanted to partition Bosnia with Milosevic, even at the price of maintaining the Serb control of central

Croatia; he attacked Croatia's own Bosnian allies in the back in collusion with Croatia's own Great Serbian enemies; he planned to hand over bits of Croatian territory to Milosevic and Karadzic in return for bits of Serb-held Bosnian territory; and he halted the successful operation to defeat Bosnian Serb rebel forces in western Bosnia in 1995, because he wanted to continue collaborating with Milosevic and to partition Bosnia. Croatia was liberated despite Tudjman, not because of him, and Tudjman was, more than any other individual, the architect of the partial Great Serb victory in the Bosnian war. Tudjman was Croatia's Draza Mihailovic - a traitor, chauvinist and collaborator with the occupiers.

Marko Attila Hoare is European Neighbourhood Section Director for the Henry Jackson Society

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