

# Krajina: Remembering the Storm

## Anniversary of a Victorious Crime

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

In the early morning hours of Aug. 4, 1995, on the heels of an incessant artillery and air bombardment, some 200,000 Croatian troops moved in to “liberate” Krajina, a stretch of mountains inhabited by Serbs who had rejected Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia four years prior. Overrunning the token UN observation posts, the U.S.-trained Croatian army quickly overwhelmed localized Serb resistance. President Franjo Tudjman declared Aug. 5, the day Croat troops entered the Serb capital of Knin, a national holiday: “Homeland Thanksgiving Day.” By Aug. 7, the “[Republic of Serb Krajina](#)” was no longer in existence.

A grand celebration is scheduled for tomorrow in Knin. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, the late Tudjman’s political heir, will no doubt give a rousing patriotic speech, glorifying Croatia’s “defenders from Serbian aggression.” Some mainstream media will report that the offensive resulted in civilian casualties, and that one high-ranking Croatian general, Ante Gotovina, is a fugitive from war crimes charges at the Hague Inquisition. And that will be the end of it. Dwelling on “[Operation Storm](#)” (*Oluja*) serves no purpose in the official narrative of the Balkans wars. Its victims are that narrative’s principal villains, so their suffering must be suppressed. The victors, on the other hand, are no longer useful to the Empire. “Storm” is something Washington would like to forget. Serbs and Croats don’t have that luxury.

### Frustrated Dreams

The area of Krajina was for several centuries the [borderland](#) between the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires, a buffer zone that protected the inner Hapsburg lands from Turkish raids. It was populated largely by Orthodox Serbs, who had fled Ottoman persecution, and who became frontiersmen for the Hapsburgs in exchange for land and liberty. By the 19th century, the Ottoman Turks were in retreat; the new danger to the Hapsburg Empire was Slavic nationalism. Vienna turned on its frontiersmen, encouraging [conflict](#) between the Orthodox Serbs and the Catholic Croats, who became its staunchest supporters. Vienna’s Serbophobia eventually led Austria-Hungary into a fatal conflict that destroyed much of European civilization.

It also nurtured the hatred that would explode in 1941 as the vicious [Ustasha genocide](#). These homegrown Croatian Nazis, led by Ante Pavelic, set out to destroy the “race of slaves” (A. Starcevic) with ruthless abandon, but ran out of time. Still, by 1945 they had killed [anywhere](#) between half a million and 750,000 Serbs.

With the end of communism in 1990, Franjo Tudjman and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) brought a revival of Pavelic’s symbols and vocabulary. Some of the top supporters of the HDZ were Ustasha émigrés. Tudjman himself expressed [relief](#) that his wife was “neither Serb nor Jewish.” Tudjman’s constitutional reform redefined the republic as a nation-state of

Croats, with Serbs as an ethnic minority. When Tudjman's government declared independence from the Yugoslav federation in 1991, most Serbs saw 1941 all over again. This – and not some imaginary “aggression” from Serbia – was the root of their “rebellion,” and the genesis of the Krajina Republic. After several months of bitter fighting, marked by massacres, ambushes, and the most vitriolic propaganda, the UN brokered an armistice. The so-called Vance Plan envisioned four “protected areas,” with a Serb majority, whose eventual status would be resolved through negotiations.

Over the next three years, Tudjman's government feverishly prepared for war, training its troops on the battlefields of Bosnia and staging quick, limited offensives at the strategic edges of UN-protected areas (most infamous being the [Medak Pocket attack](#) in 1993). Although enjoying political, diplomatic, and even military support from Vienna and Berlin since 1991, it was only when it got Washington's support that Zagreb was ready – and able – to strike. “Retired” American officers, working for government contractor [MPRI](#), claimed to teach Croat officers “democracy” and “human rights.” The events of May and August 1995 would demonstrate MPRI's definitions of both.

## **Junkyard Dogs**

*“Dick: We ‘hired’ these guys to be our junkyard dogs because we were desperate. We need to try to ‘control’ them. But it is no time to get squeamish about things.”*

– [To End a War](#), Chapter 6

US envoy to the Balkans [Richard Holbrooke](#) thus described the note slipped to him by Ambassador Robert Frasure, during a meeting with Croatian officials in 1995. Holbrooke's own account of how the U.S. officially condemned Croatian attacks even as he was meeting with Tudjman and telling him which cities to take, suggests he was hardly “squeamish” about using Croats to fight what he – and hundreds of advocacy journalists, lobbyists, and policymakers – had termed “Serb aggression.”

On May 1, 1995, Croatian troops tested both their readiness and the UN's will by staging a [lightning strike](#) at an exposed Serb enclave of Western Slavonia. The operation was code-named *Bljesak* – “flash,” or perhaps more appropriately, “*Blitz*.” The clear violation of the armistice went unpunished. The stage was set for *Oluja*.

According to Serb documentation, the three-day offensive in August 1995 resulted in the expulsion of 220,000 people. Some 1,943 people have been listed as missing/presumed dead, including 1199 civilians, 523 women, and 12 children. The death toll would have been greater had the Serbs not fled *en masse* before the advancing Croat tanks; all who stayed behind were killed. The Croats, and their American sponsors, were [definitely not squeamish](#).

Ten years later, Krajina is still a wasteland, with “scattered ghost villages strewn with shell-scarred houses overgrown with ivy and tall grass” ([Reuters](#)). Only a tenth of some 400,000 Serbs who lived in Croatia before it seceded have returned, only to face bureaucratic abuse and frequent physical violence. Tudjman made Pavelic's dream to rid Croatia of Serbs a reality. It seems everything is in the choice of allies.

## **Unpleasant Comparisons**

After obliterating Krajina, the conquering Croatian army moved into western Bosnia, aiding the Izetbegovic government to crush a dissident faction led by [Fikret Abdic](#) and assisting in

the major Muslim offensive that “coincided” with NATO’s massive bombing of Bosnian Serbs. But after the Dayton Agreement was signed and peace imposed on Bosnia, Empire’s junkyard dogs discovered the supply of Milk Bones had run out. They had served their purpose.

Today’s Croatia is frustrated that its ambitions to enter the EU and NATO hinge upon the capture of [Ante Gotovina](#), a general involved in *Oluja* who is universally considered a war hero, but whom the Hague Inquisition accuses of war crimes. Some of the truth about atrocities against the Serbs is [slowly coming to light](#), but interestingly enough, only after the prominent personalities accused have fallen out of political grace. The Zagreb leadership snaps back at any hint that *Oluja* might have been anything but just, right, and noble. When Serbian president Boris Tadic called it an “organized crime” in a [statement](#) Monday, President Mesic replied it could hardly compare to Serb crimes such as [Srebrenica](#).

But by all means, let’s compare. In both cases, a UN “safe area” was targeted by the attack. In Srebrenica, the UN at least tried to protect Muslim civilians; in Krajina, it did no such thing. Serbs evacuated Muslim noncombatants from Srebrenica; Serbs who did not flee Krajina were killed. Yet Srebrenica is somehow “genocide,” while *Oluja* is a victory worth a national holiday?!

Another reason the Empire prefers to keep *Oluja* out of sight and out of mind is [the push](#) to establish an independent, Albanian-dominated Kosovo. If Croatia’s conquest of Krajina was legitimate, because Krajina’s existence violated its sacrosanct administrative borders, then why did Serbia not have the right to uphold its borders when it came to Kosovo? If obliterating the Serb population did not disqualify Croatia from keeping Krajina and Slavonia, how can the exodus of less than half of Kosovo’s Albanians disqualify Serbia from keeping Kosovo? If the Serbs, a constituent Yugoslav nation, did not have the right to ethnic self-determination in Krajina and Bosnia, how can the Kosovo Albanians (an ethnic minority) have one?

### **The “Abramowitz Doctrine”**

This apparent paradox was “explained” by Morton Abramowitz, the *eminence grise* of U.S. foreign policy, in an [interview](#) last summer: “there is no entirely rational answer ... you seek perfect reasoning, which does not correspond to reality on the ground.” Logic does not apply to the Empire, because it *creates* its own reality; [where](#) have we heard that before?

The “reality” Abramowitz and his like-minded policymakers have sought to establish, by force, has been one in which, whatever the circumstances, [Serbs are in the wrong](#). Apologists for the Empire dismiss this observable, verifiable fact as a “conspiracy theory” and claim the Serbs have a “victim complex,” even as their entire Balkans “reality” rests on the claim that everyone else has been victimized by Serbs.

What “perfect reasoning” is involved in recognizing the simple fact that the centuries-old Serb community in Krajina is practically extinct, and that the Serb community in Kosovo – from which most of their ancestors came – is facing the same prospect? Where the Nazis failed, the American Empire has succeeded. Is that really something to be thankful for?

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