

Bosnian Trade Off

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Secret tape recordings provide indisputable evidence of the former Croatian President's obsession with the division of Bosnia.

The subject of rumour and speculation for years, the late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's alleged designs on Bosnia have been confirmed in transcripts of secret tape recordings he made at the height of the conflict.

In a recorded conversation with two senior Croatian officials on November 28, 1993, the former Zagreb leader speaks of trading Bosnian Croat controlled areas along the Sava River for towns in the west of the republic.

"If we get borders Novi Travnik, Busovaca, Bihac and if we cleanse Baranja, we can give up majority of areas around Sava," Tudjman is heard to tell Mate Boban, the then president of Croatian republic Herzeg-Bosnia, and Gojko Susak, the Croatian minister of defence at the time.

Although not mentioned explicitly in the tapes, the trade off with Serb leaders is widely believed to have been part of his plan to create Greater Croatia - that is a Croatian state including much of the western half of Bosnia.

The revelations come several months after Tudjman's successor to the presidency Stipe Mesic claimed to have discovered a telephone hotline used by his predecessor to conduct secret negotiations with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic over control of former Yugoslav territory.

The new transcript comes from a huge archive of taped Tudjman conversations made available to the public by Mesic.

Tudjman obsessively recorded confidential discussions with his colleagues because he felt they would prove to be invaluable when historians came to writing about his role in Croatia's struggle for independence.

Hundreds of tapes have been found in the former president's office, exposing wartime plots, intrigues and corruption. Officials have spent months sifting through them, separating those dealing with criminal activities from ones documenting ordinary political business.

The latest tapes to be published provide indisputable proof of both Tudjman's obsession with the division of Bosnia and the lengths to which he was prepared to go to achieve his goal.

Tudjman clearly talks about 'cleansing' the Serb-held Baranja region of Croatia - a euphemistic term for the brutal removal of ethnic groups - one of the most shocking tactics employed by the warring factions in the Yugoslav conflict.

The tape also reveals Tudjman's cynicism. Under pressure from the international community to end his involvement in Bosnia, the Croatian leader decided to sacrifice Boban to appease his detractors.

Tudjman and Susak are heard trying to persuade Boban to step down. They reproach him for not launching an investigation into the destruction of the 'Old Bridge' in Mostar and dozens of civilian murders in the town.

The criticism, however, stemmed not from revulsion over the crimes but an effort to deceive the international community by presenting themselves as committed to the preservation of human rights.

Tudjman was concerned the civilian deaths might prompt the international community to make Mostar a protectorate.

Asked why he hadn't charged anybody with the murders, Boban insists that there wasn't sufficient evidence to do so. Tudjman is heard to retort, "You may not be able to bring charges, but politics is a game. Provide the names of 60 people - and we'll say they are under investigation for violating human rights."

In another revelation, Boban talks about a meeting of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, on February 28, 1992 (from the records it is not clear whether it was HDZ from Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia) at which a decision was made to annex some parts of Bosnia to Croatia.

Boban mentions the move in passing and the matter is not mentioned again. But Tudjman's references to trading territory at the end of his conversation with Boban and Susak leaves little doubt that annexation was high on his agenda.

War mongering, ethnic cleansing, secret deals over territory, the toleration and encouragement of war crimes and a deceitful attitude towards the international community were central elements of Tudjman's policies.

People have long speculated over his wartime objectives, but they've had little hard evidence on which to base their assessments. The publication of his secretly recorded tapes reveal not only his ultimate goal, a Greater Croatia, but the brutal means with which he was prepared to achieve it.

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