

A State of Violence

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The attempt to forge a Serb state within Croatia left a tragic human legacy.

Ten years ago I sat in the front room of a house in west London in company with a number of Croats, all eyes glued to the fast-changing footage of the satellite television that was carrying programmes from Croatian state television. "Come round," my friend had said. "Something's up."

That "something", it turned out, was the ignominious fall of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, RSK, the Serb entity that comprised almost a third of Croatia since 1991 and whose collapse marked the apotheosis of the mastermind of Croatian independence, Franjo Tudjman.

As town after town fell to the victorious Croatian army on the screen, and Knin itself, the epicentre of the Serb revolt, was in danger, the mood in the room was reticent.

Partly it was because the scale of the now apparent victory was unexpected. "I thought we'd win back a few kilometres or a few towns and villages," my hostess mused.

Her elderly mother sat in silence besides me. Hailing from Sibenik, on Dalmatia's coast, she had lived with the sound of the Serb shellfire in 1991 and 1992 and now was in Britain on holiday. "How do you feel?" I asked her, as a triumphant-sounding Croatian TV commentator babbled away in the background. "Those Serbs," she sighed. "Belgrade just used them. And now they've thrown them away - like an old rag!"

Her measured, limited satisfaction with the course of events matched that which I witnessed later that year among many Croats who had lived on the borders of the RSK. There was not much euphoria on the ground after the soldiers swept through.

In reality, they felt they had lost out and that their principal difference with the Serbs was that in the end, the Serbs had lost out more.

Many Krajina Croats never went back home, for there was little to go home to, their villages, houses and places of worship having been comprehensively trashed during the four-year rule of the RSK.

Later that same summer, I journeyed through the Krajina, unable to recognise parts of the countryside that I had visited before and after the Serb revolt.

In Kostajnica, a quaint riverside town southeast of Zagreb, I found rubble and ruins. On the riverbank that separates Croatia from Bosnia I met an old returnee. He was staring at a group of people staring back at him from the other side of the river.

They were all former neighbours, for that group of people on the other side of the river were Kostajnica Serbs who had fled to Bosnia in the aftermath of Operation Storm. Now they were separated from their old neighbours and in some cases, relatives, by much more than a wall of water.

I searched for the 18th century Catholic church that had looked as if it dated from the reign of Maria Theresa, near which in 1992 I had listened to the then Serb leader, Jovan Raskovic, delivering a long and meandering speech to local Serb farmers.

At a dinner held in a barn after the speech, I asked a farmer sitting beside me if he and his fellows wanted to secede from Croatia, for that had been the gist of the speech. "Don't be crazy," he said. "Zagreb is only a few kilometres away. That's where we sell all our stuff."

"Why can't we be just like we were before?" said a Serb family I encountered not far from Kostajnica, on the same trip. "Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia..." The mother reeled off the names of the six Yugoslav republics mechanically.

It had been only four years before, but the land I recalled from that summer - green fields, winding lanes, bucolic villages, orchards laden with fruit - had vanished.

By 1995, the old church in Kostajnica had been blown to pieces under the RSK. I could barely work out where it had even been sited. The big old Franciscan monastery in the town had almost gone the same way.

Everywhere lay signs of devastation, for what the Serbs had not demolished from 1991 to 1995, the avenging Croat soldiers were finishing off now. "Hrvatska Kuca - ne diraj" (Croatian home - don't touch) was scrawled on the few relatively untouched houses.

It was hard to imagine many Croats thinking of this wrecked landscape as "home", let alone going to back to it if they had another option.

An air of doom and of uncontrolled violence hung over the RSK from the start. By coincidence, I had been there at the very beginning, on holiday in Dalmatia, when news of a "disturbance" in the remote town of Knin sent me driving up the winding road that led to this dusty outpost, whose main significance was as a railway junction.

There I had encountered a sinister, baby-faced local official in a black leather jacket called Milan Babic and his sidekick, a fat policeman called Milan Martic.

The "irredentist dentist" some foreign reporters soon nicknamed Babic, referring to his earlier trade. But there was little comic about either of these two men, soon to emerge as major political players on the stage of the fast collapsing Yugoslav federation. Even then I was struck by the cool fanaticism of the one and the pigheaded arrogance of the other.

"The Croats won't find another Pribicevic in me," Babic informed me coldly, referring to the Croatian Serb leader of the 1920s and 1930s who had ended his political career by backing the Croatian Peasant Party in its quarrels with Belgrade.

I found Martic scoffing beans in a down at heel restaurant in Knin, full of grand plans about how much territory he intended to take. "The Croats don't deserve a town like Zadar or Sibenik," he announced, chomping his beans.

There was nothing nice, brave or noble about the statelet that these two proceeded to erect with the help

of the Yugoslav army under Veljko Kadijevic, and Slobodan Milosevic.

Had they confined their designs to Serb-majority areas they might have emerged with something from the conflict, for in the early days the Croats were far from united in their reaction to the secession of remote towns like Knin.

But this duo was unable to resist their own greed. After Knin (almost 90 per cent Serb) came Benkovac (60 per cent), Petrinja (50 per cent) and then towns like Drnis and Slunj, which were overwhelmingly Croatian but which Babic and Martic wanted in order to link their territories in Dalmatia with those to the north and east in Banija and Slavonia.

A state containing so much potentially hostile territory could only be governed by terror, violence and mass expulsions, which was what happened as more than 200,000 Croats were forced from their homes.

The fate of Kijevo, a tiny Croatian village near Knin was emblematic of the way the RSK proceeded. They could have surrounded it and let it be, for it was too small to pose much of a threat to their plans. Instead, Martic had it mostly flattened.

The RSK was a pioneer in the field of what later came to be called "ethnic cleansing" and boasted of the fact, for RSK officials began floating the idea to foreign journalists that their ethnically pure state was a model that might be usefully applied to the still ethnically muddled Republic of Serbia.

Milosevic, meanwhile, found the RSK's unswerving loyalty to himself politically convenient at a time when his support was less solid at home.

On and just after March 9, 1991, Milosevic imported gangs of police from Knin to put down a huge opposition demonstration led by Vuk Draskovic, counting quite correctly on their reputation for rough tactics.

Clearly, Milosevic did not trust his own police in Belgrade to disperse the protesters with the same efficiency, for they remained for days, a menacing presence on the streets of the capital and instantly recognisable from the RSK insignia on their uniforms.

The violence that the RSK police employed freely against fellow Serbs was only a shadow of their conduct towards the remaining Croats back home, however.

On a visit to Baranja in 1993, I found the remaining, mainly elderly, Croats being picked off and murdered one by one, usually at night, with the transparent connivance of the local authorities.

The killings were the despair of the local Belgian UN peacekeepers. "We cannot stop it unless we station soldiers on the door of every remaining Croat," their commanding officer told me.

But the RSK authorities in the local town, Beli Manastir, resented the Belgians for even trying to stop this indiscriminate murder. They were "worse than the Ustashe", one of the Beli Manastir bosses told me.

It was not the state of Baranja, abysmal as it was, so much as the first anniversary of the "liberation of

Vukovar” in November 1992 that to my mind most accurately reflected the moral bankruptcy at the heart of the RSK.

After the carnage that had followed the capture of Vukovar, when more than 200 patients in Vukovar hospital were tipped out of their beds and shot dead, a day of silent reflection might have an appropriate commemoration.

Instead, the RSK authorities insisted on a full blown festival with flags and victory banners hanging from the streets.

And so it was, in company with many other foreign journalists, that I trudged through the potholed, rubble-strewn streets of this once rather charming baroque riverside town to watch Veselin Slijivancanin, one of the “Vukovar trio” indicted by the Hague tribunal for the hospital massacre, strutting before his admirers.

They were a motley bunch, these admirers, some complete thugs, typical of the ne’er-do-wells who rise to the surface of any civil war, while others were complete crazies who had travelled over from Serbia for the day, spluttering away to anyone who would listen about what they would “do to the Ustashe”.

Away from this mob, I chanced across someone more representative of the people who had actually stayed in Vukovar.

An old man wearing plastic shoes, he stood there crying in the freezing rain about his wife and daughter who had left him, because they were now on “the other side”, in Croat-held Osijek.

Ten years on, I still wonder what happened to all those people. I wonder if the old man in his plastic shoes ever found his wife in Osijek, or what happened to the burly farmers I met in that barn in Kostjanica, sleepwalking into a conflict whose final dimensions they clearly had not grasped.

I had only one proper friend from the RSK, a sports instructor from Vukovar and he got the hell out, soon after the town fell. His closest friend, a Croat, had already been killed and his other buddy, a Ruthene, had disappeared. He wouldn’t fight for Croatia, as a Serb, but would not attack it, either.

The last time I saw him he was in Belgrade, begging me to buy his gold watch so that he could get away to Germany, where his uncle lived. Shamed by his new-found poverty, I told him to keep his watch and gave him the few dollars he needed to find a new life.

To me, that whole episode was indicative of the RSK. An indecent construction, it repelled decent people. Its fall was a disaster for the Serbs who lived in it. But so, in a sense, was its rise.

Marcus Tanner covered the Balkan conflict for the London-based Independent newspaper.

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