

War Crimes Overshadow Memories of Victory

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Supporters of an open debate on Operation Storm war crimes face opposition from the public, most of whom remember it with unqualified approval.

Ten years after Operation Storm captured Knin and surrounding areas in which Croatian Serbs had proclaimed their own state, the military action is still causing controversy.

The August 5, 1995 offensive is celebrated in Croatia as Victory Day and Homeland Thanksgiving and most Croats look back on it as a brilliant army operation.

But the war crimes that occurred during and after the action and the fact that General Ante Gotovina, who commanded it, has since been indicted by the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, now burdens popular memories.

The case of Gotovina, on the run since he was indicted in 2001, has become a millstone around Croatia's neck, stalling its progress towards membership of the European Union.

According to the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights more than 400 Serb civilians were killed and over 22,000 homes burned during and after Operation Storm.

The exact number of Serbs who fled their homes has never been agreed but the figure ranges from 150,000-300,000, depending on the source. The Hague tribunal's indictment of Gotovina cites 150,000-200,000 refugees.

The Croatian authorities no longer deny that war crimes took place but claim that they were committed by renegade gangs and were not organised or authorised.

Mate Granic, Croatia's foreign minister when Storm took place, claims in his soon-to-be published memoirs that around 3,000 people were questioned. There is no official data on how many of those were actually punished.

"There is no doubt that matters went out of control after Operation Storm, which stained this otherwise brilliant victory," writes Granic in his book.

A debate on the war crimes committed during 1995 is still an unpopular topic in Croatia ten years after they occurred.

Attempts to raise the question of these crimes are often qualified as "besmirching the Homeland War" by a large section of the population, especially war veterans.

There are, of course, some who distinguish between the crimes and the wider military operation, including the parliamentary deputy Damir Kajin, one of the first individuals to speak out about them.

“The crimes that happened after Operation Storm are true and it is impossible to look the other way, but they do not negate the legitimacy of the military action,” he said. “These crimes should be condemned.”

A far greater burden for Croatia is the Hague tribunal’s indictment against Gotovina, which describes Operation Storm as a “joint criminal enterprise”.

The indictment states that Gotovina, along with other individuals, including Ivan Cermak, Mladen Markac and the late president Franjo Tudjman, took part in a joint criminal enterprise whose common goal was to permanently remove the Serb population from the Krajina region by force.

It says that this was conducted through acts that involved looting, damaging and permanently destroying Serb property in order to deter and prevent them from returning and resettling their homes.

The description of Operation Storm as a joint criminal enterprise is deeply resented by Croatia’s premier, Ivo Sanader, whose government has called it “completely unacceptable”.

Sanader, who advocates cooperation with the Hague tribunal as the only way to expedite Croatia’s accession to the EU, has had to face down major internal dissent from veterans’ groups and sections of his own party, the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, many of whose members are nationalist hardliners.

Law experts, including the Zagreb law school professor and socialist deputy Ivo Josipovic, defend Operation Storm as a legitimate military operation under international law.

“There is no doubt the Croatian side committed war crimes during the Homeland War and Operation Storm and the Hague tribunal has qualified them as serious criminal acts,” said Josipovic.

“But they must not be compared with the Srebrenica massacre in which 8,000 people perished, which is what some people are trying to do.”

Serbs who have remained in Croatia feel otherwise. “We are bothered by the fact that Serb victims are never mentioned at the anniversaries celebrating Operation Storm,” said Vojislav Stanimirovic, chair of the Independent Democratic Serb Party, SDSS, and a parliamentary deputy.

“Those celebrating it only mention a brilliant and magnificent victory, which we do not deny, but we maintain that in order for the truth to be said, Serb civilian victims should be mentioned, too.”

The Croatian parliament was due to adopt a special declaration on the significance of Operation Storm shortly before its 10th anniversary, in which it will style it an “anti-terrorist action”.

The draft version of the declaration condemned all individual crimes committed during Operation Storm but expressed concern that the Hague tribunal treated the operation as a criminal enterprise whose main objective was ethnic cleansing.

The authorities now seem determined to combat what they see as the tribunal’s unfair qualification of Operation Storm in the courts.

“Public declarations will resolve nothing,” said one justice ministry official. “A declaration [by parliament] might appease groups in Croatia who are offended by the qualifications expressed in the [Gotovina] indictment but Croatia has better ways of resolving this problem. We will dispute it in court.”

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