

“THE CROATS HAVE NO RIGHTS TO A STATE” - SERBIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHERS, AND PUBLICISTS ON CROATIAN STATE INDEPENDENCE

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By analyzing a number of authors from the body of contemporary Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing, the author provides an insight into the standpoints on the establishment/renewal of Croatian state independence.

Key words: Croatian state independence, Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing, Homeland War

The genocide in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II perpetrated against Serbs, Jews and Roma was the responsibility of all “who were at that moment Croats, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all and forever, regardless of whether they were fascists or antifascists, and even regardless of whether their loved ones were killed together with the Serbs, Jews and Roma”. Anyone who believes that this is a quote from the work of some zealous Greater Serbian ideologue is mistaken. This is a citation from the book *Otac* (‘Father’) by Miljenko Jergović, a person who publicly declares himself a Croat.¹ Why begin a text dealing with Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing with a quote from a book written by a person considered a Croatian writer? In order to engender an understanding that these and other debased theories about the collective guilt of the Croatian people which, among other things, preclude their right to their national freedom and state independence – which shall be portrayed herein - are not specific to the written word of a single (in this case Serbian) people, rather they are the product of a mental outlook which is odd to the say the least, and

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¹ Miljenko Jergović, *Otac* (Belgrade: Rende, 2010), p. 16.

which may be found among individuals and smaller groups in all peoples of the world.

Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing on the establishment/renewal of Croatian state independence may be described as negativistic, i.e., the dominant position is that the Croatian nation had no right to the establishment of statehood in 1991. However, even within this stance there are three theories as to the extent to which the Croatian nation did not have this right, and why:

1. The first, provisionally called the most hard-core, is that the Croatian nation as such did not have the right to an independent state at all, and had to remain in the federal Yugoslavia or some other form of this Yugoslav state;
2. The second, somewhat softer but the most pervasive, is that the Croatian nation was entitled to depart from Yugoslavia and form a nation state, but that it should not have been established within the existing borders of the Republic of Croatia which, within this line of thought, also encompasses Serbian ethnic territories;
3. The third is that Croatia, as a federal unit of Yugoslavia, theoretically had the right to constitute itself as an independent state, albeit with two major caveats: first, its internal order could not be structured as a nation state of the Croatian people, but as a civic state; and second, this right to independence was restricted and even lost by the chauvinistic policies of the Croatian state authorities vis-à-vis its citizens of Serbian ethnicity.

Several of the most prominent examples of these three positions from the fields of historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing are presented, as well as the reasons specified as the grounds for these views.

An exemplar of the first, most hard-core group which negates the right of the Croatian nation to a state is historian Nikola Žutić from the Institute of Contemporary History in Belgrade and his book *Rimokatolička crkva i hrvatsvo – od ilirske ideje do velikohrvatske realizacije 1453-1941* (*The Roman Catholic Church and Croatianism – From the Illyrian Idea to Greater Croatian Realization, 1453-1941*), which was published by this Institute. In it, Žutić sets forth from the thesis that the Croats do not exist as a nation, rather they are the result of a vast, virtually worldwide conspiracy against the Orthodox Serbs. Žutić's thesis is that in the early Middle Ages there was a small state of a Slavic people called Croats. However, both this state and that nation disappeared in the tidal wave of the Ottoman incursions in Europe, or more accurately, they remained "in traces" in some parts of today's Croatia. During the early modern period, the Catholic Church attempted to convert the Orthodox Serbs, which succeeded only partially. Thus, together with pan-German, anti-Slav Austria, it

created a conspiracy, i.e., a far-reaching project which had at its core to impose upon the Catholic Serbs the name of that extinct nation – the Croats – and thereby shatter the unity of the Serbian national body. This conspiracy succeeded and the Croats emerged. But this was only the beginning of this conspiracy's actualization. The next phase was to implement the Greater Croatian idea, i.e., the creation of a large Croatian Catholic nation state in the territories which the Catholic Church wanted to place under its domination. The expansion of the Croatian state also signified the expansion of the Catholic Church, i.e., this state became the tool, the means in the Catholic Church's missionary activities aimed at the unyielding Orthodox Serbs. In order to fabricate certain rights in the implementation of this conspiratorial project, Croatian Catholic historiography was created, which employed unreliable and most often forged historical data and creative ideological constructs to formulate a historical myth, i.e., an entire quasi-history of a fictitious nation – and Žutić's book is dedicated to exposing it.²

Thus, Žutić considers the Croats non-existent as a nation, an artificial nation created by the Catholic Church and pan-German political circles, in order to serve their march toward the east, i.e., to establish the domination of the Catholic Church and the German nation over the Orthodox Slavs, primarily the Serbs. Thus the Croatian state, as the tool of this criminal conspiracy, is neither permissible nor possible, and the Serbian nation, if it wishes to preserve its religious and national identity, had to and still must oppose it.

Another historian, Kosta Čavoški, also advocates the view that the Croats have no right to an independent nation state. Unlike Žutić, he does not delve into questions of ethnogenesis, rather he attempts to find support for his views in international and state law. In the foreword to the monograph *Republika Srpska Krajina* ('Republic of Serbian Krajina' – a work by a large group of authors),³ Čavoški provides a chronological overview of the emergence of the so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina, and he claims that the reason for the Serbian rebellion and secession from Croatia is that Croatia forcefully and illegitimately, that is, "unconstitutionally withdrew from Yugoslavia and proclaimed its state independence".⁴ Thereafter his text contains a rather extensive exposition in which he negates the right of the Croats and Croatia to self-determination, including secession from Yugoslavia. His assertion rests in the declaration made by UN Secretary General U Tant in 1970 that the United Nations will not acknowledge the secession of a portion of any UN member state. Furthermore, he points out that the Constitution of the Socialist Federal

² Nikola Žutić, *Rimokatolička crkva i hrvatstvo - od ilirske ideje do velikohrvatske realizacije 1453.-1941.*, Belgrade, 1997.

³ Kosta Čavoški, "Nastanak Republike Srpske Krajine i njen međunarodni položaj", in: *Republika Srpska Krajina* (Knin – Belgrade: Srpsko kulturno društvo "Sava Mrkalj" – Topusko and Srpsko kulturno društvo "Zora" – Knin, 1996), pp. 11-24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

Republic of Yugoslavia from 1974 stipulates that the country's borders cannot be altered without consensus among all members of the federation, which Croatia allegedly violated with its unilateral and unconstitutional secession. Thirdly, he argues that Croatia had already consummated its right to self-determination when it joined Yugoslavia, and that this right no longer exists. Therefore, Croatia's referral to the right to self-determination when it withdrew from Yugoslavia was neither valid nor justified, and this in turn prompted the Serbs to rebel against this abuse of valid legislation.⁵ Čavoški attempts to explain the fact that Croatia was nonetheless recognized by the international community by claiming it was an international diplomatic subterfuge. According to him, the world's states feared a replay of the Yugoslav case within their own borders and the secession of individual provinces, so these events were not "presented as a consequence of unilateral and unconstitutional secession, rather as an ancillary outcome of Yugoslavia's collapse, whose genuine reasons were not explained but rather concealed".⁶

Something of a transition between the first and second position, i.e., between the first that the Croats have no right to a state and the second that they have this right within a limited territorial scope, can be found in the theories of historian Vasilije Krestić. In his book *Genocidom do Velike Hrvatske* ('To Greater Croatia by Genocide'), Krestić explains why the Croats cannot create their own nation state.⁷ The first reason, he says, is that the Croatian state and historical right is an ordinary falsehood.⁸ A second, much worse claim is actually aimed against the natural right of the Croatian nation to a state, which need not be linked to the historical right. Krestić's thesis is that the Croats as a nation essentially are entitled to a state. However, for him the problem is that they opted for a nation state model that is not a classical state, but rather a criminal project, an "ogre-state": for apparently the component calling for the extermination of the Serbs in the territories which must become a part of this state rests in its foundations, as an integral, inextricable part. According to Krestić, the creators of Croatian national consciousness systematically generated anti-Serbian hatred, keeping in mind that just the existence of the Serbian nation constituted the greatest hindrance to the achievement of the idea of a Croatian state. In this book, he devises a historical hypothesis whereby the Croats, from the revolutionary year 1848 to the very moment of the book's publication, "intended to create a large, ethnically pure and Catholic Croatian state. Thus, the Serbs, not prepared to forsake their national distinctiveness and their Serbian Orthodox faith, were constantly in the crosshairs of Croatian political parties and many very distinguished individuals who based the Croatian state idea on the so-called state and historical right... The idea of the

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ Vasilije Krestić, *Genocidom do Velike Hrvatske* (Jagodina, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-61.

genocidal annihilation of the Serbs, of a large, ethnically-pure and Catholic Croatian state, has outlasted all statehood frameworks, and political and social systems. As a unifying thread, it runs from Ante Starčević, Eugen Kvaretnik, Mihovil Pavlinović, Josip Frank, Frano Supilo, Stjepan Radić and Ante Pavelić to Franjo Tuđman.⁹ As a picturesque confirmation of Tuđman's genocidal intent, he cites the fabricated testimony of David Fisher, the president of the World Affairs Council of Northern California. According to this testimony, at a diplomatic corps conference in Germany in 1989, Tuđman declared "that when he becomes – and not if he becomes – president of Croatia, the ground in Krajina would become red with blood".¹⁰

Therefore, Krestić concludes, the Croats could not create a state in 1991 because it necessarily entailed the crime of genocide. In his book, he further asserts that unfortunately, despite everything, this 'ogre-state' was brought to life, and its character and stance toward the Serbs and overall political life truly confirms that it should not have been created, and that its very existence is a destabilizing factor in this part of Europe. Krestić states that upon the close of the war in Croatia in 1995, only the method of genocide was altered slightly, as it was – so he claims – perfected. "This policy is still, as it was a century earlier, comprehensively rooted in the 'state and historical right', on the institution of the Croatian 'political' (constitutive) nation, on the aspiration to create a large, ethnically and religiously (Catholic) pure Croatia. As long as this is the case, it should be known that Croatia will not be capable of freeing itself of genocide, and that it will not back down from its long-held aspiration to expand its state borders at the expense of neighbouring ethnic and state territories, in order to improve its not very fortunate geopolitical position". When reading Krestić, one gains the impression that the Republic of Croatia was conceived and organized as a gigantic concentration camp with the primary objective of exterminating the Serbs as a nation.

The most prominent proponent and advocate of the second position – that the Croatian nation had the right to leave Yugoslavia and form its nation state, but without those parts of the Republic of Croatia deemed Serbian ethnic territory – is writer Dobrica Ćosić, a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science. Among the enormous body of works by this spiritual father of modern Serbian political thought, particularly notable are his decade-spanning memories called "Writer's Notes", a work which even today has cult status in Serbia, and which was recently put to film by Serbian national television. For this paper, I cite the notes written by Ćosić for the third volume, which pertain to the 1981-1991 period.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹¹ Dobrica Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi (1981-1991.)*, vol. III. (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2002).

In them, Ćosić, contemplating political events in Croatia in 1990, the electoral victory of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the ascendancy of Franjo Tuđman to the presidency and the ensuing changes, assessed that Croatia was becoming a "chauvinist state" in which the "continuation of Pavelić's policy of creating an ethnically cleansed state of Croatia" would be implemented.¹² To back his assessment, he cites Tuđman's statement, which he characterizes as an admission, made in March 1990, that "the NDH (Independent State of Croatia) was not an historical excess by the Croatian nation; Pavelić's NDH was a historical continuation of the Croatian national ideology".¹³ The political changes which followed after the HDZ assumed power signified for Ćosić the establishment of "Tuđman's Ustashoid state",¹⁴ while he assessed the status relegated to the Serbs by Croatia's "Christmas Constitution" (promulgated just before Christmas, 1990) as the same status they had "under Ante Pavelić during Hitler's time. The consequences of this Constitution will be disastrous for the Serbian people. They will now be compelled to use all necessary means to struggle for their national and civil rights or to flee from Croatia. And they may also be compelled to convert to Catholicism and become assimilated as Croats".¹⁵ Therefore, "out of fear of legalized Ustasha ideology and anti-Serbianism which has assumed a general and terrorist character..."¹⁶ and because "Croatia, with its new Constitution, has entirely deprived the Serbian people of their rights, provoking their bitter resistance", the rebellion by Serbs in Croatia broke out.¹⁷ Ćosić commented on the Serbian rebellion thusly: "The Serbs in Croatia are once more fighting for Yugoslavia. And the Croats don't want it. But the Serbs have no other state..."¹⁸ Thus, according to Ćosić, the situation of the Serbs in Croatia in 1990 was scarcely endurable. The impression is created that the Serbs in Croatia were in limbo, with mere days before the gates of Hell opened before them.

In early 1991, Ćosić asserted that Yugoslavia was breaking apart, and he made peace with the fact that the Croats and Slovenes no longer wish to live in it, which he saw as a legitimate right of these nations. Thus, in January 1991, he wrote: "Regardless of motive, the Serbs should not oppose the political will of the Croats and Slovenes to create their independent states, but within their ethnic territories". He then demanded that Croatia's borders be altered, such that the territories in Croatia which he deemed Serbian ethnic zones be attached to Serbia.¹⁹ As to how this territory should be determined, Ćosić wrote

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-299.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303-305.

that during the so-called “Barricade Revolution”, the Serbs “blocked roads to delineate the borders of their ethnic territory”.²⁰ The view that the Croatian nation can establish a state in its ethnic territory and the demand that Croatia’s borders be changed to Serbia’s benefit tied to insistence upon the biological endangerment of the Serbs in Croatia henceforward became the “mantra” which Čosić repeated in note after note.

Besides the aforementioned views in his notes up to the summer of 1991 and the declaration of Croatia’s independence on 25 June, Čosić also refined his thesis as to why the Serbs could not remain in the new states which were about to be created. Thus, he explained that the Serbian nation as a collective found it unacceptable to live outside of Yugoslavia, i.e., to live in any potential new states.²¹ In a note from April 1991, he even stated that the Serbs, with their right to create a state that would gather all of them in a single state, i.e., in Greater Serbia, would not threaten the rights of any other Yugoslav nation.²² On the other hand, in a note from February 1991, he accused the Croats of “aspiring to create an ethnically pure Croatia and a ‘Greater Croatia’”, which in his view was the essence of primal evil.²³

As for the Serbs in Croatia, Čosić believed that their survival in an independent Croatia state meant their national and civic disenfranchisement for, according to him, Croatia was a Nazi, chauvinistic, militarized party state created by the HDZ under the leadership of Franjo Tuđman,²⁴ who “is preparing Croatia’s armed secession, and the subjugation and expulsion of the Serbs”,²⁵ and Stjepan Mesić, then Croatia’s representative in the Yugoslav collective presidency, whom Čosić described as a “primitive cynic and common Croatian chauvinist”.²⁶

According to Čosić, in May 1991, when the referendum on Croatia’s independence was held, “the Croatian-Serbian war began. This is not only a civil war, it is an international war provoked by the Croats”,²⁷ for “a war for the borders of seceding states is beginning”. His assessments of the situation in Croatia were even more damning. He stated that Croatia’s primary objective, besides seceding from Yugoslavia, is to transform the local Serbian population into a national minority, into “a nationally disenfranchised Serbian nation, creating the right of the Ustasha to expel them as a ‘destabilizing factor’ from

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 303-363

²² *Ibid.*, p. 320-321.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

their centuries-long domains", and even worse.²⁸ He stated that "Tuđman's Croatia, like Pavelić's, will solve the Serbian question in Croatian fashion: 'in a civilized way' it will eliminate this 'litter of mongrels'", and he insisted that the Republic of Serbia will have to defend this part of the Serbian nation by force of arms and implement its "ethnic and territorial integration into the state".²⁹ The imminent creation of the Croatian state for him signified the requirement that the Serbian nation "forsake its state; the state which it created through combat in the Balkan and World Wars. Those who secured their own nation states through the Serbian nation's battles are now depriving the Serbs of their nation state", or as he put it in his note of 17 May 1991, the creation of the Croatian state is a "historic tragedy for the Serbian nation".³⁰ In his "Writer's Notes" and in a series of other works, such as, for example, his texts in a series on the "Serbian question", Dobrica Ćosić stood out as one of the leading opponents of Croatian state and national independence.³¹

Following Ćosić's lead, one may find many other works dealing with the war. In the field of current affairs writing, there is the book *Građanski rat u Hrvatskoj 1991. – 1995.* ('Civil War in Croatia, 1991-1995') by Mihajlo Vučinić, the president of the Association of Serbs from Krajina and Croatia.³² Vučinić believes that the core of the problem lay not in the aspiration of the Croatian nation for an independent state, but rather in two associated components. The first is that the Croats wanted to create a state in territories that were ethnically Serb but were inside what he considers Croatia's solely administrative borders. The other problematic component is the nature of this state, i.e., the manner in which Croatian leaders conceived and implemented its creation, and this was a large, ethnically pure state which would be achieved by means of genocide of non-Croats, particularly Serbs. With this goal, Croatian political leaders, among whom he cites Ante Stačević, the Radić brothers, Vlatko Maček, Ante Pavelić, Andrija Hebrang, Vladimir Bakarić, Savka Dapčević, Miko Tripalo, Ivica Račan, Franjo Tuđman and Stipe Mesić, accused the Serbs for all of the Croatian nation's troubles, basing their policies on lies and deceptions, disseminating hatred, and threatening the rights and existence of the Serbs in Croatia. For these two reasons, the Croats should not have been allowed to create their state within the 1990 borders of the Republic of Croatia.

Exemplars of the third position – that Croatia as a federal unit had the theoretical right to become constituted as a state in its existing borders only as an independent civic rather than nation state, but that this right was 'squandered'

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

³¹ Dobrica Ćosić, *Srpsko pitanje I.* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2002), and Dobrica Ćosić, *Srpsko pitanje II.* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2004).

³² Mihajlo M. Vučinić, *Građanski rat u Hrvatskoj 1991. – 1995.* (Belgrade: Udruženja Srba iz Krajine i Hrvatske i Srpsko kulturno društvo "Zora", 2005).

by the chauvinistic policies of the Croatian state authorities toward its Serbian citizens – are the fewest in number. One may cite military analyst Miroslav Hadžić as an example. In his book *Jugoslovenska narodna agonija* ('Yugoslav People's Agony'), he claims that the Croatian authorities had only themselves to blame for the Serb rebellion and the aggression of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). According to him, Tuđman's stoked Croatian chauvinism and deepened Croatian frustrations over their permanent lack of a state, which provoked fear among the Serbs over "a repetition of tragic experiences with Croatian rule", i.e., "a new genocide" and then armed rebellion as well.³³ The Croatian authorities responded to this rebellion "with terror against the Serbs and an attack on their territory; Croatian forces made genocide, if not certain, then very likely".³⁴ They thereby forced the JNA to intervene in the war in Croatia for the primary purpose of safeguarding the Serbs. To confirm this thesis, Hadžić cited a statement by General Radovan Radinović from August 1991, that "the secessionist aim of the Croatian authorities was not feasible without the complete pacification of the Serbian people in that republic, and pacification under these circumstances practically means the physical annihilation of the Serbs".³⁵ Readers of Hadžić's text cannot discern whether the Croatian authorities truly intended to perpetrate genocide against the Serbs or if the peaceful formation of an independent Croatian state failed due to a series of erroneous and malicious moves by the Croatian authorities. In any case, Zagreb bore the blame for the outbreak of war.

Conclusion

Even though these few authors and their works presented herein may seem only a limited probing of the field of Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing, many years of research on the Homeland War, which included examination of the literature on this topic written by Serbian authors, has led me to conclude that intellectual circles in that milieu have a generally negativistic position on Croatian statehood. For most of them, the Croatian state emerged, if not on the basis of genocide and war crimes, then at the very least on the basis of injustice against and suffering of the Serbian people, and within borders and in territories which, if not Serbian, should have been granted the status of autonomous provinces. If they do not in fact accord collective guilt to the Croatian people for the war and the suffering of the Serbs, they at the very least ascribe a markedly negative role and character to the founders of the Croatian state. Therefore, one may conclude that Serbian historiography, memoirs and current affairs writing, when dealing with Croatian national

³³ Miroslav Hadžić, *Jugoslovenska narodna agonija* (Belgrade: DANGRAF and Centar za civilno-vojne odnose, 2004), pp. 134-135.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

and state independence, have not progressed much since the beginning of the 1990s, when they served as a war-mongering means for the achievement of the Greater Serbian project. Taking into consideration the political and social climate in Serbia and the painful transformations which are under way or have yet to commence in that society, such assessments are not surprising.

“Die Kroaten haben kein Recht auf eigenen Staat” – serbische Historiographie, Memoirenliteratur und Publizistik über staatliche Unabhängigkeit Kroatiens

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser analysiert Werke mehrerer Autoren aus dem Korpus der zeitgenössischen serbischen Historiographie, Memoirenliteratur und Publizistik, beschreibt ihre Standpunkte zur (Wieder)Herstellung der kroatischen staatlichen Unabhängigkeit und wie sie diesen Prozess darstellen. In den genannten Texten dominiert eine negative Sicht auf die im Jahre 1991 erreichte kroatische Unabhängigkeit und eine allgemein verbreitete Auffassung, dass die kroatische Nation kein Recht hatte, ihren selbständigen Staat zu bilden. Darin sind drei grundlegende Blickwinkel zu betrachten. Die erste Gruppe von Autoren negiert sogar die Existenz der kroatischen Nation und vertritt die Meinung, die Kroaten seien eigentlich Serben-Katholiker und ihre Nation sei ein Resultat der Konspiration zwischen der Habsburger Monarchie und der Katholischen Kirche. Andere meinen, dass die Kroaten allerdings Recht haben, ihren nationalen Staat zu bilden, jedoch die von Serben besiedelten Territorien ausschließend. Die Dritten hatten in theoretischer Hinsicht nichts dagegen gehabt, dass die Kroaten einen unabhängigen Staat bilden, aber keinen nationalen, sondern einen bürgerlichen Staat und all das hatte ihrer Meinung nach nur dann gegolten, bevor die kroatischen Behörden dieses Recht durch ihre chauvinistische Politik verwirrten.