

Analysis of the reasons for the departure of a part of the Serb minority from Croatia during Operation Storm in August 1995

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Objective: To investigate the reasons behind the departure of a part of the Serb minority from temporarily occupied areas of the Republic of Croatia, mostly during Operation Storm, and to determine if the departure was instigated by the Croatian police and military forces in August 1995.

Methods: We used sources of Serbian, Croatian, and international provenance. Besides publicly available sources, we accessed official documents of the Republic of Serb Krajina (RSK), Serbian and Montenegrin media articles, the published assessments of Serbian politicians, and the testimonies of refugee Serbs that are principally archived at the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Center of the Homeland War, Zagreb, Croatia.

Findings: We found evidence that the departure of a part of the Serb minority, which occurred mostly during Operation Storm, was voluntary. Among other sources, we present the RSK administration's two official and explicit orders for the Serb minority to leave the occupied Croatian territory, which resulted in their departure to Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) and Serbia. The accusations that the alleged brutalities and crimes conducted by Croatian forces and authorities caused the evacuation proved to be inflated and unrelated to the military operation.

Conclusion: The departure of a part of the Serb minority from the temporarily occupied territory of the Republic of Croatia, which occurred mostly during Operation Storm in August 1995, was not in response to any actions or threats by Croatia, but was pre-planned by the Serb political and military leadership and was accepted mostly voluntarily by the RSK population.

Introduction

The joint military-police Operation Storm, which in August 1995 liberated significant parts of the occupied territory of the Republic of Croatia, has been a subject of controversy. Croatian leadership has been accused of ethnic cleansing due to the departure of Serb civilians from Croatia, mostly during the operation. We explore the reasons why Serbs from the Republic of Serb Krajina (RSK) left Croatia in August 1995 and present that their departure was organized and executed by the RSK leadership before and during Operation Storm for the RSK's own purposes.

Croatian Independence War 1991–1995

The late 1980s marked a turning point in contemporary European history, as communist regimes across Europe began to collapse and new democratic governments were established. At that time, new non-communist political parties founded in western Yugoslav constituent republics Slovenia and Croatia advocated for free elections, decentralization, and restructuring of the country as a confederacy. Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, however, planned to maintain a centralized Yugoslavia under Serbian domination by diminishing the rights of the constituent republics and autonomous provinces. Significant steps toward reaching that objective were diminishing the autonomy of provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo and establishing a puppet government in Montenegro (Barić, 2005, p. 30). Serbia also gained control over the Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija* [JNA]). Such a policy, along with a "financial coup d'état" (Nazor, 2011, p. 44), propaganda, and the instigation of the insurgency of a part of the Serbian national minority in Croatia pushed Croatia (and Slovenia) onto the path to independence. At a referendum held in Croatia on 19 May 1991, about 94% of the population voted for the Republic of Croatia to become a sovereign and independent state which can enter into a union of sovereign states with other Yugoslav republics, and about 92% against staying in Yugoslavia as an integral federal state (the turnout was approximately 83% of the Croatian electorate) (*Izvešće o provedenom referendumu*, 1991). Based on these results, the Croatian Parliament declared independence on 25 June 1991. A few days later, with the help of the JNA and Serb insurgents in Croatia, Serbia started a ruthless aggression against Croatia, occupying almost one-third of its territory. As Croatia gained independence and international recognition during the aggression, this period also became known as the Independence war, commonly known as the Homeland war (*Domovinski rat*) in Croatia. During the War, Serbia often demonstrated a disregard for war laws, breaking peace treaties, killing Croatian civilians and other non-Serbs or expelled them from their homes, carrying out ethnic cleansing, and destroying infrastructure and numerous religious and cultural objects, leaving Croatia with huge life losses and war damage (Perković Paloš, 2020).

Republic of Serb Krajina

Aggression against Croatia, and later Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), was a part of Serbia's plan to expand its borders and bring all Serbs into one country, thus creating an ethnically pure state (Nazor, 2011, p. 295). One part of the Serb community, which comprised

almost 12% of the total population in Croatia, accepted Milošević's policy. Although the Croatian leadership, led by president Franjo Tuđman, allowed for a wide range of freedoms for national and ethnic groups in Croatia (Barić, 2005, pp. 54–57) and offered the position of the Vice President of the Croatian Parliament (*Hrvatski Sabor*) to the leader of the newly established Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka* [SDS]) Jovan Rašković, SDS suspended relations with the Croatian Parliament (Barić, 2005, p. 63; Ramet, 2005, p. 80; Ramet, 2008, p. 36). Supporting Milošević's plans to create Greater Serbia, the party planned to establish an autonomous Serb territory in Croatia, without the agreement of Croatian authorities. Illegal and terrorist activities, such as the announcement of the “plebiscite of the Serb people in the Republic of Croatia on Serb autonomy” and the insurgency of Serb policemen and civilians in Knin in August 1990, demonstrated that they were not going to respect Croatian authorities and laws. Their goal was to separate from Croatia and unite with Serbia, as shown in Figure 1. This resulted in the proclamation of an “administrative-territorial entity” *Srpska Autonomna Oblast* (SAO) *Krajina* (on Croatian territory) as part of the Republic of Serbia in May 1991 (Nazor, 2011, p. 60).



Figure 1. “Serbian people in one country for unification” – Serbian poster for an illegal plebiscite for the appropriation of significant areas of Croatian territory and unification with Serbia, held on 12 May 1991 (Nazor, 2011, p. 62, used with permission).

Later, during the culmination of the aggression on Croatia, on 19 December 1991, the insurgent Serbs proclaimed their illegal state in Knin, changed the name to the Republic of Serb Krajina (RSK), comprising Northern Dalmatia, Lika, Kordun, and Banovina (called Krajina by the Serbs) (Marijan & Barić, 2020, p. 114), which a few months later also included Slavonia, Baranja, Western Sarmia, and Western Slavonia, comprising all Serb-occupied territories of the Republic of Croatia (Nazor, 2011, p. 105) (Figure 2).

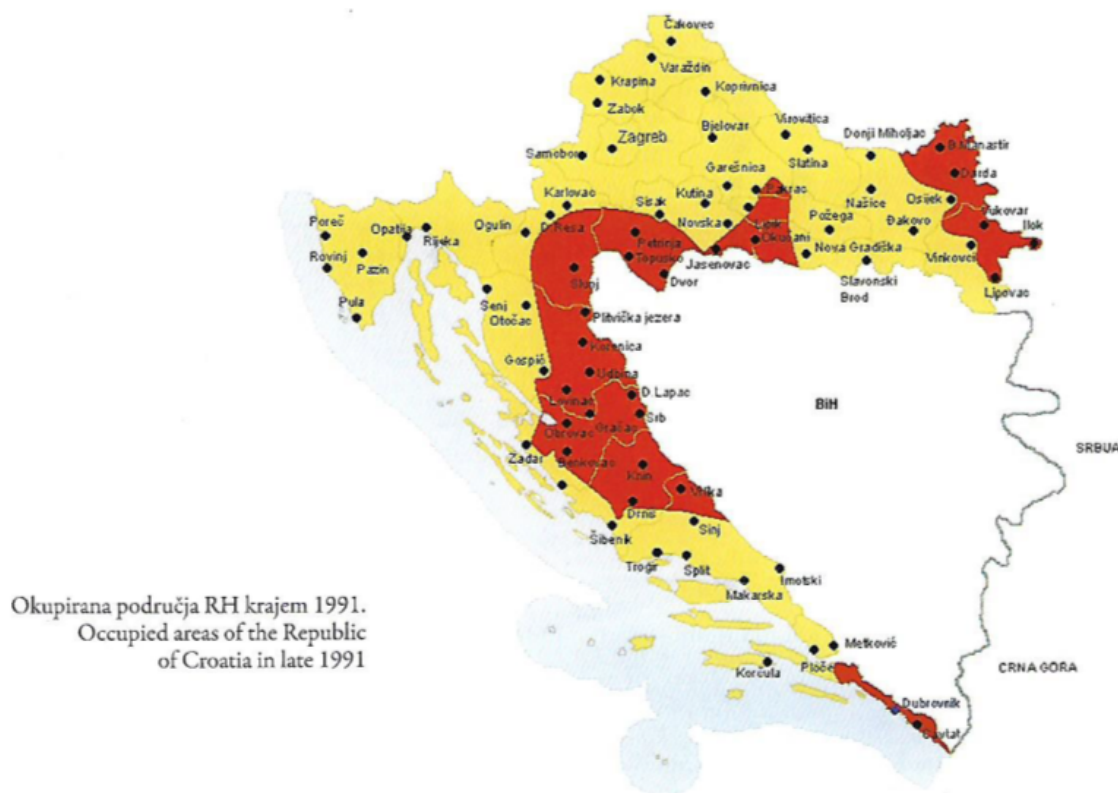


Figure 2. Occupied areas of the Republic of Croatia in late 1991 (shown in red) (from Nazor, 2011, p. 97, used with permission).

At the beginning of 1992, following the Serbian occupation of great parts of B&H and the ethnic cleansing of Croats and Muslims in those areas, Serb insurgents in Bosnia and Herzegovina created the Serb Republic in B&H (later RS), as seen in Figure 3.

The RSK and the Serb Republic strived for unification with Serbia (Marijan & Barić, 2020, p. 124), which would result in the formation of a Greater Serbia (Figure 4) (for more on the idea of Greater Serbia, see Garašanin, 1844).

The attempts of these two self-proclaimed Serbian states at unification and the methods they were using to achieve their objective were also addressed by the International Court of Justice in Hague. In its 2015 Judgement, the Court in Hague found that “the evidence establishes the existence, as of early 1991, of a political objective to unite Serb areas in Croatia and in B&H with Serbia in order to establish a unified territory”. Moreover, the Court stated that “the SAO Krajina, and subsequently RSK government and authorities, fully embraced and advocated this objective and strove to accomplish it in co-operation with the Serb leaderships in Serbia and in the RS in B&H”. The Court also stated that the



Figure 3. Occupied areas in the Republic of Croatia (red) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (orange) in late 1992 (Nazor, 2011, p. 165, used with permission). Sarajevo was encircled but never occupied.

Serbs attempted to reach this objective through “widespread and systematic armed attacks on predominantly Croat and other non-Serb areas and through the commission of acts of violence and intimidation” (International Court of Justice, 2015).

Croats, other minorities, and Serbs who did not support the insurgent leadership in RSK were killed or expelled, and their property, as well as Croatian cultural and religious heritage, was robbed, looted, and destroyed (often burnt down to the ground) (Nazor, 2011, pp. 105–106). Despite the UN mission in Croatia (1992–1995) and the declaration of most occupied territories as “protected zones”, systematic crimes against Croats lasted until the end of the RSK (Marijan & Barić, 2020, p. 137). To attempt to reintegrate its occupied territory peacefully and bring back Croatian refugees to their homes (Nazor, 2011, pp. 85–86, 149–152), Croatia negotiated with the insurgent leadership from Knin during the entire occupation period (Miškulin, 2016, p. 179). After numerous failed negotiations, Croatia decided to end the occupation and terror through a military-police operation in the summer of 1995.



Figure 4. Front page of *Greater Serbia* – the newspaper of the Serbian Chetnik movement [Serbian chauvinist movement, responsible for the killing of Croats and Muslims during World War II] from 1990. It contains the map with the planned borders of Greater Serbia, which would encompass significant areas of the Republic of Croatia, all of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia [today North Macedonia] (Nazor, 2011, p. 18, used with permission).

Operation Storm

The decision to liberate the occupied Croatian territory came only after several years of negotiations that failed due to constant sabotage by the Serb insurgent leadership; it continuously broke many treaties, such as the 1994 Zagreb Agreement and the 1994 Economic Agreement (Nazor & Sekula Gibač, 2014), refused to live in Croatia under any circumstances, intended to unite with RS, and planned to later join Serbia and Montenegro in the Socialist Republic (SR) of Yugoslavia (Miškulin, 2016, p. 179). The last peace offer aimed at ending the war was the Z-4 Plan, initiated in the fall of 1994 by the American ambassador in Croatia, Peter Galbraith, with the support of the Russian ambassador in Croatia, Leonid Kerestedžijanc. The plan anticipated a very high level of autonomy for Serbs in those

parts where they were a majority before the war, including allowing them to have their own insignia, parliament, government, president, currency, and police; in return, the occupied Eastern and Western Slavonia would be reintegrated with Croatia (Barić, 2005, p. 474). This meant effectively creating a state within a state, which would have set the stage for the separation of those parts from Croatia in the future. Nevertheless, Croatian President Tuđman accepted the plan in order to continue negotiations and achieve peace (Radelić, Marijan, Barić, & Bing, 2006, p. 383), but the Serb insurgent leadership in Knin rejected it publicly several times, and finally on 3 August 1995 (Barić, 2005, pp. 475–477).

At this point, the Croatian leadership opted for a military-police operation. The objective was to prevent the Serb insurgent leadership from uniting the remaining occupied territory of the RSK with RS and to stop the siege of the town of Bihać in Bosnia, as appealed by B&H president Alija Izetbegović to Tuđman at the end of 1994 (Marijan, 2009, pp. 43–44). The occupation of Bihać would have caused a new humanitarian disaster akin to the one in Srebrenica in July 1995, when Serbian forces killed about 8,000 Bosnian men and boys (Nazor, 2011, p. 247). Therefore, to save Bihać, achieve Croatian territorial integrity, and end the war, a new military-police operation by Croatia was necessary (Nazor, 2011, p. 168).

The operation started in the early morning of 4 August 1995. Croatian forces, consisting of 127,000 soldiers and policemen (Marijan, 2009, p. 136), attacked simultaneously from thirty-one directions along a front line longer than 630 kilometers (Nazor, 2011, pp. 172, 259), as shown in **Figure 5** (Top panel and Bottom panel).

The second day of the operation, the town of Knin, which was the seat of the Serb insurgent leadership (Nazor, 2011, p. 45) and was otherwise known as the capital of the medieval kingdom of Croatia (Šokčević, 2016, p. 56), was liberated, which meant the end of the RSK and the near end of the war. In only four days, Croatian forces liberated most of the occupied areas in Croatia – 10,400 km² or 18.4% of the Croatian territory (Marijan & Barić, 2020, p. 223; Marijan, 2009, p. 137). Only Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmia were still occupied, only to be later reintegrated peacefully in 1998. In Operation Storm, 196 Croatian soldiers and policemen were killed, 1,100 wounded, and 15 missing (Nazor, 2011, p. 172).

Departure of the Serb minority

When Croatian forces entered Knin on 5 August, the town was already deserted (Barić, 2005, p. 520). Serb paramilitary forces, Serb insurgent leadership, and civilians fled the town for RS and SR Yugoslavia (Barić, 2005, p. 554). Estimates of the number of Serbs who fled from Croatia vary by sources. According to Croatian sources, 90,000 Serbs left Croatia (Nazor, 2011, p. 65). United Nations sources estimate the number at 150,000 people (Nazor, 2011, p. 65). Serbian estimates, on the other hand, are between 200,000 and 300,000 (Nazor, 2011, p. 265).

The departure of the RSK Serbs was planned, organized, and executed by the insurgent Serb leadership from Knin. Based on the decision of the RSK Supreme Defense Council, led by the RSK president Milan Martić and commander-in-chief of the Serb Army of Krajina (in Serbian *Srpska vojska Krajine*, SVK) lieutenant general Mile Mrkšić, the vast majori-

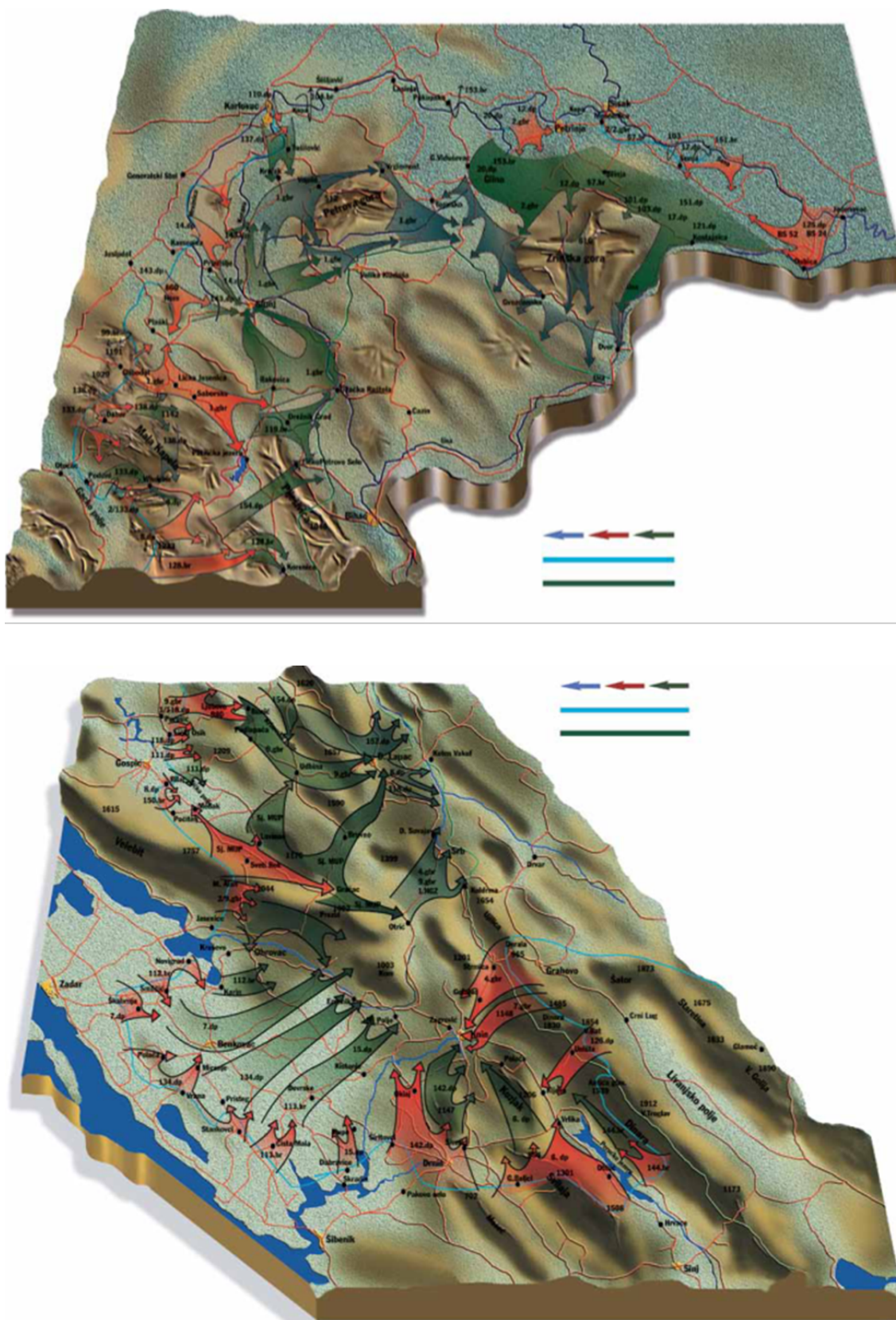


Figure 5. Lines of the Croatian army's (HV) and police advance during Operation Storm (Nazor, 2011, pp. 256–257, used with permission). Different colors of the arrows indicate different Croatian military and police units' movements. **Top panel** displays northern sectors Banovina and Kordun, while **Bottom panel** displays the southern sectors of Lika and Dalmatia.

ty of Serb civilians from Northern Dalmatia and Lika were evacuated between 4 and 5 August 1995 (Rašković, 1998, presented in **Box 3**; Barić, 2005, pp. 551–553). Although the decision to evacuate did not apply to Serb military forces, they joined the civilians and left the area with them (Barić, 2005, p. 554).

Accusations against Croatia for war crimes

The Croatian leadership and president Tuđman have been repeatedly accused of ordering the forcible displacement of the Krajina Serbs in August 1995. The main accusation was that Croatia carried out “ethnic cleansing”, meaning that Croatian authorities wanted Serbs to leave Croatia and ignored the killings of a great number of civilians. These accusations came predominantly from two sources – the Serbian side and the Croatian Helsinki Committee.

Accusations from Serbian side

From the Serbian side, a former RSK official, founder and president of the Serbian documentation-information center *Veritas* Savo Štrbac, who collects and publishes names of killed and missing Serbs in Croatia during the Croatian Independence war, claims that Operation Storm was an “aggression” on RSK, which was “exposed to as of then unseen artillery fire,” and that “Croatian soldiers killed and burnt down everything that was Serb” (Štrbac, 2007, p. 1). He published the names of 1,852 allegedly killed and missing Serbs from the beginning of operation Storm to 1998 (*Dokumentaciono-informativni centar Veritas*, 2014). However, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, founded by the UN Security Council in 1993 with aim of bringing to justice the “perpetrators of crimes in the wars in the former Yugoslavia” (Nazor, 2011, p. 269) in its 2011 verdict against two high ranking Croatian generals who played a significant role in Operation Storm, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, listed only 44 proved murders of civilians during and immediately after Operation Storm. Since Croatian forces could possibly be blamed only for these murders on grounds of command responsibility, this indicates a “low level of collateral victims” due to their actions during the operation (*International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia [ICTY]*, 2011a; 2011b; Nazor, 2011, p. 297).

Croatian Helsinki Committee

The 2001 Croatian Helsinki Committee (HHO, abbreviation after Croatian name *Hrvatski Helsinški odbor*) Report claimed that Croatia had committed ethnic cleansing in the summer of 1995, mentioning that approximately 600 Serb civilians were killed during the Operation and within the next 100 days following its end (*Hrvatski Helsinški odbor*, 2001, p. 129). The Report also stated that, by 10 October 1995, “22,000 houses and many villages were burned in a systematic and organized manner” (*Hrvatski Helsinški odbor*, 2001, pp. 78, 180). The testimony of the Committee’s president Žarko Puhovski to ICTY against the Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, was based on this report. However, the Court dismissed Puhovski’s testimony as the defense proved that the Report had referenced the press statement of the UN general for South Sector Alain Forand, stating that

over 16,578 of the 21,744 observed houses were destroyed by fire or severely damaged (ICTY, 2009). Nevertheless, on 15 April 2011, Gotovina and Markač were convicted to 24 and 18 years of prison, respectively, for events during and after Storm. However, after the appeal by the defense, and based on other sources, on 16 November 2012, all charges against Gotovina and Markač were dropped. The ICTY's final verdict established that Croatia and the two generals were not part of a "joint criminal enterprise with the aim of ethnic cleansing" and that Storm was a legitimate military operation (ICTY, 2012).

The aim of this article is to explore why the RSK Serbs left Croatia in August 1995. We examined whether they left forcefully or voluntarily. Was their departure spontaneous or organized? If it was organized, who was responsible for it? Did they leave out of fear or simply because they preferred not to live in a free and independent Croatia?

Methods

We used Serbian, Croatian, and international sources, primarily official RSK documents, Serbian media reports, and ICTY documents.

Serbian sources

We analyzed the reasons for the departure of Serb civilians and forces using official RSK documents, mostly from August 1995, stored in the archive of the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Center of the Homeland War (*Hrvatski memorijalno-dokumentacijski centar Domovinskog rata* (HMDCDR)). Contemporary Serbian and Montenegrin media, such as the newspapers *Večernje novosti*, *Politika*, *Vreme*, *Monitor*, and others also reported on the Serb departure and published testimonies of Serb civilians. Apart from that, we used published diary entries and books by some Serb officials and soldiers (Vrcelj, 2002; Sekulić, 2000).

Croatian sources

We used the Brijuni (eng. Brioni) Transcript from 31 July 1995, which had been presented in the Court as evidence that Croatia had committed "ethnic cleansing" in the summer of 1995. This is the transcript of the meeting held by the president Tuđman with the Croatian defense minister Gojko Šušak and high-ranking officers of the Croatian army on the Brijuni islands 31 July 1995. At the meeting, Tuđman decided to launch Operation Storm. We analyzed the meeting transcript with the aim of finding out whether the Croatian leadership had planned the ethnic cleansing of the Krajina Serbs (Brijunski transkript, 1995). We used President Tuđman's speech to Serbs on 4 August 1995, in which he invited Serbs to stay in Croatia, guaranteeing them civil rights (Hina, 1995, pp. 2–3). We also used the 2001 Croatian Helsinki Committee Report, which contained testimonies of Serb civilians (Hrvatski Helsinški odbor, 2001). The White Paper on the Cooperation of the Republic of Croatia, jointly authored by ICTY and the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Croatia, was also included in the analysis (Bijela knjiga Vlade Republike Hrvatske o suradnji s Međunarodnim sudom, 1999). They reveal how Croatian authorities handled crimes against Serb civilians. Finally, we used studies that reveal how Croatian civil associations,

helped by the Croatian authorities, provided humanitarian assistance to Serb civilians (Lang, Čulo, & Domazet, 1997a; Lang et al., 1997b).

International sources

ICTY documents, mainly testimonies from the trials to Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač 2009–2012, were also included in the analysis (ICTY, 2009; 2010; 2011a; 2011b; 2012).

Results

Documents of Serbian provenance show that the evacuation of Serb civilians related to the Croatian military operation has already been planned and readied for execution since 1993. Serbian and Montenegrin media reports and testimonies also reveal that they considered RSK leadership responsible for the departure of the RSK Serbs.

Evacuation was planned in advance

Serbian documents reveal that the RSK leadership began to plan the evacuation as early as 1993. It was planned on all levels – from the head of the RSK to local communities and transport companies, as is showed in **Table 1**.

Another document from the beginning of June 1995, after Operation Flash liberated Western Slavonia, reveals the preparations for the evacuation of the civilian population. An order was sent to all SVK military units demanding “the establishment of civil protection measures, and charging municipal bodies and local communities to organize evacuation accommodation and feeding of the population (women, children and elderly) from potential combat zones” (Barić, 2004, p. 452).

Official Serb documents from July and August 1995

According to the RSK Defense Law from 1992, “in case of immediate war danger, state of war or state of emergency”, the evacuation of the civilian population would be implemented (Barić, 2005, p. 547). Specific preparations of the RSK Civil Defense Headquarters for the evacuation of the RSK population started on 29 July 1995, and the RSK Supreme Defense Council proclaimed the state of war on 30 July, i.e., five days before the start of Storm. Since the Serbian forces in northern Dalmatia found themselves in a difficult position after the fall of Grahovo and Glamoč in B&H, such decisions were understandable. Before the order of evacuation of civilians by the RSK Supreme Defense Council (4 August), on 2 August 1995, the Republic Civil Protection Headquarters gave an order to its regional headquarters to immediately command the implementation of evacuation plans of “material, cultural, and other goods” for the evacuation (Marijan, 2009, pp. 368–369). In the afternoon hours of the first day of Storm, the RSK Supreme Defense Council only implemented actions for which the population had been prepared and trained if it was estimated that the Serb Army of Krajina would not be able to hold the defense line.

Table 1. A list of RSK* documents from January 1993 to June 1995, revealing that the RSK leadership planned and organized the evacuation

No.	Date	Document title	Document author
1	27 January 1993	Report from "Autotransport" [company] Benkovac to Crisis Staff of the Municipal Assembly Benkovac on participation of the company in the civilian population evacuation plan (HMDCDR, 2, (Box 265), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 327–328).	Dušan Sinobad (Director of the "Autotransport")
2	18 February 1993	The Command of the 31st brigade of the Serb Army of Krajina delivers to the leaders of subordinate units the evacuation plan of the Civil Protection Headquarters for Petrinja (HMDCDR, 2, (Box 265), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 328–332).	Nikola Gruborović (Commander of the 31st brigade of the SVK*)
3	4 March 1993	Evacuation plan of the civilian population of the Municipal Assembly Jasenovac (HR-HMDCDR, Civilne i vojne vlasti "Zapadna Slavonija", (Kut. 1) [Civilian and military authorities "Western Slavonia", (Box 1)], cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 333–334.)	Milutin Kelić (President of the Municipal Assembly Jasenovac)
4	23 March 1993	Report on the Inspection of the situation of Civil Protection in municipalities Vrginmost and Vojnić (Hrvatski informativni centar, A 044-015-01 [Croatian Information Center, A 044-015-01], cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 334–337).	Sava Milović (Expert Associate for Civil Protection in the Republic Headquarters of Civil Protection)
5	July 1993	A letter from the Administration "Western Slavonia" Ministry of Defense of RSK to the Command of the SVK's 18th Corps, for determining the direction of the movement and the crossing of the Sava river according to the evacuation plan of the population to the Serb Republic in Bosnia (HR-HMDCDR, 2, (Box 595), cf. Marijan, 2009 , p. 338).	Nikola Brujić (Assistant Chief of Civil Affairs)
6	5 August 1993	Municipal Civil Protection Headquarters report of the Municipal Assembly of Pakrac to the Regional Headquarters of the Civil Protection of Okučani on the evacuation plan in case of offensive action of Croatian forces (HR-HMDCDR, 2, (Box 182), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 338–339).	Marko Banić (Chief of Civil Protection)
7	1 February 1994	Police Station of General Jurisdiction (serb. Stanica milicije opšte nadležnosti) Okučani report to the Secretariat of the Interior Okučani on the evacuation plan from the Western Slavonia (HR-HMDCDR, 10, (Box 8), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 339–342).	Rade Španović (Commander of the Police Station of General Jurisdiction Okučani)
8	26 March 1994	Response from the Ministry of Defense to the RSK Assembly on the parliamentary question with regard to securing enough fuel for evacuation of the population (HR-HMDCDR, 3, ur.br. 01-1020-2/1994, cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 342–343).	Dušan Rakić (Defense Minister)
9	2 February 1995	Evacuation plan for the population of the local community Donji Skrad, Tušilovički Cerovac, Tušilović, and Brezova Glava (HR-HMDCDR, 2, (Box 265), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 343–346.)	Command of the Military Department Vojnić
10	April 1995	Assessment of endangerment and possibility for protection and rescue of the Republic Civil Protection Headquarters of the RSK (HR-HMDCDR, 2, (Box 265), cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 346–357).	Duško Babić (Chief of the Republic Civil Protection Headquarters)
11	11 May 1995	Security Department of the Main Headquarters of the SVK report to the Security Administration of the Yugoslav Army General Staff on reinforced propaganda activity of the Croatian Army, losses in attacks on the protected area of Bihać and on emigration of civilians from Benkovac (HR-HMDCDR, 6, Odeljenje bezbednosti [Department of Security], 37-403/1995., cf. Marijan, 2009 , pp. 357–359).	Rade Rašeta (Assistant Commander for Security Affairs)
12	9 June 1995	Notice from the Military Cabinet of the president of the RSK to the General Staff of SVK on the delegation visit from Obrovac that informed about alarming military-security situation which can cause spontaneous or organized migration of the population (HR-HMDCDR, 2, (Box 340), cf. Marijan, 2009 , p. 361).	Žarko Novaković (Chief of the Cabinet of the Commander of the SVK)

*RSK – Republic of Serb Krajina, SVK – Serb Army of Krajina.

†No specific author is stated.

[Order of the RSK Civil Defense Headquarters to regional civil defense offices concerning the implementation of evacuation and relief plans \(Knin, 29 July 1995\)](#)

Before Storm, on 29 July 1995, the RSK Civil Defense Headquarters issued an order to regional civil defense offices to immediately establish a continuous tour of duty and implement evacuation and relief plans. The regional civil defense offices were obliged to report regularly to this headquarters on the measures and activities taken, as well as possible problems, starting from 30 July 1995 (see [Box 1](#): Document translation, [Appendix 1](#): Document reproduction).

Box 1. English translation of the document on the evacuation and relief plans for Serb civilians issued on 29 July 1995 (Iz zapovijedi Republičkog štaba civilne zaštite RSK, 1995), five days before the operation “Storm” of Croatian police and military forces.

REPUBLIC OF SERB KRAJINA

REPUBLICAN CIVIL DEFENSE HEADQUARTERS

No. nov. 01-78/95

Knin, 29 July 1995

DEFENSE

OFFICIAL SECRET

REGIONAL CIVIL DEFENSE OFFICES

To whom it may concern

Pursuant to the Decision on the proclamation of the state of war, and in accordance with the latest situation, the Republic Civil Defense Headquarters hereby issues the following

ORDER

1. Regional civil defense offices need to be activated immediately, a continuous tour of duty established and, if required, some staff members kept continuously available on call.
2. Municipal civil defense offices shall be ordered to:
 - organize a continuous tour of duty and staff member activity related to evacuation and relief;
 - update evacuation and relief plans, putting personnel responsible for specific assignments on standby;
 - put organized civil protection units on standby;
 - through the civil protection officer, encourage citizens to prepare and arrange shelter objects, and carry out other measures and procedures of individual and collective protection;
 - determine the possibility of takeover for their inclusion in the implementation of protection and rescue measures
3. Through appropriate SVK [Srpska vojska Krajine] commands, monitor the situation and take appropriate measures.
4. Monitor the municipal civil protection headquarters activity and provide professional and other assistance in finding appropriate solutions.
5. Report regularly to this headquarters on the measures and activities taken, as well as possible problems, starting from 30 July 1995, at 1 pm.

Copy to:

1. Regional Civil Protection Headquarters of N. Dalmatia,... by courier
2. Lika, Kordun, Banija,
E. Slavonia, Baranja and W. Syrmia... by fax
3. Archives – here..... 1X

For the attention of:

1. Ministry of Defense
2. Commandant of the Main Headquarters of the SVK
3. President of the Government

Decision of the Supreme Defense Council of the Republic of Serb Krajina on the proclamation of the state of war (Knin, 30 July 1995)

Considering the liberation of B&H town Grahovo by Croatian forces, RSK expected Croatian attack. This is the reason why on 30 July 1995, the Supreme Defense Council of the Republic of Serb Krajina proclaimed the state of war. The Supreme Defense Council also decided to activate regional coordinating bodies in order to organize defense and work in war conditions, and by its decision, the RSK Ministry of Interior has introduced curfew on the entire RSK territory (**Box 2**: Document translation, **Appendix 2**: Document reproduction).

Box 2. English translation of the document on the proclamation of the state of war by Supreme Defense Council of the Republic of Serb Krajina (Iz odluke Vrhovnog savjeta odbrane "Republike Srpske Krajine" o proglašenju ratnog stanja, 1995).

Decision of the RSK Supreme Defense Council

STATE OF WAR PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE RSK

Knin, 30 July.

At its meeting held on Friday evening, the RSK Supreme Defense Council decided that, considering the latest developments after the occupation of Grahovo and possible Croatian aggression on RSK, to proclaim the state of war throughout the whole territory of the RSK in accordance with Article 102 of the Constitution.

The Supreme Defense Council also decided to activate regional coordinating bodies in order to organize defense and work in war conditions, and also for the Government to begin with the permanent session.

At the same time, it decided to call all relevant international factors to Knin for urgent conversations.

The Supreme Defense Council continued its session on Saturday, when it considered the military and security situation in RSK after the occupation of the Grahovo area. It assessed that the defense lines are stable and that all necessary measures to suppress possible Croatian aggression and to secure conditions for the normal life of civilians are being taken.

By the decision of the Supreme Defense Council, the RSK Ministry of Interior has introduced curfew on the entire RSK territory, which will last from 10 PM to 5 AM. At that time, all movement, except for those of persons on official assignments, is forbidden.

The Main Headquarters of the Serb Army of Krajina announced that there are no reasons for causing panic and falling for different rumors, because all defense lines are stable and ready to repel the possible aggression of the Croatian army on any part of RSK.

The Main Headquarters warned the citizens who have been spreading disinformation and creating unnecessary panic among the population that appropriate legal measures will be applied against them.

All able-bodied conscripts and all working age population have been called to prepare to soon join the work brigades, as a part of civil protection.

The RSK Government also began its permanent session in Knin yesterday and had passed a series of decrees and decisions in the fields of trade, energy, justice, health, finance, transport, and communications. By the Government's decision, the prices of vital items, consumer goods, and raw materials have been returned to the level at which they were on 25 July of this year. The amount of the maximum trade margin for these products was also determined, and it cannot be higher than 5%.

The Government listened and accepted the information given by the defense minister Milan Šuput on the measures taken with aim of defending the borders, and on the activities related to the civil protection.

The RSK president Milan Martić, who yesterday, together with the SVK commander lieutenant general Mile Mrkšić, resided in the area of the shelled village Strmica, about 20 kilometers north of Knin, towards Grahovo, declared on the RSK Radio Television that the Krajina defense lines in this part have been stabilized.

-We do not believe that Croatia can opt for such a senseless move, as it would be an attack on Knin", he [Martić] said, adding that such a possibility could not be excluded.

According to his words, the president of Serbia Slobodan Milošević, with whom he was in telephone contact yesterday, gave assurances that Serbia can no longer be indifferent.

Talking about the alliance with the Republic of Serbia, president Martić said that RSK and RS will act together, and that the two countries' presidents and military commands are in constant contact.

"We have the power to regain what the Croatian army has conquered, emphasized Martić, ordering citizens to be disciplined and to respect instructions given by the competent authorities.

For the antrefile (sic)

State Information Agency has been formed

By the decision of the RSK Supreme Defense Council, the State Information Agency of the RSK was formed, with the task of coordinating the information activities and collecting and disseminating the information related to the immediate war danger, so that the citizens could be completely and in timely manner informed.

At the head of this coordinating body are minister of information of the RSK Drago Kovačević and assistant commander of the SVK colonel mr Kosta Novaković, and within the Agency a Coordination Council was formed, whose members are representatives of the Information Service of the RSK President, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Defense and Interior, the Main Headquarters of the SVK and RSK Radio Television, and agency Iskra.

Decision of the RSK Supreme Defense Council on the evacuation of the population from the municipalities of Benkovac, Obrovac, Drniš, Gračac and Knin to Srb and Lapac (Knin, 4 August 1995)

On 4 August 1995, the RSK Supreme Defense Council issued the Decision to evacuate the population from the municipalities od Benkovac, Obrovac, Drniš, Gračac and Knin to Srb and Lapac near border with B&H as shown in **Box 3**: Document translation, **Appendix 3**: Document reproduction). From there, they progressed towards RS and towards Serbia (see **Figure 6**). The decision to leave Knin and other aforementioned towns had been made before Croatian forces liberated these areas.

Official notes from the diary of an officer of the Army of Serb Krajina on the shelling of Knin

Marko Vrcelj, then "Artillery Chief of the SVK General Staff", was present in Knin when *Storm* started:

"The drumfire barrage started all over Krajina. Everything had been planned from the smallest detail. Every shell and every artillery attack. Several days ago, observers and gunners were brought in to direct fire. The most important targets in the town include the General Staff building, the residence of the president of the state, the northern barracks, the Senjak barracks and the main crossroads in Knin... I jumped over the fence of the northern barracks and entered the building in which I had worked four months ago... The barracks was being hit by quite a few shells, but we were lucky and avoided shells falling on our head... We got into a Golf [automobile] and set off towards the General Staff. Shells were still falling, this time less frequently. We arrived at the Dešlić crossroads. The area around the General Staff was hit more heavily. I stopped the driver and told him to return to the barracks, and proceeded on foot... Seeking shelter behind trees I reached the General Staff. I entered the building: what a sight. Two shells had hit the parking space between the buildings and destroyed the entire motor pool. That must have been quite a gunner, to land them right there" (Vrcelj, 2002, pp. 212–213).

Box 3. English translation of the document by the Republic of Serb Krajina Supreme Defense Council on the evacuation of Serbian civilians (Rašković, 1998).

REPUBLIC OF SERB KRAJINA

SUPREME DEFENCE COUNCIL

Knin, 4 August 1995

16.45 hours

No. 2-3113-1/95

Because of the new situation caused by the open general aggression of the Republic of Croatia on the Republic of Serb Krajina, and after the first, initial defense success, a large part of Northern Dalmatia and part of Lika are threatened. Accordingly,

WE HAVE DECIDED

1. to proceed with planned evacuation of all persons unfit for combat from the municipalities of Knin, Benkovac, Obrovac, Drniš and Gračac;
2. to implement evacuation according to prepared plans and routes from Knin via Otrić towards Srb and Lapac;
3. request assistance from the UNPROFOR Command, Sector South, with headquarters in Knin.

Knin, 4 August 1995

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

Mile Martić

(stamp: RSK, General Staff of the Serbian Army)

CERTIFIED IN THE SVK GENERAL STAFF at 17.20 hours and field under the above number.

Serb side sacrificed its civilians

Some sources indicate that a part of the Serbian leadership was prepared to sacrifice civilians, their fellow countrymen, in order to have grounds to accuse the Croatian forces of war crimes. This allegation has been raised by certain commanders and members of the Serbian forces. Milislav Sekulić, major general of the Serb Army of Krajina, presented this opinion in his book titled *Knin fell in Belgrade*:

“Could one at all raise a question that might read: why would anyone on the ‘Serbian side’ need the population in Kordun to be surrounded? Doesn’t that mean an expectation that the Croatian army would ‘pose’ before the world and its sponsors while it carries mass murders of children, women, old people, encircled soldiers? Was the expected massacre supposed to serve as crown proof that the Croats were a genocidal people, and their army the same as in the times of Ante Pavelić and World War Two? And, finally, would the massacre in Kordun be a welcome excuse for the decision to lead the people into exodus and on the road of no return? Wouldn’t that massacre eventually and forever cover up all the lies with which the Serbs in Krajina were misled not only since 1991 but even earlier? Although, unluckily, encirclement did occur, luckily the conduct of the **Croatian army was rational and quite controlled** (authors’ bold). Croatia knew what it wanted and firmly controlled the situation. One could say it did not fall into a trap” (Sekulić, 2000, p. 221).

In his testimony at The Hague, after the question of General Gotovina’s defense team about the meaning of the message “hold out”, sent during Operation Storm by representatives of the Yugoslav Serbian military, police and political authorities to the command of the 21st

SVK corps, intelligence and SVK officer Slobodan Lazarević responded:

“...The ‘hold out’ could have been translated only one way, keep fighting, and something will come out of it. All the people sitting in that office knew that it was a battle we could not win, it was obvious that we were sacrificed (...) that Belgrade wanted to score some cheap points by surrendering twenty or twenty-five thousand people (5,000 troops and 20,000 civilians). I never believed that the Croats would come and kill them all. And neither did, I believe, Tošo Pajić [officer of the State Security Office in Belgrade and then minister of the interior of the Republic of Serbian Krajina]. They [the Serbian leadership in Belgrade] **wanted to turn Topusko into a Srebrenica**. In that case, they would accuse the Croatian side. The idea was to present to the world matters in this way, by saying that nobody was an angel, that they were the same, just as bad as we were, they just killed a group of civilians at Topusko” (*Transcript of testimony of Slobodan Lazarević, n.d.*).

Serbian and Montenegrin media reactions to the departure

Along with RSK records, the reports published in the Serbian and Montenegrin media immediately after the Storm also confirm that the political and military leadership of the insurgent Serbs in Croatia was responsible for the departure and suffering of the Serb population of Croatia during the Storm.

General attitude of Serbian media to the departure

The responsibility of the political and military leadership of Serbs in Croatia is obvious from many questions and comments in Serbian papers: Why did not the Krajina leadership accept peace in time, if it could not hold out in the war? Indeed, who issued the order on the retreat of the people and the army? These were only some of the questions raised by Serbian journalists. The Serbian public wanted the “Krajina leadership, which did not run at the rear of the column” to answer the question: Why, and on whose advice, did it decide to move hundreds of thousands of people towards Serbia? (*Jevđović, 1995*). The conduct of the RSK leadership was deplored by the Yugoslav press already on the first day of Operation Storm:

“They are spinning yarns about unifying all Serbian lands, and then the going gets tough and they call to Serbia for help. Serbia gave them weapons, sent them a commander to organize them. They were told to negotiate with Croatia and thus pacify the situation. No! They just wanted a big show, a celestial drama. But the Croats are now deep inside, they cut them off; in this way, they are also losing their diplomatic positions and their stakes are much lower” (*Pakao na Drini, 1995*, pp. 8–9).

Recognition of the responsibility of the political leadership of the Republic of Serbia for the departure

Along with comments that the Z-4 Plan was a “last ditch” plan permitting the Serbs to achieve the maximum of their territorial aspirations (since the “West would never recognize the RSK”), the Serbian media reported that the rejection of the plan and the “fueling of unrealistic RSK ambitions” was also sponsored by many political factors in Belgrade. Thus, Milošević’s close associate Borisav Jović was reported to have said that the “Krajina was militarily strong enough to withstand a possible attack of the Croatian army”; the chetnik *vojvoda* and president of the Serbian radicals Vojislav Šešelj stated that the “Z-4 Plan was totally unacceptable”; papers also published the view of a famous Serbian opposition leader, Zoran Đinđić, showing that the Serbian political parties were fairly united regarding the issue of Serbs outside Serbia and the “right to Serbian territories”: “The fact that the

Serbian people in the RSK do not accept the plan suggests that we should not accept it either” (Pešić, 1995).

Vuk Drašković

By referring to the narrow-minded position of Serbs on the implementation of the decision about all Serbs necessarily living in a single state, culprits in “one’s own yard” were also sought by Vuk Drašković, then the leader of the opposition “Serbian Renewal Movement” (Amnesty International, 1993) and one of the more vehement champions of Greater Serbian policies in the early 1990s. His reply to a reporter’s question, published in the Serbian newspaper *Vreme*, on “who was to blame for the fall of Krajina and the fate of the Serbian population in the area”, unambiguously shows why the Serb people in Croatia suffered a tragedy and who was responsible for it:

“For years, people have been shouting all over Serbia that Krajina will never even think of living anywhere but in Greater Serbia. This unrealistic position was so strong that it entered the conscious and unconscious minds of quite a few people. All those who have been feeding the people with such a dangerous illusion are to be blamed. On the other hand, as things have shown, those of us who did not think so were not able to explain to the people that they were being grossly misled. Because we were not able to tell the time, in time, what lay in store, we are also guilty” (Gurat ću na svaka vrata, 1995).

Republic of Serb Krajina officials’ quarrels

Addressing the media after the war, RSK officials accused one another or justified their decisions, thereby admitting their responsibility. Thus, the last RSK prime minister Milan Babić expressed his shock at the fact that “the SVK general staff and president Milan Martić ordered the general evacuation of the population and the retreat of the army” (Povlačenje umesto borbe, 1995). Milan Martić denied the allegations and claimed that he had only ordered that the population be moved and accommodated in surrounding villages, and that “no mention was made of any withdrawal” (Nisam naredio povlačenje vojske, 1995).

Republic of Serb Krajina foreign minister Milivoj Vojnović

Martić’s statement on moving the population only to the “surrounding villages” is contradicted by the RSK foreign minister Milivoj Vojnović’s statement sent to the UNPROFOR spokesman Yury Miyakotnik on 5 August 1995 and published in the major Serbian newspaper *Politika* that same month. Vojnović informed Miyakotnik that the “RSK government and the SVK general staff had decided to proceed with the immediate evacuation of children, women and elderly persons from the RSK territory to Yugoslavia, and sought UNPROFOR assistance” (Kovačević, 1995). Vojnović’s statement, published in the Serbian daily press, that the “objective of the evacuation was also to draw Serbia and Yugoslavia into the war” (Politika, 1995) is particularly significant.

Public acknowledgement of the responsibility of the Republic of Serb Krajina’s leadership (in Belgrade)

Any doubts about who ordered the evacuation of the Serbs and when, i.e., who was responsible for their departure from the occupied parts of the Republic of Croatia on the first day of Storm, were dismissed on 22 August 1995 at a press conference in Belgrade when, for the first time after the fall of the RSK, the members of the RSK government and as-

sembly appeared and spoke in public. On the occasion, Serbian reporters were shown the Decision of the RSK Supreme Defense Council on the planned evacuation of the population from the municipalities of Knin, Benkovac, Obrovac, Drniš and Gračac (**Box 3**) (Rašković, 1998), taken at 4:45 PM on the 4 August 1995, and signed by Milan Martić; subsequently, at 5:20 PM, it was “endorsed by the SVK general staff” (Bošnjak & Dimitrovska, 1995, p. 10; *Odluku o evakuaciji doneo Martić, 1995*, p. 7).

The subsequent comment of the Serbian press was damning. As reported by *Politika*:

“The Krajina getaway has a clear identification code... it is obvious that, by accepting the policy set at Pale [political center of the Serbs in B&H during the 1990s], the entire RSK leadership, from the president of the republic to the government and the top military echelons, failed their history test, and that they are exclusively responsible for the fate of the 200,000 Serbs from western Krajina” (Kovačević, 1995).

The tragedy of Serb refugees

Serbian sources on events after Storm report casualties inflicted on Serbs during the retreat due to so-called “friendly fire” and the suffering of Serbian civilians leading to many suicides. For example, at the meeting of Serbian military commanders on 9 October 1995, it was reported that – during Storm – one of their planes attacked by mistake a Serbian column, killing more than 20 and wounding more than 60 persons (Sastanak srpskih vojnih zapovednika, 1995). The distress of the Serb civilians in Storm mentioned in these examples (especially those regarding victims whose bodies were not buried immediately) may have been attributed to the action of Croatian forces.

The general atmosphere in the columns of Serb refugees is illustrated with this testimony:

“... Considering the climate of fear sustained over the previous four years and the tactics of intimidation applied after the start of the Croatian offensive, few Serbs were willing to remain in Topusko. All the people there panicked, and in some cases, Serbs even shot at one another when quarrelling over vehicles or property as they prepared to flee. In one very unpleasant episode, someone shot an elderly man; he was killed and buried on the spot” (Transcript of testimony of Slobodan Lazarević, n.d.).

Suicides

The Serbian journal *Intervju* reported, along with the story of a Serb who fled Croatia, that there were “many suicides on the road”, which are not mentioned in the literature about the exodus of Serb minority in Croatia. Two cases with anonymous victims were published in Serbia:

“An old man, seventy-three, just got off the road into a maize field and killed himself with a hand grenade ..., The bridge on the Nova Grada river [the name of the river is unknown] was destroyed, and a woman killed herself there. When we got to the bridge, she just grabbed the fence and jumped into the water, poor soul” (Progoni istočno od raja, 1995, p. 5).

Rebel Serb forces killed Serb civilians who did not obey orders of retreat

Serbs refusing to join the fleeing columns faced death threats from their fellow countrymen, as shown below in the statement by a Serb refugee from Croatia:

“Our leadership informed the people that they had to flee. People were made afraid of the Croatian army, and we had to run away. Those of us who did not run had to hide very

carefully in order to avoid detection... we had to run or the Serbs would kill us... They went from home to home and checked whether people were leaving..." (Drače, 1998, as cited in [Hrvatski Helsinški odbor, 2001](#), p. 14).

These were not mere threats, and the foregoing was not the only statement of the kind, as shown by the following experience of Serbian refugees: M.P. from Biskupija near Knin: "Martić's men killed my son in bed because he did not want to join the column"; M.J., Gračac: "one of my neighbours was killed because she refused to join the column"; M.K., Knin: "I was in the basement of the building in which the dentist Milan Babić had an apartment, and then the militia came and forced us into the column" ([Preslike protokola, 1995](#)).

Serb tanks crushing Serb refugees

Some Serbs in the refugee columns were crushed by tanks – an SVK tank ran over a man in a militia car before the arrival of Croatian troops:

"On the right side of a small narrow road (leading to the administration of the diesel fuel depot) I found a militia car, a 'stojadin' (Zastava 101). Tracks showed that it had been run over by a tank. It was quite flattened, and a human leg protruded from it... I went on to the corps command... I saw a 'lada' with two dead men in camouflage RSK army uniforms, 25–30 years old... The car was riddled with bullet holes at chest level. Croatian troops had not yet entered the town, and I don't know how they died. They must have been killed by a burst" ([Hrvatski Helsinški odbor, 2001](#), p. 27).

There is a well-known report about retreating Serb tanks running over a column of Serbian refugee vehicles in the region of Banovina. Milenko Predragović of the Serbian newspaper *Večernje novosti* reported, "according to eyewitnesses, the sad column of 32,000 displaced persons was rolled over by tanks under the command of the Serbian general Mile Novaković retreating from Petrova Gora", and then went on to conclude that "most probably, the column was indeed overrun by Serbian tanks, but captured ones" ([Predragović, 1995](#), p. 4), implying that the Croatian forces, who had captured Serb tanks, were responsible for that, which is not true ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 297). Apart from Serbian sources, a video documented these events ([Anonymous, 2009](#)).

Burning their own houses

Serbian sources show that some (private and public) buildings were torched by the Serbs themselves as they pulled out, i.e., that parts of the buildings were torched before the Croatian forces captured the formerly occupied parts of Croatia. The same persons gave moving testimonies on the suffering of the Serb people in the columns which their leaders led into exile ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 299).

Statements by other Serb refugees also show that buildings and other facilities were set on fire "in order not to leave them to the Croats". Thus, before leaving Donji Lapac (Serb rebel stronghold) the Serbs set fire to the *Kamensko* Hotel, the police station, and "least an additional 3–4 buildings" ([Hrvatski Helsinški odbor, 2001](#), p. 25, notes 23, 34). Similarly, in a statement given to Dr Ivan Kujundžić in Belgrade on 19 July 1996, V.J.K. (born on 8 February 1928), said: "When we joined the column (at Donji Lapac) I saw the house in which I had an apartment burning, it was torched by Serb soldiers before they retreated" ([Preslika protokola, 1996](#)).

Testimony of an elderly refugee

An old refugee described the chaos in the Serb refugee columns leaving Croatia: “In the Topusko pocket we heard that the Muslims were slaughtering everybody at Glina. Chaos ensued, people cried and moaned, armed and drunken soldiers threatened, and two men killed themselves. Then the police from Kordun restored order. They beat people with sticks” (Marković, 1995).

Testimony of Radmila D.

Here is a part of the story of Radmila D. (34): “Five babies died in our column, and many old people; we left them by the road because they told us that ambulances would collect them. Miloš B. (39) reported: A man who had no more fuel in his tractor, probably deranged, took out a gun and killed his wife, their two children and then himself. They tried to stop him, but failed” (Ljudi s traktora, 1995, p. 29).

Testimony of Višnja

Testimony of Višnja (32) shows that Serb civilians in columns leaving for B&H were armed. This could have complicated and prolonged the Croatian Operation and also led to more casualties. Although Croatian police allowed them to cross the border to B&H, Serbs had to hand over their weapons. This, according to the source, caused a certain number of Serbs to commit suicides as they did not want to give their weapons:

“We were in the column from August 5 to 10, 1995. We just stood on the spot or moved slowly. We had food, what we had taken along, but I could hardly eat. I lost my appetite because of everything that had happened to us. We heard that there had been some negotiations and that we should move on. They formed us into ranks, set the column in order (Croatian militia) and ordered everyone to leave their weapons because the border could not be crossed with weapons. They let people take the fuel from the remaining tanks, but no weapons. Some people could not bear being separated from their weapons and committed suicide” (Nikolić-Ristanović, Konstantinović-Vilić, Mrvić-Petrović, Stevanović, & Knežić, 1996, p. 287).

A Serb soldier from Kninsko polje

As reported by the Serbian *Politika*, and later published by *Vreme*, a soldier from Kninsko Polje, who had been given leave, as shown in his pass, just before the attack, to go home and clean up, “packed” all the people in his hamlet (40 of them) into a large trailer truck and drove them to Belgrade. Only the driver’s father, 63, stayed behind; the man took a gun intending to fight as long as he could, but then set his house on fire and fled... (Vreme, 1995, p. 4).

Testimony of a man from Obrovac

M.Č, 32, from Obrovac, was wounded during the retreat near Srb and was transferred for treatment to the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade reported:

“... As we pulled back to Srb and Drvar, we passed through empty villages. There were no dead or wounded civilians or soldiers, just empty houses and livestock. Occasionally, an explosion was heard, the Serbs were blowing up some facilities lest they should fall into the hands of the Croats – hospitals, post offices, depots with weapons they could not pull out ...” (Naša borba, 1995, p. 9).

Testimony of Jagoda, 45, mother of two minor children

“On that day, 4 August, when Krajina fell, I was still working. We were in a barracks, in the shelter. We just heard stories about one person or another having been killed in the barracks. When things calmed down, I went home. We asked our commander whether we would run, pull out. He said we were not going anywhere. I came home... In the meantime, a man came and said that we had to move. Out of fear, panic, we forgot to take some clothing.... Wherever we went, there was just wasteland. Homes were burning by the roadside. My cousin lagged behind. They broke the column up and he drove on corpses for 9 kilometers, from Topusko to Dvor na Uni. The Muslims cut the column in two there and slaughtered, killed everybody. My children were scared to death. They formed columns. Some people overtook others who were moving more slowly. But nobody cared for others, for sick or dying people. A relative of mine, a neighbor, died on the way. For a time, her son drove her like that, dead, and then gave up because children began to panic. He just tipped her over from the cart into the roadside ditch, covered her with branches and carried on. Imagine how the man lives today” (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1996, pp. 127–128).

Testimony of Neda, age 41

“Podgorje is about a mile away from the municipality of Krnjak; nobody told us anything, but I saw the village burning and women running away... People panicked, we didn’t know what to do... Somebody shouted ‘let’s move’, and just as we sat down I saw a house burning. Groups of Muslims appeared, torched houses, and people began to flee again. We had taken our personal weapons along because everybody did. People ran into a maize field, and terrible slaughter ensued” (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1996, pp. 262–263).

Testimony of Desanka, age 55

“In the evening, at about 8 p.m. (on 5 August), my husband went to bed, and I followed him. Then people from the civil defense came and told us to go to the factory, the ‘assembly point’. I called my husband, he said he couldn’t go. I grabbed a bag and filled it with the bare necessities. I also took a hunting gun, but no documents because I thought we would be coming back... We stayed in the factory, about thirty of us, infirm people; everything was already burning, in flames. One of the managers called a driver and gave us a bus to take us away. We drove through the burning village. The driver drove with lights off” (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1996, pp. 282–283).

Croatian attitude towards Serb civilians during and after storm

In order to analyze the attitude of Croatia towards Serb civilians during and after Storm, we have to consider several different sources at our disposal – the Brijuni Transcript, which reveals the aim of Storm, President Tuđman’s call to Serbs to remain in their homes (Hina, 1995, pp. 2–3), Croatian humanitarian actions (Lang et al., 1997a; Lang et al., 1997b), and Croatian crimes (Bijela knjiga Vlade Republike Hrvatske o suradnji s Međunarodnim sudom, 1999).

The Brijuni Transcript

The aim of the Brijuni meeting was to discuss the forthcoming Operation. According to one of the participants, the head of the Intelligence Administration of the Croatian Army Davor Domazet Lošo, the meeting had “exclusively military character, a strategic level” (Domazet Lošo, 2010, p. 13). Tuđman wanted to defeat the Serb forces, protect the civilians, and carry out the Operation with as few casualties as possible. Since Serb civilians have already been migrating from Croatia towards B&H and Serbia, his plan was to open a few escape routes for them to use and avoid unnecessary conflicts: “Having said that, and what I said that

they should be given an exit, it is important for those civilians to go, and then the army will follow, and when the lines of people go, it has a psychological effect” (Brijunski transkript, 1995). Domazet Lošo confirmed that Croatia wanted to avoid human losses, and this was the reason why they left two routes or corridors open for Serbs to leave – one near Srb and the other Dvor on Una river (Brijunski transkript, 1995). The crossing point was located next to Srb, to where, according to the document signed by Milan Martić (Box 3) (Rašković, 1998), the evacuation of Serb civilians was directed. From Srb and Donji Lapac, situated next to the border with B&H, they could cross over the road to Martin Brod and on to Banja Luka, the only remaining roads connecting Knin to Banja Luka in B&H (Barić, 2005, p. 514) as displayed in Figure 6. That Serbs would be heading towards B&H and finally to Serbia, emphasized general Gotovina:

“There is a great migration of the civilians from Knin, who are going to Banja Luka and Belgrade. This means that, if we keep the pressure for a while, there will not be that many civilians, but those who have to stay, who do not have the opportunity to leave” (Brijunski transkript, 1995).

From a professional and operational standpoint, the lower the number of Serb civilians, the lower the number of victims, and potentially, the lower the resistance, which additionally reduces the number of victims (Domazet Lošo, 2010, pp. 30–31).

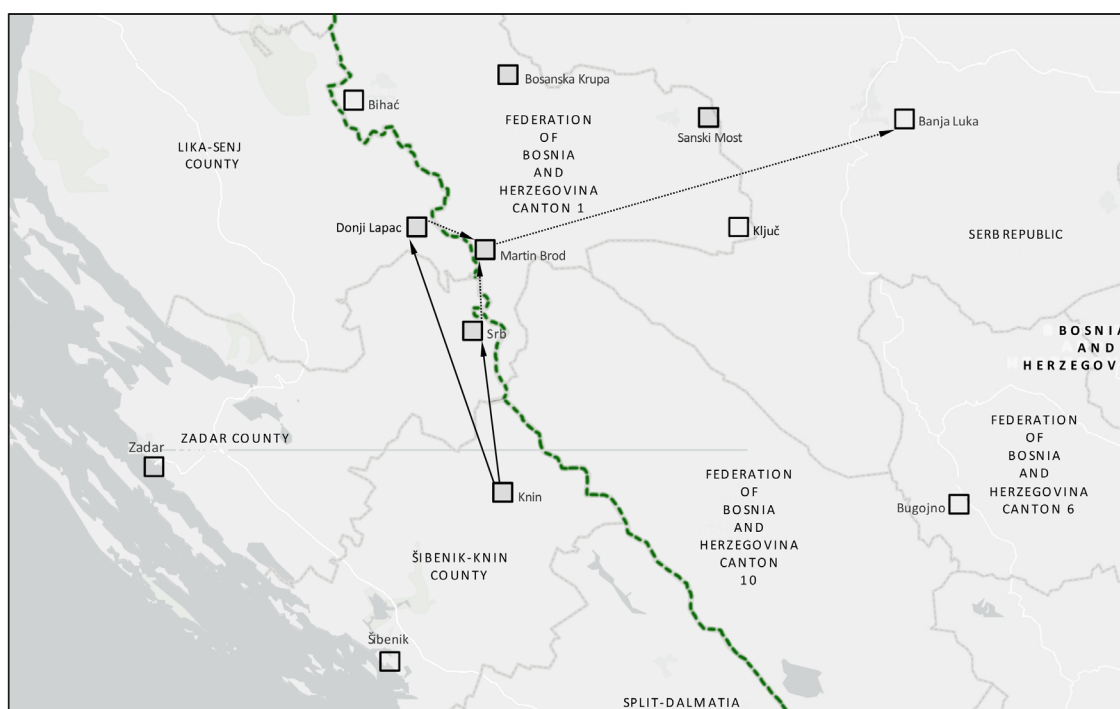


Figure 6. Evacuation routes for Serbs. Full arrows – evacuation routes from Knin towards Srb and Donji Lapac according to Martić’s order from 5 August 1995; dotted arrows – movements of Serbs from Srb and Donji Lapac towards Martin Brod and then towards Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina; green line – state border between Republic of Croatia and Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Appeal of the President of the Republic of Croatia dr. Franjo Tuđman

During the Operation, president Tuđman called on Serbs who had not committed war crimes to remain in their homes, guaranteeing them civil rights in accordance with the Constitution and the Constitutional Law on Minorities. He also called on paramilitary forc-

es to lay down their arms, guaranteeing them amnesty (Hina, 1995, p. 2; Marijan, 2009, pp. 142–143). This proclamation was published in Croatian daily newspaper and was repeated on the radio every hour (Scheffers, 2000, p. 108). However, after the leadership of the rebel Serbs made the decision to evacuate on 4 August 1995, most of the Serbs in the self-proclaimed “Krajina” ignored the appeal and left Croatia. The Appeal of the President of the Republic of Croatia dr. Franjo Tuđman stated the following:

“To Croatian citizens of Serbian nationality from the occupied areas of Knin, Gračac, Lapac, Korenica, Slunj, Glina, Dvor, and Petrinja.

Since all attempts for peaceful reintegration of the occupied Croatian areas made by Croatian authorities and the international community, including yesterday’s negotiations in Geneva, have failed;

Since the originators of the insurgency in Croatia, Martić and others, instead of accepting the call for peaceful reintegration, continue to fight a war against the Croatian state, and together with the insurgency leaders in Bosnia, Karadžić and others, they forge new plans for the joint conquest of the protected area of Bihać, which Croatia cannot allow;

Considering that Croatian and Bosnian Serbs are not only preventing the return of the displaced persons, but also continuing to persecute the non-Serbian population;

Since Serb extremists, from the very beginning of the insurgency and even now, are requesting help from the remnants of Italian fascism, offering the division of the Croatian territory between Italian and Serbian imperialism;

Since the enraged para-military Serbian troops are continuing with their terrorist acts on civilian population from Slavonia to Dalmatia, shelling the Croatian areas and towns Otočac, Gospić, Karlovac, even during the negotiations on peaceful reintegration with the Croatian delegation in Geneva, they are shelling also the Dubrovnik area where there are new victims;

And considering that all attempts of the Croatian state and the international community to peacefully reintegrate occupied parts of the Croatian territories have been rejected and disregarded the Croatian state is forced to carry out military-police actions steps/actions to reintegrate the mentioned areas in its constitutional and legal order.

We are forced to make this decision after four years of futile negotiations to stop any further misleading of the Croatian and international public and to secure the beginning of the return of the displaced persons to their homes.

Therefore, in the name of the democratic leadership of Croatia:

I call on the members of the Serb para-military units, who were mobilized into para-military Serb units voluntarily or by force, to hand over the arms to Croatian authorities, guaranteeing them amnesty according to applicable Croatian laws.

I call on the insurgency initiators to understand the futility of their endeavor and its harmfulness for the Serb community in Croatia if they persist in the insurgency, and to turn themselves in to Croatian authorities and accept amnesty or fair trial for their trespasses.

I call on all Croatian citizens of Serb nationality, who did not actively take part in the insurgency, to remain in their homes, and without fear for their lives and their property, receive Croatian authorities, guaranteeing them all civil rights, and enabling local elections according to the Croatian Constitution with the presence of international observers.

I call on the representatives of Serbia and Montenegro (and their SR Yugoslavia) to stop supporting the extremists from the occupied parts of Croatia through supporting Croatian Serbs in their rejection of peaceful reintegration of the occupied areas as occurred at yesterday’s Geneva negotiations where the Yugoslav *charge d’affaires* also participated. This would be the first step towards a general solution of Croatian-Serbian relations in the entire zone of interest of the two neighboring nations/peoples, that is normalization of the relations on the basis of their mutual recognition.

We are determined to stop the suffering and uncertainty of Croatian displaced persons from the occupied areas, and to guarantee human and ethnic rights to Croatian Serbs in the constitutional and legal order of the democratic Croatia” (Hina, 1995, pp. 2–3).

Croatian actions to save lives

In mid-September 1995, of the 38,594 people who resided in the occupied Croatian areas prior to the war and were freed in the operations Flash and Storm (former Sectors West, North and South) 14,613 persons were present there at liberation, 10,772 displaced persons returned, and 13,209 arrived after they were banished from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia (mainly Vojvodina). Approximately 10,500 mostly elderly persons, mainly of Serbian nationality (about 70%), remained in the former Sectors North and South (freed in Storm), scattered in about 600 settlements, with no security, family protection, often with no power, water or heating (Nazor, 2011, pp. 265–266).

Immediately after the end of Storm, Croatian authorities started providing humanitarian assistance and took several steps to protect the population in the liberated areas. By 18 August 1995, 1203 persons (in 826 households) received financial assistance. This assistance was provided on three occasions, and by December 1995 it was received by 7456 households with a total of 13,185 persons. In December 1995, they were all included in the welfare plan (Nazor, 2011, p. 266). All the inhabitants who had remained in the liberated areas and required medical assistance became entitled to health care, irrespective of whether they were covered by social insurance (Nazor, 2011, p. 266).

To protect the elderly and infirm persons who had remained in their homes in the freed areas, welfare centers were immediately founded in Knin, Drniš, Benkovac, Glina, and Petrinja. Because of the situation on the ground, new welfare centers were established in Hrvatska Kostajnica, Slunj, and Topusko, with outlying facilities in Vojnić, Gvozd (Vrginmost), Dvor, Korenica, Obrovac, Gračac, and Donji Lapac. Serb civilians on their way to Serbia were aided in centers at Glina, Sisak, Lipovljani, Lužani, and Lipovac. The Croats, who were at the same time banished from Serbia (Vojvodina) and Bosnia and Herzegovina in retaliation for Storm, were accommodated in provisional reception centers in Bjelovar, Slatina, Orahovica, and Virovitica (Nazor, 2011, p. 266).

Because of the advanced age of the majority of the population remaining in the area, current living conditions, and the imminent winter, Croatian institutions and ministries, alongside Croatian and international non-governmental organizations (the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, UNHCR, UNICEF and others), prepared a special organized care project during the winter. Called “Let’s save lives”, the project was launched in early October 1995. It was also supported by the Croatian President Franjo Tuđman, who insisted it be given top priority (Lang et al., 1997a; Nazor, 2011, p. 266).

Over two months, the project provided care in 604 settlements over an area of 10,497 square kilometers to 10,594 persons (6,380 women and 4,214 men; 70.4% were Serbs, 27.6% Croats and 2% others). Of these destitute persons, 76% were older than 60, and about 20% were in the 26 to 59 years group (Nazor, 2011, p. 267).

73 settlements in the previously-occupied area had merely a single resident in the winter of 1995, 155 settlements had only two to five inhabitants, 104 settlements had six to 10, 119 had more than 21, while 80 settlements were completely abandoned (Nazor, 2011, p. 267).

More than 80% of the remaining inhabitants had no source of income, and 80% of them had health problems. After November 1995, and with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross, eight mobile welfare teams, two medical teams, and two technical teams of the Croatian Red Cross were engaged continuously in the liberated area. By the end of the year, 379 destitute persons accepted accommodation in nursing homes throughout Croatia (Nazor, 2011, p. 267).

Overall, this project included a “humanitarian census”, as well as financial, material, medical, and social assistance. It also provided an increase in security and the establishment of contacts with families and administrative assistance (Lang et al., 1997b).

To normalize relations between Croatia and Serbia and create conditions for the return of Serbian refugees to Croatia, the Croatian Parliament’s House of Representatives passed the *General Amnesty Act* at its 20 September 1996 session (*Odluka o proglašenju Zakona o općem oprost*, 1996), granting “general amnesty from criminal prosecution and proceedings to perpetrators of criminal acts committed during the aggression, armed rebellion or armed conflict, and with respect to aggression, armed rebellion or armed conflicts in the Republic of Croatia” in the period between 17 August 1990 and 23 August 1996. The amnesty also related to the execution of the previous final verdict passed against perpetrators of the foregoing criminal acts. Such an Amnesty Act for criminal acts committed in the war against the Republic of Croatia had already been passed by the Croatian Parliament on 2 September 1992 and after the military-police operation Flash in May 1995 (Nazor, 2011, p. 267).

By the end of 1997, 118,000 refugees had returned to their homes in the Republic of Croatia, including about 30,000 Serbs. To expedite the return process, the Croatian Government enacted the 1998 Return and Care Program for Refugees and Displaced Persons. Organized return was only possible after the provision of minimum conditions, including the basic infrastructure (Nazor, 2011, pp. 267–268).

Croatian crimes

There is no evidence of Croatian troops destroying or torching any religious (Orthodox) buildings during Storm. Most Croatian soldiers and policemen respected strict orders regarding the protection of civilians and civilian – especially religious (Orthodox) – buildings (Nazor, 2011, p. 265). Unfortunately, certain individuals did not, and there were reported cases of murdered Serb civilians and the destruction of their property. These were condemned by the Croatian leadership, just as it condemned the shelling of Croatian towns by Serbian artillery during Storm, causing new destruction and loss of human life. During and after the Operation, some houses and property belonging to Croatian citizens of Serbian nationality were torched. According to reports on some incidents, some Serbs who did not leave the area were killed. These actions were largely committed out of revenge or for gain (Nazor, 2011, pp. 297–298).

Killed civilians

Although the perpetrators and circumstances of some murders are unknown, sources have confirmed that Croatian forces were not responsible for all the tribulations of the civilians of Serbian nationality in Storm. The 2011 ICTY verdict handed down against the Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, listed only 44 proven murders of civilians during and immediately after Storm, for which Croatian forces could possibly be blamed on grounds of command responsibility, indicating a “low level of collateral victims” due to the action of such forces during the operation (ICTY, 2011a; 2011b; Nazor, 2011, p. 297).

Destroyed homes

The number of houses torched in Storm, as reported in the media, was also considerably overstated by the HHO. The UN observers’ report states that the mentioned figure (22,000 torched houses) refers to the number of observed, rather than torched houses. A detailed analysis of the report shows that the number of torched houses probably only amounted to a tenth of that figure (Nazor, 2011, p. 298).

Croatian trials of Croats for crimes

Of course, all this does not downplay the responsibility of individual Croats who committed crimes during and after Storm (the Croatian generals who were in command during the operation had no direct link to those crimes). By September 1999, Croatian authorities brought 3978 charges against persons participating in criminal actions during and immediately after Storm; Croatian courts declared 1949 verdicts on the basis of the indictments, and 1492 persons of Croatian nationality were handed sentences: out of the 26 persons charged with murder, by September 1999, 12 persons were given sentences of one to 15 years in prison, and three were sentenced to one and a half to 20 years in prison (Bijela knjiga Vlade Republike Hrvatske o suradnji s Međunarodnim sudom, 1999, pp. 35–38).

A criminal investigation was carried out for 24 war crimes involving 156 victims. The records of the State Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Croatia comprise information on altogether 214 killed persons or victims of war crimes committed during or immediately after Storm. According to the data of the State Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Croatia on criminal offences committed during and immediately after Operation Storm, by mid-2011, charges were brought against 4128 known and 2262 unknown persons; 439 (less than 7%), were members of the Croatian army. On the basis of these charges, 3728 persons were apprehended and prosecuted (in 395 cases, 10% of the prosecutions started while the persons involved were still members of the Croatian armed forces), and sentences were handed down against 2380 perpetrators. There were 47 victims on record; 33 perpetrators were prosecuted for the murder of 21 persons, while the perpetrators of 26 murders were not identified (Nazor, 2011, p. 301).

Accusations of the International Tribunal for War Crimes Committed in the Former Yugoslavia

As mentioned earlier, ICTY was established to enact punishment for the war crimes committed in the former SFRY during and after its collapse. Its establishment was supported by the Republic of Croatia, with the hope that the perpetrators of the war crimes in the former Yugoslavia would be brought to justice and tried by a neutral and fair court (Nazor, 2011, p. 269). The main evidence for the accusation against Croatia for ethnic cleansing was the Brijuni transcript (Brijunski transkript, 1995). As mentioned before, upon re-examining the first verdict to Croatian generals Gotovina and Markač, the second trial found that the evidence was insufficient, therefore they found the generals not guilty (ICTY, 2012).

The Brijuni transcript

The Brijuni transcript (Brijunski transkript, 1995), described in pages 10 and 28–29, was a key piece of evidence for the charge that the Croatian leadership had planned a “joint criminal enterprise in order to expel the Serbs from Croatia” used by the prosecution and the Trial Chamber (a body responsible for trial proceedings, issuing judgements, and imposing sentences). The prosecution referred to specific, selectively chosen sentences pronounced at the meeting (ICTY, 2010). However, a comprehensive analysis of the transcript shows that these sentences were misinterpreted in the verdict (ICTY, 2011a; 2011b), and that the transcript of the Brijuni meeting contains no evidence of the intention of the Croatian leadership to cause the physical destruction of the Serb civil population in RSK (Brijunski transkript, 1995). As mentioned earlier, the meeting considered the implementation of the military operation against the Serbian military forces in the occupied parts of the Republic of Croatia, and not against civilians, and the use of lawful means in the re-establishment of Croatian authorities in the area (Brijunski transkript, 1995). It is quite clear that, at the Brijuni meeting, no “official decision” was made to drive the Serbs out of Croatia, or any order given to target civilians by artillery, as suggested in the verdict (ICTY, 2011a; 2011b).

Analogously, the provision of a route (“corridor”) for the pullout of the Serb forces and civilians during Storm is no proof of an intention to destroy the Serbs in RSK, as suggested in the verdict (ICTY, 2011a; 2011b) but rather the opposite. The Croatian leadership intended to avoid a situation in which the Serbian troops and civilians would be fully surrounded, because they would have then been forced to resort to a determined defense and a fight “to the end”, which would have increased the casualty rate among soldiers and civilians many times over (Brijunski transkript, 1995).

The issue of “indiscriminate Croatian shelling”

Among the ICTY accusations against the Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, was the one for the non-selective shelling of Knin and “ethnic cleansing”, i.e., the elimination of the Serbian population from Croatia (ICTY, 2010; 2011a; 2011b). After the appeal by the defense, both Gotovina and Markač were found not guilty in 2012. No evidence was found on their responsibility for the indiscriminate shelling of Knin and “ethnic cleansing” against RSK Serbs (ICTY, 2012). The conclusion in the foregoing verdict

regarding indiscriminate shelling of the listed towns is also refuted by the fact that only 5% of the shells fired on military targets in the towns involved fell outside the imaginary (and arbitrarily determined) circle within a 200 m radius from the military target (out of these, no more than 13 shells hit places which cannot be subsumed under jeopardy of a civilian target). It is not known that any Serbian civilian, when testifying about the reason for their departure from Krajina, indicated “unlawful” shelling (Nazor, 2011, p. 274). RSK records also show no evidence of indiscriminate shelling of Knin. The records list the number of shells fired on Knin in the first five hours of Storm – “200 to 300 projectiles”, mainly on military targets. Apart from that, the Croatian armed forces started Storm even though the available stocks of artillery munitions were below the level used by modern armies when embarking on such decisive, strategic (“final”) offensive operations (Nazor, 2011, p. 275). It must be emphasized that not a single civilian was killed during Storm by the attacks of Croatian artillery on military targets in Knin. Even the prosecution, during the proceedings, admitted that the Trial Chamber did not find a single case of any civilian being wounded or killed by shelling, and the evidence submitted by the prosecution during the hearing only left the possibility of one civilian in Knin having been killed by shelling (Nazor, 2011, p. 274).

Discussion

The analysis showed that the departure of the Krajina Serbs in August 1995 was organized prior to Operation Storm by the political leaders of the RSK and the Republic of Serbia for only political reasons – and even then the willingness of the Serb population to leave was not universal. The organization included prior evacuation plans and a significant technical assistance with the provision of busses, guides, food, etc. The Serbian sources clearly demonstrate that the insurgent Serb leadership in Croatia was responsible for the departure of the Serbs from the occupied parts of Croatia, as it had been planned since 1993, and that the reasons for the departure was not any actual brutality of Croatian advancing forces either by indiscriminate shelling or by attacks on soldiers and civilians in the field (Box 3, Rašković, 1998; Barić, 2004, p. 452; Barić, 2005, pp. 551–553; Marijan, 2009, pp. 327–358, 361, 368–369; Kovačević, 1995; Bošnjak & Dimitrovska, 1995, p. 10). The Brijuni Transcript (Brijunski transkript, 1995) shows that the evacuation of Serb civilians to B&H and Serbia began even before Storm. Moreover, one of the routes or corridors left for the pullout of Serbs was next to Srb – to where Serb civilians were evacuated based on Martić’s decision (Box 3) (Rašković, 1998). From there, they proceeded to B&H and Serbia (see Figure 6). Apart from that, two Serb documents before Storm – one from July 1993 (Table 1, Document 5; Marijan, 2009, p. 338) and other from 11 May 1995 (Table 1, Document 11; Marijan, 2009, pp. 357–358) – reveal evacuation plans and even possible spontaneous emigration to the territory of RS and to Serbia. The document from July 1993 (Table 1, Document 5; Marijan, 2009, p. 338) was a letter from the Administration “Western Slavonia” Ministry of Defense of RSK to the Command of the SVK’s 18 Corps on movement directions with regard to the evacuation of the population in case of war. It shows that the plan was to evacuate Serb civilians to RS. According to another document, from 11 May 1995, Croatian military successes around the town of Bihać in B&H, besieged by the

Serbian forces, resulted in significant Serbian military losses and prompted RSK Serb civilians from Benkovac and its surroundings to „prepare the evacuation of their families“ to Yugoslavia. The document shows that „in the last ten days, three buses with women and children left for Belgrade, all because of fear to remain cut off from the rest of RSK (...)“ (Table 1, Document 11; Marijan, 2009, pp. 357–358). In contrast to other documents, this one reveals that this evacuation was not planned by the RSK authorities, but was carried out by the Serb civilians, encouraged by their „relatives and other Serbs in France“ (Table 1, Document 11; Marijan, 2009, pp. 357–358). This also shows that civilians did not want to stay in Croatia in case of further Croatian military successes, but were prepared to leave to Serb-held territories. The aforementioned RSK foreign minister Milivoj Vojnović confirmed to the UNPROFOR on 5 August 1995 that the ultimate destination of the departed Serbs was Serbia (i.e. Yugoslavia) by saying that the RSK leadership had decided to evacuate civilians to Yugoslavia, seeking the assistance from the UNPROFOR (Kovačević, 1995).

Although it is understandable that there was fear among Serb civilians to a certain extent because of their expectation of Croatian revenge as a consequence of the four-year Serbian aggression against Croatia (Barić, 2005, p. 541), the sources reveal that those Serbs who left did so because they chose not to live in any kind of independent Croatia.

In line with the instructions of the Greater Serbia strategists from Belgrade (Barić, 2005, pp. 42–52, 75–76, 86, 90, 99, 111, 535–542; Kovačević, 1995), the leaders of the Croatian Serbs focused on the creation of a unified Serbian state, first inciting the armed insurgency of a part of the Serbian population in Croatia, followed by participation in the Serbian aggression on Croatia, and eventually led those Serbs into exile when their attempt to create the Greater Serbia was failing. According to the testimony of the former officer of the Counterintelligence service (KOS) of the Yugoslav People’s Army Slobodan Lazarević at the trial of Milošević in The Hague, Milošević’s government was also behind the departure of Serb civilians from Croatia in August 1995. He stated that, during the international negotiations that aimed to peacefully resolve the conflict between Croatia and Serbia, the RSK leadership always followed instructions from Belgrade to obstruct the negotiations, thus refusing every peace proposal, including the aforementioned Z-4 Plan. Lazarević emphasized that Belgrade wanted Serbs to leave RSK so they could settle them in Kosovo, RS, and eastern Slavonia (which was at the time also part of the RSK). This is why, according to him, Belgrade fostered panic among the Serb population in the RSK to leave Croatia (Transcript of testimony of Slobodan Lazarević, n.d.). This collusion between the RSK and Serbia leads to the conclusion that the Serbian government in Belgrade was also responsible for the departure of Serbs from Croatia in August 1995.

This was why the Croatian leadership could liberate the occupied territory, restore the territorial integrity, and bring peace only by carrying out a military-police operation. Although there were some crimes against Serb civilians committed by individual Croats, the 2012 ICTY verdict and other sources show that Croatian leadership was not a part of a “joint criminal enterprise” (ICTY, 2012). In other words, Croatia did not commit ethnic cleansing in the summer of 1995.

The isolated incidents that happened after Storm were due to a certain ineffectiveness of Croatian authorities and the security organizations in the liberated area, and cannot be related to the command of the Croatian forces during the operation. It is precisely because

of the proper conduct of the Croatian commander, that the number of Serbian victims during Storm was so low.

The documents of insurgent Serb authorities reveal that the departure was a part of a political strategy for the formation of a Greater Serbia

The political strategy of the Serb rebellion in Croatia in 1990–1995 was a part of the wider strategy for the creation of a Greater Serbia, with western borders at Virovitica – Karlovac – Karlobag (Figure 7) (Nazor, 2011, pp. 19, 188–189). The essence of this strategy related to Croatia (the Greater Serbia concept also concerns Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina (see Cohen, 1996; Pilar, 1997)) is that Serbs and Serbia cannot, under any circumstances, accept any kind of independent Croatia. Historically, whenever Croatia headed towards some kind of independence, the Serb minority in Croatia rebelled; this applies to the formation of Banovina Hrvatska (Governance of Croatia within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1939) (Skupina autora, 2007, p. 101; Regan, 2010, pp. 87, 98–99), the creation of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 (Dizdar, 2007, p. 602), the 1971 Croatian Spring (Irvine, 2011, pp. 33–34), and the democratic and independent Croatia in 1990 (Barić, 2005; Nazor, 2011; Marijan & Barić, 2020).

The documents of the Serb insurgents in the 1990s clearly show that they had made their choice very early on: in May 1991, in the part of the territory that they would later proclaim as their own state, 99.80% of the Serbs (of the 79.48% “voters at the referendum”) decided that the so-called Krajina would be part of Serbia (Barić, 2005, p. 101). On that basis, the leadership of the rebel Serbs in Croatia decided in 1991 that they would not live in the same country with Croats. Public statements of the RSK officials from 1991 to 1995 clearly reveal that the insurgent Serbs would rather die or move out of Croatia than live in any Croatian state (Barić, 2005, pp. 535–542).

In line with this decision was the June 1993 decision on unification with the Serbs of B&H in a single state, supported by almost 100% of the Serbs in the occupied part of the Republic of Croatia (Barić, 2005, pp. 199–200); the June 1995 draft constitution of such a state called the “United Serbian Republic” (Mišljenje Kabineta predsjednika Republike Srpske Krajine o prednacrtu paketa zakona o pripremu akata Ujedinjene Republike Srpske/Opinion of the Republic of Serb Krajina President’s Cabinet on the Preliminary Draft of the Set of Laws for the Preparation of the Unified Republic Serb Act, cf. Marijan, 2009, pp. 228–229); and many other records, especially the refusal to accept the Z-4 Plan in early 1995, with which the international community actually offered the Serbs in Croatia a state within a state (Barić, 2005, pp. 474–480). Ultimately, it is obvious that the decision of the rebel Serb leadership to organize their departure in 1995 after the military defeat in Storm was a direct consequence of the 1991 decision that the “Serbs would rather die or move out of Croatia than live in any Croatian State” (Izvod iz izlaganja predsjednika Vlade SAO Krajine Milana Babića na sastanku u Parizu s Koordinatorom konferencije o Jugoslaviji u Haagu Henrijem Veinansom, 1991).



Figure 7. Western borders of planned Greater Serbia (inspired by Garašanin's writings, 1844) at Virovitica, Karlovac, and Karlobag deep in Croatia. Yellow – Slovenia, red – Croatia, grey – Serbia. Source: Wikipedia. License CC BY-SA 3.0 available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Greater_Serbia_\(in_Yugoslavia\)_hr.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Greater_Serbia_(in_Yugoslavia)_hr.svg). This map can be used under License CC BY-SA 3.0. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>).

We should also consider some statements made by orthodox priests, who had a great influence on Serbian politics and on ordinary people. On 1 November 1991, in a letter sent to the president of the International Peace Conference on Former Yugoslavia lord Peter Carrington, Patriarch Pavle (of the Serbian Orthodox Church) wrote that Serbs “cannot remain in any form of independent Croatia, but have to find themselves under the same state roof with today’s Serbia and all the Serbian regions (Krajina)” (Tomanić, 2001, p. 98–99).

Operation Storm could not have been postponed

In early August 1995, the Croatian military operation could no longer be postponed because of the Serbian attacks on the strategically extremely important town of Bihać in neighboring B&H and the rapidly deteriorating condition of its defenses (Nazor, 2011, p. 168). The fall of Bihać would have meant RSK and RS being able to finally join as a unified Serb-occupied territory, ripe for annexation to Serbia proper. On 3 August 1995, the insurgent Serbs could see only two options available to them: either the SVK would have won and RSK (the occupied part of the Republic of Croatia) would have become part of a unified, new Serbian state (Greater Serbia), or the area would have been abandoned by

all those refusing to recognize the Croatian government – which, according to Serbian sources, meant the majority of the Serbian population in the area. This is evidenced by the message of the RSK president Milan Martić to SVK officers in February 1995: “War between the Republic of Croatia and the RSK must end with the victory of one and the defeat of the other side. Until that happens, war will not and cannot end” ([Izvodi iz izlaganja predsjednika Republike gospodina Milana Martića, 1995](#)).

The SVK officers supported Martić’s position, as confirmed by the interview by the SVK commander, lieutenant general Mile Mrkšić, on St. Vitus’ Day, 28 June 1995, in which he expressed to all SVK members the wish that they would “celebrate the next St. Vitus’s Day united – in a single Serbian state ([Vojska Krajine, 1995](#), p. 24).

On Croatian crimes

Presenting data on war victims is an extremely delicate matter, primarily because of the emotions raised by the suffering of innocent people. Every innocent person killed deserves respect and people must remember that their murder cannot be justified. At the same time, skepticism is always warranted when considering data on the number of innocent people killed, to prevent manipulations by those with an agenda in certain narratives of history, such as those concerning the victims of World War II in the former Yugoslavia. Historians have a particular responsibility to closely scrutinize the nature of killings that occur in a conflict. Historical sources have unequivocally shown that the 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia was caused by Greater Serbian politics and that the many victims of that war predominantly resulted from an attempt to implement the political goal of “all Serbs living in one [ethnically clean, as examples have shown] state” ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 295). Even the incorrect figure of “600 murdered civilians” (which ignores the fact that not all the mentioned persons were civilians and that the Croatian forces were responsible for only some of the deaths) cannot nullify the foregoing fact, especially if we consider the following factors. First, we have to consider the size of the territory on which the liberation Operation Storm was carried out, which was more than 10,000 sq. km, and the number of people in it (more than 200,000 troops on both sides and civilians). Second, the Operation was carried out after four years of agony for several hundred thousand displaced Croats. For example, in December 1992, there were 663,493 displaced persons and refugees in Croatia ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 297). On the eve of Storm, there were 384,664, more than half of whom were people banished from the occupied parts of the Republic of Croatia ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 298). Since 1991, more than 40,000 Croats were forced to leave Vojvodina (an autonomous province within Serbia, where there was no war) alone ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 298). Third, the continuous threat of artillery – actually terrorist attacks by Serbian units from the occupied parts of Croatia on towns and villages in the free parts of the Republic (“real threat strategy”) ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 298), with which the rebel Serbs in Croatia intended to force the Croats to desist from the occupation of the occupied territory and from returning to their homes. Fourth, the comparison with similar final military operations worldwide and in the former Yugoslavia, especially the Serbian force operations in Croatia and B&H between 1991 and 1995, in which numerous crimes were committed over the non-Serbian population ([Nazor, 2011](#), p. 298).

These alleged crimes were largely committed out of revenge or for gain, but any figures according to which the Croatian forces were responsible for the death of about 600 civilians and the torching of more than 22,000 Serb homes, persistently reported by some media for ten years, are exaggerated many times over (Nazor, 2011, p. 298). In addition to being inaccurate, such reports also fail to tell the other side of the story, that more than 6,000 Croats (troops and civilians) were killed already in 1991 during the Serbian aggression (crimes in which many Serbs from the occupied parts of the Republic of Croatia were involved), that the number of Croats killed doubled to 12,000 by the start of Storm, and that more than 200,000 housing units of Croats were destroyed, largely already in 1991, in the attacks of Serbian forces on Croatia before the start of Storm (Nazor, 2011, p. 294).

Serbs left Sarajevo and the Danube Region for the same reasons

The conclusion that the Serbs left Croatia during Storm due to not wanting to live in an independent Croatia is also supported by a Serbian source (Serbian refugees and displaced persons, 2000), according to which 77,317 persons of Serbs, out of a total population in the area, 128,316 (i.e., more than 60% of the Serbs in the area), left the Croatian Danube region during peaceful reintegration, that is, after the cessation of hostilities (Nazor, 2011, p. 282).

For the same reason – that is, their refusal to accept any government other than a Serb one – Serbs also departed *en masse* from the districts of Sarajevo which became part of the Federation of B&H and not of the Serbian entity in B&H (Ganić, 2012).

The effects of Serbian propaganda

One should not generalize and say that all Serbs were extremists and insurgents. However, it is possible that the RSK leadership's media blockade and the strong anti-Croatian propaganda might have been the cause of the almost one-hundred-percent support of the Serbs in the RSK for their extremist leadership and their (almost total) departure from the occupied parts (Sectors North and South) during Storm. This might have been potentiated by their fear of the displaced Croats' revenge and of being terrorized by their fellow countrymen. This does not refute the fact that the past aggressive policies of the Serbian leadership are responsible for the departure of the Serbs on the first day of Storm and the overall tragedy of the Serbs in the Republic of Croatia during the 1990s (Nazor, 2011, p. 277). It is quite possible that the readiness of the Serb minority in Croatia to leave has been enhanced by the anti-Croat propaganda by Serbian-controlled media. This propaganda is largely based on inflated accusations of the horrible crimes that the World War II pro-Nazi regime of the Independent State of Croatia inflicted on the Serb minority in Croatia (for example, see Subotić, 2018), and the glorification of the idea that Serbs are great soldiers and Croats cowards who only slaughter civilians. This propaganda had two consequences for the Serb minority population: first, they believed that their military would win the war and retain the occupied territories, and second, when the imminent military defeat became obvious, they left the country for fear of being slaughtered. This view should be contrasted with the fact that all Serb refugees who wanted to return to Croatia (except the proven war criminals) were welcomed, their houses restored, damages compensated, and all jobs renewed. They now have significant minority rights, including three guaranteed

places in the Croatian Parliament and representation in state and local administrations (Boban, 2011). For decades, their political party members are in coalition with Croatian majority parties everywhere on the political spectrum (Nikić Čakar, 2020, p. 531).

Croatian, international – and most convincingly – Serbian sources demonstrate that the Serb insurgent leadership was alone responsible for the departure of the RSK Serbs in August 1995. The evacuation was planned and organized in advance, as early as 1993, so when the Croatian forces liberated Knin on 5 August 1995, the town had already been deserted. Moving towards Srb, according to the evacuation plans, Serb civilians and soldiers ended up in RS and in Serbia.

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