

CROSS-BORDER MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN A WAR (CASE OF YUGOSLAV ARMY AND ITS SATELLITE ARMIES 1991 – 1995)

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Abstract: Tragic wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and especially the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, arouse even today many debates, whether they were civil wars or open aggression. From the perspective of official Belgrade, the narrative of that war was simply talk of an ethnic war. However, Zagreb and Sarajevo think differently. This opinion is based on the fact that the military headquarters, as well as the political headquarters of the army, were located in Belgrade, and that the ethnic Serb armies were part of a joint system and coordinated chain with the Yugoslav Army.

Keywords: Serbia, Milosevic, JNA, VRS, SVK.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Yugoslavia was accompanied by tragic wars, in which, in addition to great human losses, they will also be known for the creation of “ethnically clean” territories. In order to realize the territorial plans, it was necessary to engage a strong military machine. The regime in Belgrade will soon put the Yugoslav Army at the service of the ethnic policies launched by the official Belgrade. Although the new states like Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina will be accepted as independent states in the UN, their independence will be denied in Belgrade. Being aware of the international connotation and consequences, the military presence with command in Belgrade will try to be camouflaged, through the creation of new ethnic Serb armies in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Precisely this aspect represents today the essence of the debate whether the wars in the former Yugoslavia were civil wars or open aggression against two (meanwhile) independent states. In this regard, it is not only the narrow military aspect that should be considered, but also other aspects dealing from the issues of the cadre of commanding officers to the financial system.

Research methodology

The study is subject to the application of analysis, comparative approach, synthesis, and abstraction as the main methodological heuristic toolkit. The conclusions are based on analysis.

Results

Together with the Serbian leadership elite around Milosevic, the hardline military group of Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) generals organized the implementation regime's project to create a new mono-ethnic state. The project included a detailed geographical outline. It was planned that the state with the center in Belgrade, to include large parts of Croatia and the greatest part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of these territories were inhabited by ethnic Serbs as a majority, but indeed many territories were populated with other ethnic majorities.

The outline was a modern version of the old plan for the creation of the "Greater Serbia", initially written by theorist Ilija Garasanin in the mid-nineteenth century. The plan called on agents to be sent to the desired territory, in order to infiltrate and set up parallel military and police forces in preparation for the annexation of territories. These were precisely the methods used by Milosevic and the public and secret infrastructure he led. Armaments and military equipment were placed in strategic locations in Croatia and Bosnia, and local people were trained as police and paramilitary forces, as a prelude to ethnic cleansing and appropriation of territory.

After the suppression of Autonomy in Kosovo and the confirmation of the loyalty from the Montenegro, the next arena was Croatia. The conflict in Slovenia should be excluded from these dimensions because there wasn't any ethnic interest for Serbia there. Despite its aggressive politics, from the Belgrade's point of view the conflict in Croatia was caused by Croatia's secession from the Yugoslav Federation.

The Serbs were well integrated also in the institutional structure of Socialist Republic of Croatia and were largely represented among the police and army. This produced a totally disproportionate number of officers, soldiers, and policemen of ethnic Serb population, while also served as a source of anger among the ethnic Croats which represented a big majority in the republic.

With the help of Yugoslav army, during 1991 Serb controlled armed groups will ethnically purge a territory from Knin to Petrinja, and also in western Slavonia around Pakrac, territories near Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Also, the eastern part of the country around Vukovar. Serb paramilitaries and the JNA had already secured a triangle of land in oil-

rich northeastern Croatia. From Baranja it stretched west, to the outskirts of Osijek, and south, to Borovo Selo, a suburb of Vukovar. The towns of Vukovar and its regional center Vinkovci now stood in the way of further expansion into eastern Slavonia. They were the target of the large impressive deployment of joint forces of JNA and other para-military forces.

The famous idea proclaimed by Milosevic regime “wherever Serbs lived was Serbia”, including many territories where ethnic Serbs were in a minority, was unprecedented nationalist arrogance with tragic end. The idea, as played out in Croatia and later in Bosnia-Herzegovina, entailed the expulsion or outright liquidation of the Croatian or Bosniak-Muslim populations. The Serbian side employed the argument that if the Croatian people laid claim to self-determination of Croatia, they had to concede the same right to local Serbs regarding Serbs proclaimed territories.

This argument was dubious to Serb political elite, because the Yugoslav constitution itself recognized the statehood of the Republic of Croatia, on the basis of which it could claim sovereignty; there was no same constitutional basis for a claim to “statehood” or “sovereignty” for Serbs in Croatia. Official Zagreb could define its right within fixed borders of previous Socialist Republic of Croatia, as would later be conceded by the international community.

The Serb occupied territory of Croatia, was used during 1992 – 1995 for launching additional attacks and military offensives toward the Bihac pocket, a “safe zone” that remained besieged but mostly out of Serb control during all the time of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Enclave center Bihac and the towns Cazin and Buzim has never fallen to Serb Army which spent huge capacity to hold the enclave encircled.

Most of these territories were in fact populated largely by ethnic Croats like the area around Slunj, but were put under Serb control because of the need for territorial continuity, mostly for the logistical military needs in the war, but in long term for putting the Serb occupied territories in one homogenous territory.

The territories now mono-ethnic (1991 – 1995) were not used for the war purposes toward Croatian Army until 1995, when Croat counter-attack erased the Serb para-state inside Croatia. But areas instead were well used also by Bosnian Serb forces and for armed paramilitias from Serbia (Arkan units) to attack the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina Fifth Corp, which endured three-year siege and also attack by the “separatist” forces of the so-called “Peoples Defense” of Fikret Abdic, based in the town of Velika Kladusa and also northernmost parts of the Cazin Municipality.

Earlier than involvement around Bihac Pocket, Arkan Units from Serbia strengthened by their warfare experience gained in eastern Croatia, had moved into Bijeljina, the most important city in the northeastern Bosnia on April 1991. Bijeljina together with the key town of Zvornik were attack in the very beginning of the war because of the vital strategic importance to the Serb territorial continuity. Later this continuity was fully achieved after the ethnic cleansing of large areas where Serbs previously has been only an ethnic minority or the highest level a significant proportion of the population.

All relevant sources reported in 1992 that the Bosnian city of Zvornik had fallen to a combined force of Yugoslav Army troops and Serb paramilitaries from Serbia. Eventually Milosevic admitted that Arkan was indeed in Bosnia, but only as a “bodyguard” for one of the Bosnian Serb leaders. According to subsequent reviews, the units under Arkan’s command operated in 28 municipalities in the territory of the former Yugoslavia¹.

Together, they represented a hinge of territory that linked the chunks of territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina that the Serb nationalists considered theirs – in the northwest, Bosanska Krajina, around Banja Luka; and in the east, the west bank of the Drina river, south of Zvornik and down the eastern and southern flanks of Sarajevo to join the part of Herzegovina. Eastern Bosnia was most important to Belgrade because it bordered on Serbia and for this reason it was subjected to a constant large military presence, including the heavy assaults from the territory of Serbia.

As it was a clear case among Serbs in Croatia, also the Bosnian Serbs were by no means autonomous, but a client army of Milosevic and the JNA, whose overall strategy was controlled by Belgrade. In early April 1992, when fighting broke out in Bosnia, the JNA had 80,000 troops deployed in the country. In early May, the JNA was ordered to withdraw to Yugoslavia. But Milosevic in a clever diplomatic maneuver had already decided that all Bosnian-born JNA troops could remain in place. Nothing in the military frontline was changed regarding the Serb control during the switch from JNA to Serb Army.

The Federal Secretary of Defense, General Kadijevic, admits in his book of political memoirs that the JNA simply changed its identity to other names. He admits that the military leadership of the JNA provided about 90% of the combat forces of the JNA, from which the army of the FRY (Serbia and Montenegro), the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) and the Army of the Republika Srpska Krajina (SVK) were formed [1].

Only in occupied territories in Croatia, The JNA left to SVK some 400 armored vehicles and 350 large-caliber artillery pieces².

Kolstø and Paukovic remind us about a paradox situation when the Serbian parliament in Belgrade, however, never accepted the accession occupied territories of Croatia because officially Belgrade preferred the referendum question of Serb in Krajina to focus on the preservation of Yugoslavia. Indeed, the areas were controlled by the JNA under Belgrade's control [2].

The Serbian political establishment justified this involvement in its own way. According to Belgrade, the JNA was defending Yugoslavia and those who wanted to remain in Yugoslavia from those who wanted to secede.

A formal transformation from JNA to SVK will only take place in late 1992. SVK was officially created only after Belgrade formed VJ and replaced JNA. The creation of SVK correspondents with the time when a ceasefire had been in force. It was created by merging the units of the TO of the Serbian Krajina (supplied by JNA and Serbian Police), and the official remnant troops of the JNA on October 1992. However, the officers of SVK remained part of joint officer corps and were in the payroll list in Belgrade³. Serbian President Milošević appointed the commanders of SVK⁴. Through the budget of FRY government was financed, more than 90 percent of the RSK 1993 budget⁵.

Similar to VRS, the officers who served in the SVK had privileges in terms of retirement time experience. In Belgrade this time was calculated automatically with double length. Testimony during the trial of Milosevic indicated that the FRY continued to pay salaries and pensions to retired SVK and VRS officers until 2002⁶. This clearly shows that the officers were treated the same as the VJ officers and official Belgrade made no distinction in this regard.

But Kolstø and Paukovic also remind us of another fact about the nature of military assistance to people that Belgrade offered to the self-proclaimed state of Krajina, through war-seasoned Serbian volunteer paramilitaries. Different groups of volunteers some of them part of para-military formations of Serbian political parties like SRS of, but who were actually paid, did not come into illegality, but in fact presented with a lot of pride. It is widely known that the so-called "Serb Volunteer Guard" supplied and equipped from the Serbian Police moved to and were located in various locales places especially in Eastern Slavonia, while its camp was located in Erdut, lying on the border with Serbia.

These "volunteer" forces were in fact not only serving as an aid to the JNA, but also using the JNA infrastructure themselves even when

acting ostensibly independently. When the “volunteer” commander Arkan ultimately asked the Osijek mayor to hand over the city, he sent the ultimatum from the JNA headquarters⁷. In his own statements, Arkan stressed that his troops were cooperating excellently with the JNA and were conducting joint operations under the command of the JNA. Stipe Mesic, in his memoirs recalls the news from the occupied Baranja, where Šešelj, Arkan and even the Serbian opposition MP Paroški were reviewing “volunteers” accompanied by a senior JNA officer [3].

On the other parts of Croatia, the situation had worsened by almost the same method. The Croatian government said that officers of the army corps stationed in Knin, commanded at the time by Ratko Mladić, are bringing weapons and arming ethnic Serbs. According to swiss publicist, and connoisseurs of events Victor Meier, which had in mind the composition of the armed structure which was occupying parts of Croatia, this could no longer be considered a local Serb uprising, but was clearly a war against Croatia aimed at changing borders⁸. Even in cases where the Croatian law enforcement forces established control, as in the town of Dvor na Uni, it was the JNA units that recaptured the territories, advancing from the direction of Bosnia-Herzegovina or Serbia. In such an escalation, no one in Belgrade cried if the involvement had any formal institutional support.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina itself, Bosnian Serb officers stationed elsewhere in Yugoslavia were relocated to Bosnia. Thus 25,000 JNA troops left, but 55,000 Bosnian Serb soldiers remained. All were transferred to the Bosnian Serb army. The Serb attackers who besieged Sarajevo, for example, were no longer officially soldiers of the JNA, but of the Romanija Corps of the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS).

Practically in the ground, the situation didn't change either military or politically, as the proclaimed JNA withdrawal was basically a bluff. Simply the insignia and the uniforms were changed. Various formations from Serbia were present again. Serb Army in the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina was all time counting on help from Serbia. Various human resources interchanges were even official.

Similar to the SVK case, the VRS was financially completely dependent on and supported by official Belgrade. Bosnian Serb leaders do not hide this, even the fact of funding was mentioned in the Bosnian Serb Assembly. These debates in the Assembly will later become evidence during the trial of former Serbian President Milosevic⁹.

Belgrade supplied weapons and uniforms to Bosnian Serb Army that occupied the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the concentration camps were set up alike the camps of World War II. The

wages of military officers were directly payed from Belgrade itself although this was not made a public issue. The extent of the financial contribution from Belgrade to SVK and VRS was not public until the trial of Milosevic. JNA Gen. Aleksandar Vasiljevic testified in the trial that the funding comes from the FRY¹⁰.

A banking system was installed to enable transfer of funds. National Banks were established in 1992 in the Republika Srpska and in the Republic of Serbia Krajina, under the auspices of the National Bank of Yugoslavia. The banks of the two self-proclaimed Serbian states were practically satellite banks to which they were subordinated to the central bank in Belgrade. In the same way that it enabled financing for banks, Belgrade also integrated the Public Accountancy Service, a financial transfer system¹¹. Serbian intelligence provided Milosevic with detailed information for the situation on the ground and practically Serbia ruled directly the occupied territories when we consider the fact that local Serb politicians from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were clearly subordinated to Belgrade political infrastructure, sometimes they openly went to discuss with Milosevic in Belgrade.

The supply of weapons from Serbia across the border further in the Serb controlled territories in Bosnia and Herzegovina had never stopped during the war despite the sanctions imposed by UN. The only difference occurred with the presence of international monitors. During the time when they were present at the border, as a Serbian journalist Anastesijevic will declare, the supply was done in a more discreet fashion¹². The man who was running Serbia was in constant contact with the ethnic Serb military and political leadership that was overseeing the ethnic cleansing of Croats and Bosniaks (Muslims). Despite all, Serbia with a very clear tactical play managed to present the ethnic Serb structures in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as some self-styled entities with their political and military centers. This was a very intentional move with the aim to free Serbia as much as possible from international diplomatic pressure.

Official Belgrade had during all the time of wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the power to decide who to nominally rule the occupied territories. This fact was very well known to the international community involved in diplomacy around. When we mention the final political goal, neither Serb leaders in Croatia nor in Bosnia-Herzegovina didn't proclaim a desire for independent statehood as they were openly demanding for the unification of occupied territories with Serbia.

The sort of intention in this direction was only at the late phase of the war in the sense of creating joint political entity in occupied territories in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but this case was more as a political and military answer toward newly military alliance between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1994, the Joint Headquarters of the “Republika Srpska” and the “Republic of Srpska Krajina” was established. The two armies, among others, already had taken actions in each other's sectors. The idea of the Joint Headquarters seemed to be more a formal step in the unification of the two armies which during all the time from the establishment de-facto functioned as one. On May 1995, The Assembly of the Republic of Srpska Krajina really decided for the unification of what they named “Western Serb Federation” or “Western Serbia”. However, the territory occupied by Serb para-state in Croatia was soon overrun by Croatian Army in the operation “Storm”, so the plans in this direction no longer had any practical meaning or real value in the politico-military domain. This decision was more like a self-styled political adventure and sought to sensitize nationalist circles in Serbia for more solidarity, in a period before the military retreat of Serb armed structures from some of the occupied territories both in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Conclusions/Discussion

The military chain of command as well as other aspects that have to do with the naming of the command, aspects of supply up to financial support and the salary list, are indicators that the ethnic Serb armies in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were satellite armies of the Yugoslav Army.

There is no doubt that the Yugoslav Army was openly involved in military activities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. During 1991 and the first part of 1992, this was not even tried to be hidden as a fact. The UN acceptance of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as independent states, within internationally accepted borders, will force the regime in Belgrade to officially proclaim the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army from the territory of the two states. But in fact, this was a tactful and extremely useful political maneuver. On the one hand, it was claimed that there is no presence of Yugoslav troops in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, while on the other hand, the troops on the ground had changed their insignia to SVK and VRS, keeping their weapons and remaining in their same military positions.

The later facts, after the end of the war, and especially the facts presented during the trial of the Serbian leader Milosevic, confirm that

SVK and VRS were completely dependent on the framework of the Yugoslav Army system, which was also detailed in military aspects, where among others, the payment system was also included, which had its headquarters in Belgrade, and was applied through the banking system.

Notes

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⁵ **HRW**. Weighing the Evidence: Lessons from the Slobodan Milosevic Trial. 18, 10(D). Human Rights Watch, 2006.

⁶ Testimony of Witness B-127, Trial Transcript, July 22, 2003, p. 24631.

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¹⁰ **HRW**. Weighing the Evidence: Lessons from the Slobodan Milosevic Trial. 18, 10(D), Testimony of Aleksandar Vasiljevic, Trial Transcript, February 6, 2003, Human Rights Watch. 2006. p. 15839.

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