

***From Conflict to Commemoration:
Serb-Croat Relations and the Anniversaries of Operation Storm***

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Abstract: New research in the field of memory studies has shed considerable light on how the World War Two past was distorted and manipulated in order to justify the resurgence of violence after 1991 in the former Yugoslavia, including the instrumentalization of commemorations, memorials, collective memories of victims, and other aspects of the memory culture in this region. Commemorations of the wars in the 1990s threaten to create permanently conflicting narratives of the past and prevent the post-war reconciliation which will ensure long-term stability in the region. The media, narrow political interests, and the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) all play a role in how commemorations of Yugoslavia's breakup, and by extension social memory of the recent past, are perceived. This article examines how the post-communist commemorative culture in Croatia affects Serb-Croat relations, with a focus on the annual celebrations of the Croatian Army's most successful military action during the Homeland War, Operation Storm (*Oluja*).

Key words: Operation Storm, Serb-Croat relations, commemorations, culture of memory

Despite centuries of co-existence, political and cultural cooperation, and shared interests of a European future, positive Serb-Croat relations in the twentieth century have been overshadowed by the periods of mutual violence and ethnic hatred that have unfortunately characterized the former Yugoslavia's short but turbulent history. World War Two and the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s were the two conflicts which can without a doubt be considered the nadir of Serb-Croat relations, with particularly tragic consequences for those groups who were national minorities, i.e., Serbs living in Croatia, and to a lesser extent, Croats living in Serbia. Although Western observers have often noted that the ex-Yugoslavia seemed to have been plagued with an overabundance of history and collective memories, a more appropriate interpretation is that there has

been an overabundance of manipulation and abuse of history and collective memories. New research in the field of memory studies has shed considerable light on how the World War Two past was distorted and manipulated in order to justify the resurgence of violence after 1991, including the instrumentalization of commemorations, memorials, collective memories of victims, and other aspects of the memory culture in this region. This article examines how the post-communist commemorative culture in Croatia affects Serb-Croat relations, with a focus on the annual celebrations of the Croatian Army's most successful military action during the Homeland War, Operation Storm (*Oluja*).

Operation Storm

On the morning of 4 August 1995, Croatian forces commanded by Ante Gotovina launched a massive attack against the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK – *Republika Srpska Krajina*) from multiple directions. The demoralized and outnumbered Serb forces rapidly crumbled, and by 7 August the Croatian government declared that the fighting was over. Realizing that neither the international community (sickened by Serbian atrocities in Bosnia) nor Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević (ready to wash his hands of the Croatian Serbs he helped incite in the first place) were going to intervene on behalf of the RSK, the Krajina leadership ordered the evacuation of the entire civilian population; approximately 150,000 to 200,000 Serbs fled Croatia in long refugee columns of cars and tractors loaded with personal belongings.¹ Even though President Franjo Tuđman issued an appeal for Serbs to stay, guaranteeing their safety and full rights after the return of Croatian sovereignty, it was evident that few people in the Croatian leadership were sorry to see the mass exodus of a population considered by nationalists to

¹ Nikica Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Golden-Marketing, 2005), pp. 533 – 567.

be an impediment to Croatian statehood.² On 6 August, an elated Tuđman arrived in liberated Knin and told the gathered television reporters that Operation Storm had dashed the idea that “Serbs could ever again play the role they had in Croatian history, which was stabbing a knife in the back of the Croatian people.”³

Whereas Operation Storm had been a legitimate military action liberating internationally recognized Croatian territory, and tacitly approved by a Clinton administration wanting to resolve the conflict in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, the aftermath of the offensive would, in the prescient words of former EU negotiator for the Balkans Carl Bildt, “cast a dark shadow over Croatia for a long time.”⁴ Historian Nikica Barić has documented how the Croatian leadership ordered its units to behave according to the Geneva Convention during Operation Storm, and noted that Gotovina was angered at the widespread looting and destruction already taking place on 6 August during a recorded meeting in Knin.⁵ Yet in the weeks and months after Operation Storm, militia units, civilians, and even individuals in Croatian Army uniforms were observed systematically pillaging and burning Serb properties throughout the Krajina, while dozens of mostly elderly civilians who had decided to stay or had been unable to flee were found murdered. The Croatian Helsinki Committee documented the killing of at least 410 civilians in Sector South (the UN-designated zone encompassing the Krajina) and the destruction of approximately 20,000 houses and buildings in the hundred days

² In a statement that was aired on all Croatian media, Tuđman called on “Croatian citizens of Serbian nationality, who did not actively participate in the rebellion, to stay in their homes without fear for their lives or property, and await the arrival of Croatian authorities.” *Vjesnik*, 5 August 1995, p. 2.

³ Transcript of film *Oluja nad krajinom* (2001), available at: www.b92.net/specijal/oluj/index.php?start=0&nav_id=174029, accessed 5 June 2008.

⁴ *New York Times*, 6 August 1995, p. 1.

⁵ Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, p. 558.

after Operation Storm, rendering the formerly Serb municipalities virtually uninhabitable.⁶

Thus, from the very moment the guns fell silent across the former Krajina, diametrically opposed narratives of Operation Storm were created. For Croatia, this event symbolized the end of four years of frustration and occupation, a keystone victory that would enable the proper functioning of a territorially integrated state. For the Serb population that fled Croatia during August 1995, Operation Storm and its aftermath meant another period of victimization in the national collective memory, added to tragedies such as World War Two, World War One, and seemingly endless warfare stretching back to the Battle of Kosovo Polje (1389). The dominant national narratives are further complicated by internal historiographical and political debates, as well as the ongoing trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) that invariably influence the interpretation of the recent past.

Commemoration and Memory

“Politics is expressed through symbolism,” asserts anthropologist David I. Kertzer, suggesting that even people in modern societies are influenced more by symbolic forms than rational calculations.⁷ In *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, he cites the prevalence of political rituals, replete with emotional, historical, and national symbols, in every political system regardless of whether it is a democracy with free market capitalism or an

⁶ *Vojna operacija “Oluja” i poslje – izvještaj* (Zagreb: Hrvatski helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, 2001), p. 129. During Gotovina’s trial, the former president of the Croatian Helsinki Committee, Žarko Puhovski, admitted that the figures of the report were not precise due to the difficult conditions in the former war zone and the lack of cooperation from the Croatian government. *Novi list*, 17 February 2009, p. 7; and *Novi list*, 18 February 2009, p. 7.

⁷ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 2

authoritarian regime with a state-run economy. Symbols and rituals play a particularly important role in states which have recently achieved independence and nationhood, in order to legitimate the new governing institutions, territorial integrity and borders, and a ruling elite who lay claim to the founding myths of the country. The countries of Eastern Europe experienced a radical transition from communism to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, involving the transformation of people's values, ideologies, and political culture, as well as repertoire of symbols. Ethnologist Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin wrote extensively about how the new Tuđman government systematically created new symbols, holidays, and traditions in addition to implementing the revised historical narratives through the transformation of public spaces.⁸ Whereas the leaders of communist Yugoslavia relied on increasingly hollow commemorations of World War Two to try and maintain legitimacy, Croatian governments since the 1990s have constructed a commemorative culture around the key events of the Homeland War and the country's struggle for independence, which is incorporated into the broader historical template of the Croatian peoples' alleged thousand year-old dream for their own state.

Commemorations and other political rituals, in addition to the calendar of holidays and important memorial days, all contribute to the construction of social memory. Serbian sociologist Todor Kuljić argues that

the calendar, as a collection of national holidays, represents a selective national collective past...holidays, as institutionalized dates of memory, draw attention to not only what we need to remember, but when and how to remember. New holidays symbolized a radical break with the past.⁹

Furthermore, it should be noted, the content of a calendar identifies not only what is remembered, but what is forgotten.

⁸ Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin, *Ulice moga grada* (Belgrade: XX. vek, 2000).

⁹ Todor Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2006), pp. 173–174.

War commemorations serve two other important functions. Firstly, they invariably construct a political landscape, or, in other words, accompanied by memorials they delineate an ideological topography that reflects the ideals and values of the victorious side.¹⁰ After 1945, each community in the former Yugoslavia sought to construct a monument dedicated to the Partisan struggle or to memorialize victims of fascist terror. This was the case in Croatia, which featured over six thousand Partisan monuments and other forms of commemorative objects, and an unknown amount of new memorials to the Homeland War. Secondly, war commemorations help to define national identities, since, as J.M. Winter observed in memorializations of World War One, they are “acts of citizenship – collective affirmations of identity of a nation under threat.”¹¹

The added significance of the Homeland War commemorations, as noted above, is that they are associated with the foundation of the state; specifically sacrifice, struggle, and ultimately victory in the battle for independence. For Croatia, these commemorative events pay respect to the (usually nationalized, i.e., Croatian) victims and celebrate the military successes. In a post-war, multiethnic country, however, this kind of commemorative culture can be problematic, since, as Paul Ricoeur has aptly observed,

there exists no historical community that has not been born out of a relation that can, without hesitation, best be likened to war. What we celebrate under the title of founding events are, essentially, acts of violence legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right. What was glory for some was humiliation for others. To celebration on one side corresponds execration on the other. In this way, symbolic wounds calling for healing are stored in the archives of the collective memory.¹²

¹⁰ James M. Mayo, “War Memorials as Political Memory,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 78, no. 1 (January 1998), pp. 62–75.

¹¹ J.M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 80.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 79.

Croatia thus needs to find an appropriate balance between celebrating its justified victory and successfully reintegrating (and being sensitive to the trauma suffered by) a segment of its population that was collectively accused of being the enemy and saddled with war guilt. Every year Serb-Croat relations, and the potential for reconciliation, were tested by the commemorations of the recent, traumatic past.

Commemorating the Homeland War

The two most important commemorations of the Homeland War are the siege (and fall) of Vukovar (18 November), and the Day of Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving and Veterans Day (*Dan pobjede i domovinske zahvalnosti i Dan branitelja*) centered in Knin, celebrated annually on 5 August.¹³ The public ceremonies of these two defining moments of the war in Croatia clearly reveal two prominent images, victim and victor, in the dominant narrative of the recent past. Vukovar remains a symbol of Croatian suffering and Serbian aggression, the vicious destruction of cultural monuments, ethnic cleansing, and the merciless attack against civilians by the Yugoslav People's Army which culminated in the massacre of over two hundred Croatian prisoners at the Ovčara farm in 1991. The central event of the Vukovar commemoration is a symbolic "column of memory" that follows the 5.5 km route from the Vukovar hospital (where wounded Croatian defenders and civilians were captured and taken to Ovčara) to the Memorial Cemetery of the Homeland War Victims. A wreath-laying ceremony at the monument at

¹³ The holiday was first celebrated on the one year anniversary of Operation Storm, in 1996, and the Veterans Day part was added in May 2008.

Ovčara, located on a former pig farm on the outskirts of town, is also a prominent component of every commemoration held in Vukovar.

At the 2007 commemoration, a former commander of the town's defense declared that "the most important thing is that Vukovar becomes a place for the collective memory of the Croatian people." That memory is exclusively one of victimization, and exclusively ethnic Croatian victimization at the hands of "Serbian aggressors," which is reinforced by the commemorations. The fact that Serb civilians were killed by Croatian extremists during the conflict, or that many Serbs remained loyal to Croatia and contributed to the defense of Vukovar, is overlooked in the simplified "Serb vs. Croat" version of history perpetuated through public rituals. There is no doubt that Slobodan Milošević's Serbia, backed by the Yugoslav People's Army and Croatian Serb paramilitaries, committed numerous crimes in the war against Croatia, but placing collective guilt at the feet of all Serbs obstructs reconciliation and distorts the historical record.

The annual commemoration of Operation Storm in Knin presents a radically different side of the Homeland War narrative. Successfully liberating occupied Croatian territory and ultimately "winning" the war, that is, securing independence and international recognition, are emphasized triumphantly every 5 August. Memory of war victims, while present, plays far less of a role than during the Vukovar commemorations. Under Tuđman, the town of Knin was not always at the center of the ceremonies; the now practically forgotten Altar of the Homeland above Zagreb and Mirogoj Cemetery were locations where the Croatian political leaders would make appearances on this day. In 1997, Tuđman even chose 5 August as the day for his inauguration in front of St. Mark's

cathedral in Zagreb, seeking to cement his personal legacy with that of the victorious Homeland War. But Knin remained, to use French historian Pierre Nora's term, a powerful *lieux de mémoire*, or site of memory. Sites of memory are "various symbolic 'places' or cultural expressions of collective memory such as geographical regions, monuments, commemorative ceremonies, well-known personalities, political movements, professional institutions or social habits...[that] are the focal points of our national heritage."¹⁴ Knin had been the seat of medieval Croatian kings, as well as the heart of the Serb rebellion in the 1990s, so it was the ideal location to serve as central stage for this key public ritual of the Homeland War.

Stormy Commemorations in Knin

During the period of Ivica Račan's coalition government, from 2000 until 2003, fear of a right-wing coup meant the prime minister and most ministers avoided Knin to prevent the commemoration from being used by those angry at the new pro-West policies. Namely, the right-wing was furious that Račan had confirmed the ICTY's jurisdiction over Operation Storm, which led to indictments being issued against Croatian generals involved in that celebrated victory.¹⁵ For the first time, the commemorations featured political speeches which acknowledged that war crimes had taken place during or immediately after Operation Storm, a sharp departure from the exclusively celebratory tone of the Tuđman period. In 2004, the new HDZ government set the precedent that all of the top Croatian politicians (president, prime minister, and speaker of the parliament)

¹⁴ Peter Carrier, "Places, Politics, and Archiving of Contemporary Memory in Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire*," in Susannah Radstone, ed. *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 39.

¹⁵ The joint indictment for Operation Storm includes Generals Ante Gotovina, Mladan Markač, and Ivan Čermak.

should attend the commemoration in Knin, emphasizing the importance of this date and place in the national consciousness. Even though the HDZ under Ivo Sanader had taken important steps at reaching out to Croatian Serbs, including coalitions with the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS – *Samostalna demokratska sprska stranka*), the victorious tone of the Victory Day commemorations invariably antagonized the country's ethnic Serbs.

The tenth anniversary of Operation Storm in 2005 overtly revealed that several contested versions of the recent past existed, which not only affected internal Croatian politics, but influenced Croatia's relations with its neighbors. Right-wing political parties upset with Croatian cooperation with the ICTY organized counter-commemorations, and a new supplement for history high school textbooks dealing with the 1990s provoked considerable public debate before ultimately being scrapped by the Ministry of Education because of the controversy.¹⁶

On 5 August 2005, the tenth anniversary of Operation Storm, the Croatian political leadership – speaker of the parliament Vladimir Šeks, President Mesić, and Prime Minister Sanader – gathered in Knin to make clear their unified position that the offensive was completely legitimate and honorable. Šeks, a long-time HDZ deputy, called Operation Storm “a most brilliant victory, unsullied, in accordance with international and all other laws.”¹⁷ Sanader likewise praised it as “a glorious military operation,” asserting that the events that took place after the offensive needed to be “separated from Operation Storm itself.”¹⁸ Mesić, rejecting Serbian president Boris

¹⁶ The controversial history textbook and polemics that accompanied it were published in *Jedna povijest, više historija* (Zagreb: Documenta, 2007).

¹⁷ *Novi list* (Rijeka), 6 August 2005, online version at www.novolist.hr.

¹⁸ *Danas* (Belgrade), 1-2 October 2005, online version at www.danas.co.yu.

Tadić's comparison of Operation Storm with the Srebrenica massacre, argued the "entire action, it must be stated, was carried out according to the laws of war as defined by international conventions," even though "crimes did take place on the margins of the offensive."¹⁹ Thus, Croatia's leaders were acknowledging war crimes had been committed, but under no circumstances could they be associated with the crowning military achievement or Croatia's war for independence.

The history of Operation Storm constructed in Belgrade offered a much different conclusion regarding the events of the summer of 1995. President Tadić, attending an event organized by Krajina Serb refugees in a Belgrade church on the tenth year anniversary of their flight, told the crowd that Operation Storm "was an organized crime, the planned murder of people and the deprivation the fundamental human right – the right to life."²⁰ "It represented the largest incident of ethnic cleansing after World War Two," asserted Serbia's prime minister, Vojislav Koštunica. The association of Krajina refugees, who receive support from the Serbian government, issued a statement rehashing the worn out theory of the genocidal nature of Croats whereby they declared Operation Storm to be "the climax of the planned crime of genocide, a major criminal endeavor, which had started long before it was realized in the NDH [Croatian fascist state during World War Two] and the Republic of Croatia."²¹ Serbia was not only calling Operation Storm a planned crime, but explicitly making a connection between the modern Croatian state and its fascist past, a tactic practiced *ad nauseum* by Milošević's propaganda apparatus in the 1980s and 1990s. This counter-commemoration in Belgrade provided

¹⁹ *Hina* (Zagreb), 5 August 2005, online version at www.hina.hr.

²⁰ *Glas javnosti* (Belgrade), 5 August 2005, online version at www.glas-javnosti.co.yu.

²¹ World News Connection, originally published by *Tanjug* (Belgrade), 4 August 2005, www.tanjug.co.yu. The Ustashe established the Independent State of Croatia (NDH – *Nezavisna država Hrvatska*) after Axis troops occupied Yugoslavia in April 1941.

yet another simplified narrative, stripped of the historical context of the war in Croatia in the 1990s and exculpating the Serbian political leadership for the tragedy of Croatia's Serbs in the Krajina. Efforts at reconciliation between Serbia and Croatia invariably suffer each year as the politicized interpretations of the recent past are combined with raw emotions and traumatic memory of the war in Croatia at these ritualized public recollections.

Behind the genuine emotional support for the suffering of the refugees and victims of the war, there lay a more calculated political goal: the reestablishment of the RSK. In early 2005, the exiled "government" of the former Krajina para-state issued a political manifesto to that effect, and similar calls for its restoration could be heard at the events associated with the tenth year anniversary of Operation Storm.²² Savo Štrbac, director of the Veritas organization and collaborator with former ICTY deputy prosecutor Graham Blewitt, articulated the motives of the exiled Krajina Serbs in a number of interviews. "The Homeland and defensive war is going to be proven to be criminal and aggressive," he told the Bosnian Serb press, "and with the Gotovina indictment The Hague for the first time recognized the Krajina as a state with its own army, which will be the foundation for restoring a new RSK."²³ In spite of all the saber rattling by the remnants of the Krajina Serb leadership, no international body, including the tribunal at The Hague, has given the RSK any degree of political legitimacy.

In 2006, a month before the Operation Storm anniversary, Sanader and Koštunica met at the Croatian-Serbian border to celebrate the opening of a new border crossing, a symbol of improved relations. Both leaders expressed their belief in rapid entry into the

²² *Globus*, 4 March 2005, pp. 15–17; and *Index.hr*, 28 February 2005, online version at izbori.net/clanak.aspx?id=252059.

²³ Quoted in *Novi list*, 7 December 2002, online version at www.novilist.hr.

EU, and Sanader stated that “the past cannot be forgotten, but we can learn from it and build a new future.”²⁴ The positive statements and optimistic promises of increased cooperation were shattered with the war of words that erupted as each side commemorated its narrative of the events of 1995. Koštunica and Tadić again attended memorial services for victims in Belgrade, issuing statements that “Operation Storm was a huge and unpunished crime,” and that genocide was committed against the Serbian people.²⁵ In Croatia, the Day of Victory was reported as the “Majestic Victory of the Liberating Army.”²⁶ Moreover, the Croatian leaders used the opportunity of the commemoration to lash out at Belgrade, arguing that Operation Storm was not a criminal act, but rather Greater Serbian aggression was in fact the crime that was brought to an end by the Croatian Army.²⁷ One thing that marked a change from earlier years was that Dragan Jerković, the SDSS deputy mayor of Knin, became the first Croatian Serb politician to participate in the commemoration, even though he was criticized by his own party and some other Serbian political organizations.²⁸

On 5 August 2007, Croatia celebrated the twelfth anniversary of Operation Storm (*Oluja*), the military action that liberated over 10,000 square km (18.4 percent of Croatia) in four days. While President Stjepan Mesić, Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, and Speaker of the Parliament Vladimir Šeks (along with numerous other Croatian politicians) gathered in the fortress above Knin to watch the ceremonial raising of the Croatian flag, several thousand veterans marched through the streets below. As in previous years, politicians

²⁴ *Jutarnji list*, 21 July 2006, online version at www.jutarnji.hr/ispis_clanka.jl?artid=36692.

²⁵ *Jutarnji list*, 4 August 2006, online version at www.jutarnji.hr; B92 News, 4 August 2006, online at www.b92.net.

²⁶ *Vjesnik*, 4 August 2006, p. 2.

²⁷ *Jutarnji list*, 6 August 2006, online version at www.jutarnji.hr/ispis_clanka.jl.?artid=38295.

²⁸ *Identitet*, August 2006, p. 20

used the spotlight to declare Operation Storm the “most brilliant page in Croatian history” and once again denounce Belgrade as the aggressor of the 1990s.

Amidst the celebrations, the question of war crimes and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) invariably came up. Although not as aggressively as in 2005, on the tenth anniversary of Operation Storm, opposition parties criticized the government for arresting “Croatian heroes” and sending them to The Hague. Shirts supporting General Ante Gotovina (who had been a fugitive for over four years before being arrested in 2005) were being sold on the streets, and pro-Gotovina billboards, posters, and graffiti decorated Knin’s buildings. Meanwhile, in Serbia, President Boris Tadić and Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica once again issued declarations calling Operation Storm the greatest act of ethnic cleansing since World War Two and a planned criminal operation.

As the commemoration in Knin concluded with a Mass, Sanader told the gathered reporters that “no one is going to write Croatian history but us,” adding that he would “not allow any institutions to falsify history,” clearly alluding to the ICTY. This statement, which Sanader repeated on a number of other occasions, highlights how the annual commemorations of the Homeland War are interwoven with Croatia’s foreign policy, domestic politics, relations with the ICTY, and an understanding of the recent past. What does it mean when the head of a government argues for exclusive rights on writing history? And to what degree can politics dictate which historians are considered legitimate? Croatia’s current political situation, namely efforts at Euro-Atlantic integration and obligations to the ICTY, have helped to reawaken insecurities over the “control of the past,” especially when considering the country’s experience with

communist and fascist regimes in the twentieth century, as well as previous centuries of foreign rule.

Although the polemics between Serbia and Croatia continued in the aftermath of the 2008 commemoration, the confrontational tone, especially in the media, was noticeably less than in the previous years. President Tadić and new Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković did not issue sharp denunciations of Croatia prior to 5 August, and the Serbian media carried articles on Operation Storm only on the actual day of the commemoration. Moreover, the Croatian politicians at the commemoration in Knin had no reason to engage in arguments that threatened bilateral relations with neighboring Serbia. Most of the controversy at the commemoration regarded internal Croatian political debates: President Mesić's quarrel with the Catholic Church, his condemnation of all war crimes and uncompromising criticism of the NDH regime, and right-wing counter-commemoration organized by Marko Perković Thompson in Čavoglave.²⁹ The leading organization of Croatia's Serbs, the Serbian National Council, once again did not participate in the official commemorations, but they did organize for the first time a memorial service for all victims, regardless of nationality, and issued a statement for future commemorations that unified, and not did not divide, Croatia's post-war society.³⁰

The ICTY as Historian?

The commemoration in Knin has also highlighted the role of the ICTY in writing Croatian history and defining Serb-Croat relations. The war crimes tribunal in The Hague has had a profound impact on Croatian politics, international relations, and the

²⁹ *Novi list*, 6 August 2009, pp. 2–3; *Nacional*, 21 July 2009, pp. 72–76; and *Glas Istre*, 28 July 2009, p. 7.

³⁰ Srpsko narodno vijeće, "Izjava sjećanja Srpskog narodnog vijeća," 4 August 2009, www.snv.hr/vijesti/izjava-sjecanja-srpskog-narodnog-vijeca.

perception of the past, as well as how the Homeland War is commemorated. Sanader's repeated declarations that only Croatia can write its own history have been directed at alleged attempts of the ICTY "rewriting" the narrative of the war in the 1990s. Tribunal officials have openly stated that their work will impact the historical record of Yugoslavia's destruction, even though most legal scholars and social scientists have been critical of attempts by criminal courts taking on the mantle of historian (including the selective use of evidence and inability of the courtroom schedule to accommodate the broad social context necessary for historical work). Furthermore, it has become evident that the ICTY is overly politicized in its relations with the Yugoslav successor states. Despite the shortcomings of a "tribunal as historian," there is little doubt about the impact of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials on the historical narrative of the Holocaust and World War Two. It is therefore quite likely that the ICTY will have a similar effect on how the history of the Homeland War is written, regardless of the debates over the legitimacy of that tribunal.

In the case of Operation Storm the annual commemorations for this military action vividly reflected Croatia's relations with the tribunal. Under Tuđman, commemorating 5 August was always a purely triumphant affair, with no mention of any possible wrongdoings on the Croatian side. During the 1990s, the belief that no war crimes could be committed by the side defending itself against aggression prevailed, and the Croatian government hesitantly cooperated with the ICTY only when pressured by the international community. Generals who would subsequently find themselves on ICTY indictments, such as Mirko Norac and Gotovina, were prominent guests in Knin and other sites of memory for Homeland War commemorations.

However, alongside the legitimate operations of the Croatian Army there were clear cases of war crimes, such as during the aftermath of Operation Storm. Had the Croatian government taken prompt action to publicly condemn crimes against Serb civilians and the destruction of their property, the ICTY would have been less likely to intervene. But since Tuđman showed little incentive in punishing those responsible for crimes in Gospić, the Medak Pocket, and Operation Storm, to name a few examples, it was possible to see that he either tolerated collective retribution against Croatia's Serbs or, as alleged in several indictments, actively planned that collective retribution. After 2000, a number of Croatian generals were indicted and disappeared from the commemorations.

Not only were some of the main protagonists of the heroic Homeland War narrative missing from public ceremonies, but Croatian politicians had to address, and actually incorporate, the issue of cooperation with the ICTY at commemorations of Operation Storm. The rhetoric at the anniversary Operation Storm has changed, with Croatian politicians acknowledging that war crimes did occur and that there were Serbian victims as well, something that would have been unimaginable under Tuđman. The Croatian leadership has insisted, however, that these were individual crimes which must be separated from Operation Storm, and that under no circumstances can it be considered planned ethnic cleansing. This is of utmost importance for Croatian national interests, as the trial of Gotovina, Čermak, and Markač – who are accused of being part of a “joint criminal enterprise” allegedly involving the entire political and military leadership – has proven to be an intriguing debate over the recent past.

Conclusion

Both the ICTY and politicized commemorations will continue to shape the public perceptions and understanding of the Homeland War (and the wars in Yugoslavia more broadly), even as a new generation of Croatian and foreign historians have begun to publish serious studies about Operation Storm and other events in the 1990s. While the Hague tribunal can be discredited as a “historian,” the archives collected by the ICTY and transcripts from the trials have become invaluable to researchers working on this time period. The ICTY has also become interwoven into the fabric of war commemorations in Croatia and across the region. In 2007, the commemoration in Vukovar was overshadowed by the light sentences given to Yugoslav People’s Army commanders accused of the Ovčara massacre. In Srebrenica, the presence of former chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte sparked controversies, while in Serbia Ratko Mladić has become a prominent symbol in demonstrations against the West and resistance to the ICTY. However, Srebrenica, Vukovar, and even Knin receive attention only one day of the year, while the other 364 days they are forgotten and left to face serious socio-economic problems outside of either the national or international spotlight.

In Croatia, commemorations will continue to memorialize certain aspects of the Homeland War, and different versions of the past will exist for different ethnic and political groups. Serbia and Croatia will construct their own narratives of what happened in the 1990s, even though cooperation between Serbian and Croatian historians is now more common. Leaders in the region will also need to abandon the manipulation of the past for narrow political interests and the perpetuation of nationalist myths if liberal democratic societies are to flourish. However, it will be a long time before history and

commemorations will contribute to reconciliation, and not exclusive narratives of victimization, as the memories and wounds of the war are still not healed.