

# AN EXAMINATION OF THE CAUSES AND SPECIFIC FAILINGS OF THE YUGOSLAV NATIONAL ARMY WHICH RESULTED IN ITS DISSOLUTION

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**D**uring the end of the 1980's and early 1990's the world was watching the collapse of the Soviet Empire, one of the bloodiest chapters from this period of time was the dissolution of Yugoslavia. A country which occupied the land from the East Adriatic Coast inland to border Hungary and Austria in the North, Romania and Bulgaria to the East, and Greece and Albania to the south. One of the few truly multi-ethnic states in Europe, it encompassed Croatians, Slovenes, Serbians, Bosnians, Bosniaks, Albanians, Macedonians, and many mixes of the aforementioned. While the most geographically homogenous and largest groups were more or less self governing, there was significant ethnic overlay on the ground and mixed loyalties to various polities and differing goals for the future of Yugoslavia. When Croatia, a country with a long history, although not truly independent for centuries, attempted to secede from the increasingly Serbian dominated Yugoslavia, and take with it one of the most economically productive Yugoslav Republics and a sizable Serbian population, the likelihood of conflict was incredibly high.

My research focuses on the first phase of this war, from mid 1991 to early 1992, I was puzzled as to why the Serbians chose to abandon the Yugoslav National Army as their fighting force after this period of fighting. I look at two possible causes for this, a poor combat performance by the Yugoslav National Army and doubts about its loyalty to and control by the Serbian government. In short this study attempts to answer why a well trained, well supplied, institutionalized military force was abandoned in favor of localized militaries and paramilitaries in the pursuit of Serbian war goals during the War in Croatia from the middle of 1991 to early 1992.

## **Literature Review**

Doing research on my topic proved more difficult than I had anticipated. I had expected to find a large amount of research done on the opposing militaries. What I found instead was a surprising lack of real research done.

This is in part due to the unique nature of the event of study. Being militaries there is a certain amount of secrecy I expected to encounter, but it seems I underestimated just how much would remain ambiguous, this is probably due to the still on going war crimes trials being pursued, the relatively recent nature of the conflict, and the confusion inherent in the break-up of a country, people and military.

Because of these difficulties I was forced to rely more on journalistic reports and self-published resources from former actors within the conflict. Sources such as (Engelberg 1991, 1991; Powers 1991; Williams 1991; Reuters 1991; Associated Press 1991; Sudetic 1991, 1992) provided me with contemporary sources, many of which provided the only easily accessible source of numbers and reports on smaller engagements and general progress of the war.

Aside from the journalistic sources I was also forced to rely on a number of self-published sources from Croatian Veterans sites (Branko Hebrang; Portal Udruge Hrvatski Dragovoljac 1991; Association of Veterans of Special Police Units ALFA Zagreb). In addition to being self-published these were also in Croatian, thus making authorship and authenticity difficult to verify. However these sources often constituted the only in depth descriptions of specific engagements, providing numbers and step by step breakdowns of the course of events which were not found in totality or in citable sources elsewhere. What I did find with these is that the reports given did match up well with other sources, so while these are not as reliable as a Journalistic or Scholarly source, they do provide ostensibly first hand accounts of what happened.

Actual scholarly research papers I found were in large part un-related to my research question, dealing primarily with the more humanitarian aspects of the war, such as the effects on children, women, infrastructure, and psychology. When I did find peer-reviewed research on the subject it was often extremely narrow in scope, and I was unable to find research on all aspects of my question, forcing me to draw inferences (Bromley 2007; Kardov 2007; Marijan 2001). In addition to ordinary scholarly research, I also came across a sizable amount of published material from military sources, which while highly informative, turned out not to be as data heavy as I would have liked, focusing instead on analysis of events (Sebetovsky 2002; Sanz 1991)

The single most useful type of source I came to rely upon were databases and reports, such as a report to the United Nations which provided the single most information on the most topics (Bassiouni et al. 1994). In

addition to that report I also came upon document databases, CIA reports, government websites, and a Library of Congress database from 1990 (Rupic; The Central Intelligence Agency Office of Russian and European Analysis 2000; Ministry of Defence: Slovenian Armed Forces; Country Studies by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress).

### **Research Design**

Given my initial Research Question as to why a well-trained, well supplied, institutionalized military force was abandoned in favor of localized militaries and paramilitaries in the pursuit of Serbian war goals during the War in Croatia following the Sarajevo Agreement, I constructed two hypotheses as to why this may have happened. The first of these was that the Yugoslav National Army had proven itself to be unreliable and incapable of achieving the war goals of the Serbian Government. The Second Hypothesis was that the Yugoslav National Army's combat performance was not what led to their disuse but rather an inability to assure the government of its loyalty due to ethnic composition.

In order to ascertain which of these was true or to what degree both were I planned my research to look at a few specific factors. The first hypothesis was to be tested by looking at the performance of the various forces in action during the conflict. I intended to measure this performance by looking at three variables for each force: the ease with which they achieved their objectives during operations, the casualties suffered during these operations, and the loss or gain of equipment during these operations.

The second hypothesis was much easier to test, I needed only look at two variables and those for only one of the forces involved, the Yugoslav National Army, and the two variables, being data on the ethnic composition of the Yugoslav National Army, and closeness with which the Serbian government operated with this force.

### **Presentation of Research and Events**

Before examining what happened it is useful to know which actors these events happened to. Since this paper is concerned primarily with the military actions from 1991 to 1992 within Croatia, the actors upon whom I focused my research were the Militaries of Croatia and Serbia. While Croatian forces were fairly centralized, with the bulk of operations being conducted by the official Croatian military, the forces of the Serbs were significantly more fractured. Serb forces were composed of, in decreasing order of size

and effectiveness, the Yugoslav National Army, the Serb Army of Krajina, and the Serbian paramilitary groups.

Croatian forces from the earliest days of conflict with the local Serb population beginning in April 1991 to the signing of the Sarajevo Agreement Ceasefire on January 2nd 1992 underwent massive transformation. At the start a Croatian military was largely non-existent. During the conflicts with the Serb population as well as during the initial offensives by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), the Croatian military was largely composed of Special Police Forces and members of the Croatian Territorial Defense Forces (TDF). These initial forces were organized into the Croatian Army and later into the Croatian National Guard. The Croatian National Guard (ZNG) was the most effective and best counter to the JNA. Like the Croatian Army the core of the ZNG was comprised of police and former TDF members, and the officer corps was staffed primarily by Croatian defectors from the JNA. In June of 1991, the ZNG numbered approximately 60,000 soldiers. As discussed elsewhere, early on the Croatian forces suffered from a severe lack of munitions and equipment, with soldiers witnessed fighting without uniforms in June and July of 1991. but by the time of the signing of the Sarajevo Agreement the gap between the two forces had closed significantly (Bassiouni et al. 1994).

The Yugoslav National Army, is considered to be the official military force of the Serbs during the war in Croatia. This is because, the interests of the Serbs, either in maintaining the membership of Croatia in a Serb lead Yugoslavia, or carving out portions of Croatia which were considered to be a part of Greater Serbia, were pursued by Yugoslav National Army. (Marijan 2001). In addition to this, the ethnicity of the officer corps of the JNA, was composed primarily of Serbs and Montenegrins, the two groups together constitute 70% of the officer corps. Given that the enlisted ranks were composed primarily of short term conscripts, the domination of the officer corps by the Serbs, meant that the JNA was firmly in the control of the Serbs. (Bassiouni et al. 1994).

The Yugoslav National Army, referred not just to the army, but also the navy, and airforce of Yugoslavia. The JNA prior to the conflict in Slovenia was composed of roughly 70,000 officers and professional soldiers, 150,000 conscripted soldiers, and a number of reservists estimated to be around 400,000 (Bassiouni et al. 1994). The JNA was considered to be a highly competent military force, well equipped, well paid, and at least at the officer corps, well motivated and committed to preventing the breakup of

Yugoslavia (Engelberg 1991; Bromley 2007). Yugoslavia's military was organized around two separate forces, the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and the Yugoslav National Army. The territorial defense forces were lightly armed, largely infantry based units, intended to stall and harass an invader through superior knowledge of the local terrain, and support from the local populace. The JNA on the other hand was intended to function as a main-line battle force, with a diversified force distribution consisting of infantry, armor, artillery, support units, air units, and naval units. Because of these two separate combat roles, the TDF were largely ethnically homogenous and stationed within those ethnicities, while the JNA drew from all the ethnicities of Yugoslavia, and was dispersed equally throughout the country, with weapon and supply depots similarly dispersed (Marijan 2001; Bassiouni et al. 1994).

The Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) officially came into existence on December 19th 1991, although prior to that the state existed de facto as the Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Krajina, which was declared on the 21st of December 1990. On April 1st 1991, SOA Krajina seceded from Croatia (Sudetic 1991). While never receiving De Jure international recognition, the RSK served as a well organized framework which would have been the core for a legitimized government for an independent Serb state within the initial borders of Croatia had Serbia won the war. The RSK also raised their own military force, the Serb Army of Krajina, which was officially formed on the 19th of March 1991, and at its height numbered roughly 55,000 soldiers. (Bassiouni et al. 1994).

In addition to the Yugoslav National Army and the Serb Army of Krajina, there were also a number of Serbian Irregulars who fought alongside and in varying degrees of closeness with the more regular Serbian Forces. Of these the two most effective were Arkan's Tigers and Seselj's White Eagles. The White Eagles were active in Krajina as early as April 1st 1991, conducting attacks on Police. Seselj stated in an interview that he and his forces had been sent from Belgrade to protect Serbian minorities in Croatia and Bosnia-herzegovina (Bassiouni et al. 1994). Arkan's forces began operations later on, but still fairly early in the war, with his Tigers forming in October 1991. Both groups are thought to have had close ties to the Serbian Government, with their arms ostensibly supplied by the JNA, freedom of movement in and out of Serbia, and alleged ties with members of Milosevic's government (Bassiouni et al. 1994). The degree to which the JNA had control over these groups is not fully clear. At the time of Sarajevo Agreement,

the JNA claimed to be able to enforce the ceasefire among the paramilitary groups, but they also alleged that some of the shelling Dubrovnik was carried out by paramilitary groups without orders from the JNA (Sudetic 1992).

While the main interest of this research is in the large scale conflict between the Yugoslav National Army and the Republic of Croatia, hostilities did not begin there. And indeed even before any fighting began there was military preparations made by both sides.

While the lead up to the war occurred over a number of years prior to the outbreak of violence and involved political, social and economic aspects, Our focus is on the military preparations of the opposing sides. The Yugoslav National Army began making preparations for a war in Croatia as early as 1990 (Sanz 1991). Following the elections in Slovenia and Croatia in 1990, Belgrade announced that control of the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) would be removed from the local republics, fearing their use by Slovenia and Croatia as the core for an independent military (Country Studies Series by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress).

This fear proved to be well founded, as Croatia did begin to arm from late 1990 to early 1991. Because of the fairly successful Serbian initiative to weaken and take control of the Territorial Defense Forces, the creation of a Croatian military was constructed around the existing police forces. While the Croatians had little control and representation among the personnel of Territorial Defense Forces, they were able to acquire a sizable portion of the material assets from within the country, including tanks, artillery, missiles, and perhaps most importantly roughly 38,000 small arms, and more than 20 million rounds of ammunition. Aside from what the Croatians were able to seize from the Yugoslav National Army, they also began to purchase weapons from European suppliers, primarily from Hungary (Bromley 2007).

The Serb Army of Krajina, and the Serbian paramilitaries also had to acquire arms. These groups also sought arms from abroad, but the majority of their weapons and munitions came from the JNA (Bromley 2007).

Both sides suffered from severe weaknesses to operational effectiveness. The Croatians were under supplied and Serbians were dealing with a manpower and morale problem from the outset. July of 1991, after the outbreak of hostilities, the U.S. and the European Community imposed separate arms embargoes on the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), affecting all member republics.

[The Security Council] *Decides*, under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, that all States shall, for the purposes of establishing peace and stability in

Yugoslavia, immediately implement a general and complete embargo on all deliveries of weapons and military equipment to Yugoslavia until the Council decides otherwise following consultation between the Secretary-General and Government of Yugoslavia (*Italics in original*). (United Nation Security Council)

On the 25th of September 1991 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 713, placing an arms embargo on SFRY. China had been set to veto the resolution, but the SFRY government, by then controlled by Serbia, supported the Resolution (Bromley 2007). The reason for the support by Belgrade for the embargo, while initially counter-intuitive, becomes clear when Serbia's control of the JNA and its stockpiles is considered, they already had an advantage in equipment over the other republics, and by preventing them from accessing foreign suppliers they hoped to maintain this advantage for the JNA and the Serbian supported groups. (Bromley 2007)

While the embargo was intended to limit the rate at which the various groups could arm and restore munitions supplies, it met with only limited success. In December of 1991 the Security Council passed Resolution 724 creating a committee to oversee the implementation of the embargo set up in Resolution 713. The committee was tasked with collecting and distributing information but lacked any resources with which to do any independent investigations and had no means of enforcement (Bromley 2007). Aside from the domestic defense industry of Yugoslavia, a number of nations ignored the embargo and continued to supply arms to the opposing sides. Croatia continued to be supported by Argentina, Germany, Russia, South Africa, and Hungary, among others. The amount supplied was not insignificant, from Argentina alone from the years of 1991 to 1992, they received 6500 tonnes of military equipment, including 8,000 automatic rifles, 211,000 hand grenades, and several million rounds of ammunition. Serbian weapon supplies from foreign countries were much less significant, comprising primarily 226 Surface to Air missiles, and replacement parts for aircraft and armor (Bromley 2007).

From the very beginning of hostilities in Slovenia, the Yugoslav National Army faced manpower difficulties. During the fighting in Slovenia, both Croatians and Slovenians deserted the JNA. As a result of this the JNA called up the Serbian reservists, many of whom evaded the draft, with estimates as high as 100,000 draft dodgers. Those who were successfully conscripted proved unreliable in combat, refusing to leave the safety of armored personnel carriers, and even reports of reservists simply leaving combat

areas and returning to Serbia. (Engelberg 1991; Ban)

Prior to hostilities between the JNA and Croatia, Serbs in Serb majority area began to attack Croatian Police forces. In April 1991, roughly 200 incidents involving explosives, and 89 direct attacks on police were recorded within Croatia. (Bassiouni et al. 1994).

The first month after Croatia declared Independence saw the JNA secure predominantly Serb lands, and begin shelling of Croatian areas. The area controlled by the JNA comprised roughly 30% of Croatia (Powers 1991). The cities of Dubrovnik, Gospic, Sibenik, Zadar, Karlovac, Sisak, Slavonski Brod, Osijek, Vinkovci, and Vukovar all came under JNA attack. Slavonia, Dalmatia, and Krajina all under the control of the Serbs at various times during the second half of 1991 (Reuters 1991; Powers 1991; Associated Press 1991; Williams 1991).

August 25th, 1991, the Siege of Vukovar began. This was one of the most critical engagements of the war. Occupying a large amount of time, material resources, and morale of the JNA, this engagement was a Serbian victory, but a costly one. JNA forces numbered roughly 36,000 soldiers, while Croatian forces numbered a comparatively insignificant roughly 1,800 soldiers (Central Intelligence Agency 2000; Sebetovsky 2002). Of those deployed, the JNA casualties were roughly 10% of the total force, with 1,103 killed, and 2,500 wounded (Sikavica 1997). Croatian losses were nearly total, with 879 dead, and 777 wounded (Zubrinic; Sebetovsky 2002). The battle occurred over a period of 87 days. Aside from the significant numerical advantage enjoyed by the JNA, they also were equipped with Artillery. The JNA shelled Vukovar at a rate of up 12,000 rounds a day. (Sebetovsky 2002)

Following the fall of Vukovar, the reactions were mixed. The Croatians were naturally dismayed at the defeat, many blaming the government for failing to reinforce Vukovar. Despite these initial reactions, the Croatian media and military used Vukovar as a rallying cry, extolling the virtues of the defenders as those of the entire country (Kardov 2007). The Serbian response was publicly positive, with the JNA building a triumphal arch in Belgrade to commemorate the victory. Behind the public face however things were not so rosy. The fact that a numerically superior force attacking a cut-off city, with a significant advantage in weaponry was unable to take the city for 87 days indicated that the JNA was not up to attacking entrenched urban positions, and while a tactical victory for the Serbs, turned out to be a strategic victory for the Croatians (Bassiouni et al. 1994).

One of the engagements which proved to be crucial to the eventual



Croatian victory was the group of battles collectively known as the Battle of the Barracks. In this collection of engagements, taking place from late August through December of 1991, Croatian forces attempted to take control of the various JNA barracks scattered throughout Croatia. Varazdin barracks, the second largest in Croatia surrendered on September 22, netting the Croatians over 300 pieces of armor and artillery. The Croatians took barracks in nearly all regions of the country that did not initially fall to JNA control. Many barracks fell early on, most in September, and Sinj barracks, in Dalmatia, fell as early as August 25th. However some positions managed to hold out longer, with the Lora naval base finally falling in December, and the Marshall Tito barracks in Zagreb holding out until under a ceasefire agreement they evacuated in January of 1992. The acquisition of the barracks by the Croatians and the munitions gained a quick supply of equipment for the Croatians while also pinning down JNA forces within Croatia and depriving the JNA of the equipment and munitions (Branko Hebrang).

Operation Otkos 10 was the first major offensive carried out by the Croatians, with operations lasting from October 31st to November 4th 1991. The JNA had managed to nearly cut off Slavonia from the rest of Croatia, the goal of Otkos 10 was to prevent this. The operation sought to capture positions that would allow for advances toward the Papuk mountains and maintain a land connection between Slavonia and the rest of Croatia. Losses on both sides were minimal, but the Croatians achieved their goals, building confidence and competency which allowed for the larger Operation Orkan 91 (Association of Veterans of Special Police Units ALFA Zagreb).

Operation Orkan 91 was conducted from December 12th, 1991 to January 2nd 1992. This operation capitalized on the gains made by Operation Otkos 10, with most of the fighting occurring in or near the Papuk mountains. 21 Serbian fortified positions were taken by the Croatians, and 170 square kilometers returned to Croatian control. While the Croatian and Serbian forces were relatively evenly matched in total soldiers, with 13,600 Croatians and 13,500 Serbians, the Serbians had more than three times as many pieces of armor, and more than twice as much artillery. Operation Orkan 91 was halted by the ceasefire signed on January 2nd (Portal Udruga Hrvatski Dragovoljac 1991).

On January 2nd 1992, a ceasefire was signed in Sarajevo, and referred to as the Sarajevo Agreement. At the time of signing, the Republic of Serbian Krajina encompassed 13,913 square kilometers and occupied a further 680 square kilometers (Rupic). The RSK had the clear upper-hand at

this point in time, with the JNA still deployed throughout Croatia and the military of the RSK receiving material support from Serbia proper. Under the terms of the agreement, JNA forces withdrew from Croatia, heading to Bosnia-Herzegovina where another conflict was immanent (Sudetic 1992). The successes of Operations Otkos 10 and Orkan 91 virtually back to back, along with the costly Serbian victory at Vukovar, and the expected conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina are most likely what led to the Serbian decision to agree to a ceasefire despite still having the advantage in the war.

The Yugoslav National Army had been planning to reorganize for some time prior to the Sarajevo Agreement. The plan was to downsize the overall size of the force, move from conscription based enlisted personnel to professional soldiers and to ensure the loyalty of the force by restricting membership to Serbs and Montenegrins. Some of this reorganization occurred during the fighting from 1991-1992. Following the Siege of Vukovar the officer corps was more thoroughly purged of non-Serbs and those not-loyal to the Milosevic-led government in Belgrade. Non-Serb, and non-loyal Serb personnel also left the Yugoslav National Army through desertion and draft dodging. Following the Sarajevo Agreement, the JNA officially withdrew from Croatia, but unofficially, a number of units were transferred over to the control of Serb Army of Krajina, a force already subordinated to the Serbian Ministry of Defence. In addition to those units integrated in the RSK command structure, a further 80,000 soldiers were incorporated into the Serbian Bosnia-Herzegovina forces. On May 20, 1992, the JNA was officially dissolved. Both in name and in concept, the Yugoslav National Army had become the Yugoslav Army, the JNA for some time after the onset of hostilities in Croatia was still multi-ethnic, including a minority of Croatian, Macedonian and Albanian soldiers, but by the time the force was renamed its composition was almost entirely Serb, and the political ideology of the Army was no longer Yugoslav in nature, but Serbian Nationalist. (Bassiouni et al. 1994; Engelberg 1991)

## **Conclusion**

Having presented the research, it is now possible to assess my two hypotheses. The second hypothesis stated that the JNA was dissolved because its loyalty and effectiveness could not be counted upon because of ethnic composition. This was true in part. The JNA from 1990 to 1992 was primarily Serbian and Montenegrin, following the secession of Slovenia and Croatia and the corresponding desertion of those ethnicities from the JNA, the Serb

ethnic domination of the JNA only became more pronounced. However while they were reasonably ethnically homogenous, the JNA still suffered from manpower and morale problems. This was in part due to the remaining non-Serb members of the JNA, although these too decreased in number throughout the conflict, but also because many of the Serb conscripts within the JNA were unwilling to fight, and many actively defected, taking equipment and supplies with them. Control by the Serbian government over the JNA was largely not an issue. Following Vukovar especially, with the purges of the JNA officer corps of those whose loyalty to the Milosevic-government was not clear, Belgrade felt it had sufficient control of the JNA to disperse it to less centrally controlled chains of command such as that of the Republic of Serbian Krajina and roll over the rest into the Yugoslav Army.

The first hypothesis turned out to be much better supported. The JNA in the initial phase of the war encountered relatively little effective resistance in achieving their operational goals. This was due in large part to the asymmetry of the forces, Croatia still in the process of creating and arming a military. Even with significant numerical and supply advantages, the difficulty with which the JNA conquered Vukovar, weakened the JNA, and illustrated that they could not hope to quickly and easily defeat and occupy Croatia, especially with another conflict developing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which threatened not only Serbian supply lines, but would require a much larger force than the Serbians could field in order to carry out both wars. The structure of the pre-war Yugoslav military into the Territorial Defense Forces and the Yugoslav National Army, also put the JNA at a disadvantage in that the assigned role of the TDF was to slow down and weaken through attrition exactly the kind of invasion which the JNA conducted. Had the JNA not also had local support from the RSK and Serbian Paramilitaries, I am convinced that the war would have been even costlier to the JNA and may not have allowed for the effective dismemberment and rebirth of the JNA into the Yugoslav Army.

However my initial research question was also flawed, in that the JNA did not so much disappear from the conflict as it dispersed and reformed, with its members and equipment still forming the backbone of the Serbian military forces throughout the war. What has become clear though is that due to the conditions prior to the conflict, the Croatian mobilization and armament effort and the brewing conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina during this period, the Yugoslav National Army never had much of a chance of success in Croatia.

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