

Croatian conviction casts light on US responsibility for war crimes

By Paul Mitchell
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Last week, the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in the Hague found two Croatian military leaders, General Ante Gotovina and Assistant Interior Minister Mladen Markac, guilty of war crimes and sentenced them to 24 years and 18 years imprisonment, respectively. A third defendant, Ivan Cermak, was acquitted.

Gotovina and Markac were accused of taking part in a “joint criminal enterprise”, the purpose of which was “the permanent removal” of the Serb population of the Krajina region of Croatia during the August 1995 Operation Storm military offensive, which broke a United Nations-monitored cease-fire.

Their crimes, involving “deportation and forcible transfer, plunder of public and private property, wanton destruction, murder, inhumane acts and cruel treatment”, led to the deaths of up to 2,200 people, half of them civilians, and the creation of 200,000 Serb refugees.

Tens of thousands have demonstrated in the Croatian capital Zagreb since Gotovina was convicted with banners proclaiming him a hero for his role in the “Homeland War”, which erupted soon after Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991. German imperialism, anxious to flex its political muscles after reunification, had promoted Croat secession and rushed to extend recognition. While both the US and the other Western European powers initially opposed recognition, they ultimately accepted Germany’s position.

Warnings that civil war would result were dismissed. Within months Serbs, who dominated the west of Croatia, declared an independent Serb Republic of Krajina (RSK), splitting the country in two. Operation Storm was designed to bring the region back under Croat control.

The conviction of Gotovina and Markac casts further light on the role of the US government in Operation Storm and its responsibility for what has been described as the biggest act of ethnic cleansing during the Balkan Wars.

During the trial, it became apparent that US officials were in constant contact with the Croatian government, encouraging the military offensive at a time when a UN cease-fire was in operation. They knew that war crimes were likely to be committed. The Clinton administration also approved the training of Croat forces, and provided intelligence and air support. No US official or politician has been placed on trial or is likely to be.

Peter Galbraith, a former senior adviser to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and US ambassador to Croatia from 1993 until 1998, was called at the trial as an “expert witness”. Asked to explain his comments at the time that Operation Storm could not be described as ethnic cleansing, he replied, “ethnic cleansing, as I considered it to be, involved actions to expel the population through military attacks, terror, mass rape, killings, to make sure that everybody who survived

left, the burning of homes.

“Basically, ethnic cleansing was what the Serbs did. In my view, the Croatians—Croatia did not do this in Operation Storm, because when the Croatian forces arrived, the Serbs were already gone. [They had been warned to leave by the RSK government when it was clear an attack was imminent.] So you couldn’t ethnically cleanse somebody who was not there.”

He continued, “So that’s what I meant by that statement. I have to say that I, over the years, have regretted that I made it, because it was misunderstood and sort of seemed to be an apology for the Croatian military action, and that was not what was intended.”

Galbraith told the court that Croatian President Franjo Tudjman was obsessed with creating an ethnically homogeneous “Greater Croatia”. He believed the Serbs in the Krajina were too numerous and constituted a strategic threat to Croatia. Any who left (or were driven out) should not be allowed to return.

Tudjman had become the US’s closest ally in the Balkans. Galbraith said, “In the first two and a half years, I met with him very frequently; I would say several times a week, on some occasions several times a day.”

Other close contacts were Defence Minister Gojko Susak, “who I simply saw all the time”, and Foreign Minister Mate Granic, whom Galbraith saw “four or five times a week.” “We would speak on the phone all the time”, he explained.

Regular meetings were also held with Tudjman’s chief of staff, Hrvoje Sarinic, and Miro Tudjman, Tudjman’s son, who was head of the Croatian intelligence service.

Following the end of the Croat-Bosnian Muslim war in 1994, the US talked to Croatia “about becoming our partner in the peace process” and promised “the fastest possible integration into western political, economic, and security arrangements”, Galbraith explained.

In early 1995, the US was becoming exasperated with its European allies and the United Nations over their continued failure in Bosnia and perceived lack of resolve in confronting Slobodan Milosevic. Galbraith said, “I had strong disagreements with the United Nations and was very frustrated with how it was conducting itself.... [I]t was my conclusion that the UN troops there were not going to defend the [Bihac] pocket because, after all, the Dutch troops had not defended Srebrenica [leading to the massacre of 7,000 Bosnian Muslims], and the troops in Bihac were less capable.”

“If NATO wasn’t going to save Bihac, then—and Croatia was willing to undertake military action that we should not object to that military action...that was the position that my government took. As I wrote in messages, I was aware that Croatian military action to save Bihac would produce a humanitarian crisis with regard to the Krajina,

but in what I called the hierarchy of evils—that humanitarian crisis clearly would rank lower than a situation in which the Bosnian Serbs took Bihac.”

The US agreed to Gotovina and the Croatian Army launching an attack along the Livno valley, knowing it was part of planned military takeover of the whole Krajina.

Galbraith said he told Tudjman that the US “was not approving of these operations in the sense of telling the Croatians to do this, but we were clearly not objecting, and in that context the fact that we were not objecting was highly significant because we and other countries had objected to any action that had expanded the war—that arguably would have expanded the war, including objecting to military action, November 10th, 1994, during a previous Bihac crisis.”

“We certainly didn’t say, don’t do it, and we didn’t say, do it,” Galbraith repeated elsewhere.

Susak told a meeting at the Ministry of Defence that included Gotovina, “The west has given a partial blessing.”

The US was giving a green light to Operation Storm, however much Galbraith tries to evade it, even though it knew that similar offensives including the Medak pocket in 1993 and in Western Slavonia in May 1995 had led to the expulsion of tens of thousands of Serbs and the indiscriminate killing of hundreds of others.

At the same time, Galbraith was meeting with Milan Babic to convince him to accept terms for peace, which he did on August 2. “I thought that there was some prospect that Babic would be able to get the parliament to agree to accept the deal that I worked out with him,” he related.

Negotiations between the two sides were also taking place in Geneva on August 3, the day before Operation Storm was launched. But it was clear from Galbraith’s testimony that the Croats were going to present an ultimatum the Serbs could not accept.

“As to the meetings in Geneva, they, the Croatians, used them as a vehicle to present their final ultimatum.... [I]t was clear to me, as it was to the other diplomats in Zagreb and I think to the broader international community, that the meeting in Geneva was just that, that it was pro forma, that it was a very dangerous situation, that Tudjman was going to outline demands that he had already stated, and that the Serbs were going to refuse them, and that that would provide the pretext for war.”

The next day, August 4, 1995, troops from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina launched Operation Storm. Galbraith said he saw evidence of war crimes, the extensive and systematic destruction of Serb property and widespread killings. “I can think that they only happened because the Croatian state authorities, Tudjman and...the gang around him, wanted this to happen,” he said.

By the end of September, as the scale of the destruction and atrocities became apparent, pressure intensified for a cease-fire. However, the US continued to encourage the Croatians to advance.

Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and architect of the Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian war, warned Tudjman, “You may have a cease-fire within one week or less, and I would hope that you could take Sanski Most and Prijedor and Bosanski Nova if possible before a cease-fire.... [I]f you take those three towns before a cease-fire, we can have a successful negotiation on the map. In any case, officially, the United States always says no more military action, but privately, and I cannot be quoted on this, I would urge you to consider the fact that the pressure for a cease-fire within the next week is very, very high.”

Evidence has also emerged of the role of Military Professional

Resources Inc. (MPRI). The private military contractor, licenced by the US, is run by retired US generals. It started work in Croatia in January 1995, in the run-up to Operation Storm. Galbraith only referred to MPRI briefly in his testimony, but their activities have been documented in the WSWs (see “An exchange on the break-up of Yugoslavia”).

Last year, a class action suit was brought in the US by Krajina Serbs claiming MPRI trained and equipped the Croatian military for Operation Storm and designed the battle plan. The action says MPRI sought to “procure through its contacts heavy military equipment including artillery batteries and import it into Croatia; [and] arrange for Croatia to receive real-time coded and pictorial information from US reconnaissance satellites over Krajina in order for the data to be used for accuracy targeting in artillery batteries.”

“It was evident that MPRI’s acts, especially including equipping and training military forces, would run counter to UN Security Council Resolution 713 [imposing a cease-fire and arms embargo]. But because MPRI is not a state, it is not legally bound by UN resolutions. Thus MPRI could do things that the United States could not do, such as importing weapons into Croatia....”

There was evident satisfaction in the US with the progress of Operation Storm according to Galbraith, who explained, “Many people in Washington welcomed Croatia’s actions, and it was certainly welcomed...by many in the Clinton Administration for the reason that I stated, which is that it began to change the situation in Bosnia” and led to the Dayton Accords.

“The Croatian army military campaign in Bosnia, along with the military campaign by the army of the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with NATO air-strikes that began at the very end of August were the three elements—decisive elements that led to the end of the Bosnia war, and it would not have been—it would not have happened if it were not for the Croatian army’s military action,” Galbraith concluded.

Now that Gotovina and Markac have been convicted of war crimes, it begs the question as to why leading figures in the Clinton administration have not been similarly indicted for their intimate role in these terrible events.

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