

'Operation Oluja' foils London's Balkans policy

by Dean Andromidas and Michael Liebig

The Croatian blitzkrieg "Operation Oluja," aimed at re-conquering of the Serbian-occupied areas in the country's south, has extraordinary political and military significance, reaching far beyond the Balkans region itself. In only three days—Aug. 4-6—the myth of the allegedly invincible Serbian military power was shattered, once and for all. That characterization remains true, even though the remainder of former Yugoslavia under Slobodan Milosevic did not intervene directly into the fighting in "Krajina"; but it certainly did intervene indirectly. The Chetnik units were numerically superior to the Croats, but they were on an equal footing with respect to artillery and armored vehicles.

The fact that the Croatian campaign was able to be brought so quickly to a successful conclusion, reveals Croatia's superiority in planning, leading, and executing military operations. The behavior of the leadership in Belgrade, on the other hand, has nothing to do with Milosevic's ostensible "readiness for peace," nor with any "secret agreements" with Croatian President Franjo Tudjman. The Milosevic regime most likely did not intervene directly, because the Serbian Army's hands were largely tied: Strong military units of "rump Yugoslavia" are tied down in Kosova at the Albanian border, in Sandjak in Vojvodina next to Hungary, on the Serbian border with Macedonia, and on the Bulgarian border to the east. On top of that, the personnel and material support being provided to the Bosnian Serbs under Ratko Mladic, is reducing Serbia's available military resources. Finally, Serbia's domestic situation is so tense, that an open Serbian attack against Croatia would pose unforeseeable domestic and foreign-policy risks for the Milosevic regime. Thus, the Croatian leadership based their decision to put an end to the Serbian occupation of Croatian national territory, upon a sober, and by no means "adventurous," evaluation.

Why it succeeded

The success of "Operation Oluja" was based on a large number of *flanking and encirclement actions* carried out by the Croatian Army over the entire "Krajina" battle area (see map p. 52). The operationally significant Serbian positions were rapidly surrounded and cut off. The Serbian forces, however, were mostly not completely boxed in or obliterated, but rather, the way was left open for them—along with the Serb civilian population—to flee toward Bosnia.

The Croatian General Staff's planning for "Operation Oluja," which had already been essentially agreed upon in 1994, demonstrates a high degree of military expertise. The Croatian Army leadership is "young," the majority consisting of generals and colonels who are around 40 years of age. This leadership core had been forged through the bitter defensive battles against the "Yugoslavian People's Army" in the second half of 1991. That was the time when—almost out of "nothing"—defense was organized against the Serbian assault on Croatia. Since then, systematic efforts have been made to organize, train, and properly equip the Croatian Army.

It is a historical irony, that weapons systems formerly belonging to the Warsaw Pact—especially to the "Western Group" of the Soviet Army stationed in East Germany—have played a significant part in equipping the Croatian Army. Today the Croatian Army possesses an adequate, though not optimal, arsenal of armored and artillery systems. These include T-72 tanks, BMP1/2 artillery tanks, and reliable Russian-made artillery. The Croatian Army's successful penetrations in "Operation Oluja," however, are *not* primarily based on superior fire-power to blast open breaches in enemy front lines; Croatia lacks the necessary masses of artillery and armored vehicles to carry out such "break-

through operations” with massive fire. Massed deployment of artillery by the Croatian Army played a significant role only during assaults on dug-in Serbian positions in cities such as Knin and Petrinja.

Special units played a crucial role

According to the (albeit preliminary) information available to the authors, it was the special commando units that played the crucial role in the important Croatian assault operations. These special units mostly belong to one of the Croatian Army’s four “guard brigades,” or else are Interior Ministry troops under Gen. Mladen Markac. The special units are the product of a strict selection process and very strenuous training, with an emphasis on nighttime and hand-to-hand combat.

According to our available information, during “Operation Oluja,” special units quietly moved *at night* along the most important lines of attack, and filtered behind the enemy fronts. These were not only small groups, but also units of platoon, company, or all the way to battalion strength. The arms used in these assaults were, of course, infantry weapons, the “heaviest” of which were machine guns and light grenade launchers. By daybreak, the special units were mostly positioned *at the back and flanks* of the Serbian enemy, who were then assaulted from many sides at once. The special units also seem to have played an important role in the (mostly nighttime) neutralization of Serbian artillery positions. This tactical-operational approach had a devastating effect on the Chetnik troops: The Serbian troops suffered heavy losses, and morale quickly collapsed. On the morning of the second day of “Operation Oluja,” the campaign already seemed to be sure of victory.

Other armed forces outside of Croatia ought to look carefully at this form of combat, since it demonstrated the efficiency of special units against numerically superior, larger forces; whereas, in NATO, special units are mostly only deployed in very small groups for single commando actions. The Croatian Army has proven that special units do not have to occupy a “niche.” It is also worth pointing out, that the Croatian Army suffered relatively low losses during the campaign.

The on-the-spot observer is left in no doubt, that the motivation and fighting spirit of the Croatian Army is extremely high. Moreover, the Croatian population is almost 100% behind the Army and the policy of military re-establishment of the country’s territorial integrity. To the observer from Germany, the national enthusiasm of the Croatian youth and their support for the Army, is quite remarkable. The role of the Catholic Church cannot be forgotten in this regard. Cardinal Franjo Kuharic of Zagreb has declared that “Operation Oluja” meets the criteria for a *just war*. This, he explained, is not only justifiable, but indeed obligatory, whenever 1) the damage caused by an act of aggression, is serious, lasting, and beyond doubt; 2) non-military efforts to end the



These children, victims of the three-year Serbian siege of Bihac, were taken to Zagreb by Croatian troops.

aggression have been either fruitless, or impossible to pursue; 3) the war against the aggressor has prospects of success; and 4) military force against the aggression does not only merely lead to evils greater than those already caused by the aggression itself.

The situation in the liberated areas

With the exception of small, scattered Chetnik groups hiding in the woods, the formerly Serbian-occupied areas of Croatia are now fully under the control of the Croatian Army and police. The entire region has been hermetically sealed off, and only military personnel, police, technicians, and returning residents who had been forced to flee in 1991, are allowed to enter the liberated areas. This measure was absolutely necessary, not only out of general security considerations, but also in order to prevent looting. The houses, farms, and apartments of approximately 150,000 Serbian former inhabitants of the “Krajina” region were abandoned in great haste. It is true that the Croatian soldiers have been “supplying” themselves locally with alcoholic drinks, food, and other goods, but on the other hand, there has not been any “large-scale looting.” The numerous fires which continued to burn days after the Croatians moved in, mostly have a commonplace cause: Livestock, left behind in the stalls, have died and are decomposing in the summer heat, and so everything is often just set ablaze. Many houses and farms have been completely or partially destroyed by the ravages of war; but it is often the case, that this damage goes back to 1991,

since there was practically no reconstruction activity after the Serbs occupied the region. Beyond that, most of the villages in "Krajina" are simply ghost towns, bereft of any people.

We must again emphasize here, what every on-the-spot observer can confirm: The Serbian civilian population was *not forced to flee*. The Serb civilians became victims of their own ideology and propaganda. All that was needed was the alarm call, "The Croats are coming!" and the Serb civilians instantly fled hearth and home. And wherever there was hesitation, the Serbian administration seems to have taken special measures to ensure that practically everyone would flee. Almost all Serbs in "Krajina" remember how, in 1991, their Croatian neighbors were murdered (about 20,000) or forced to flee (about 250,000).

Many of these Serbs had personally participated in such criminal acts of violence. They therefore assumed that they would meet a similar fate at the hands of the returning Croats, and so they took flight. Most of the "Krajina" Serbs now want to settle in "rump Yugoslavia" or in Serb-occupied eastern Bosnia. Most of them think that Serbian-occupied northwest Bosnia around Banja Luka is too unsafe to resettle there. Meanwhile, since the beginning of August, and with virtually no publicity, there has been a large-scale *ejection* of Croats, and to a lesser extent, Hungarians, from the formerly autonomous region of Vojvodina, which had been incorporated into Serbia in the 1980s. A sober and unprejudiced evaluation would have conclude that the deeply rooted Serbian "national ideology" shows definite symptoms of a collective psychosis, in which sadistic and masochistic factors also play a role. In the Serbian ideology, the "outside world," the "others," are perceived not in keeping with reality, but rather manic-depressively. It seems that the Serbs' genocidal excesses in Croatia, and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past four years, represent one side of the coin, the other side now being the breakneck mass exodus from "Krajina."

This "Serbian psychosis" is also evident when one visits the areas around Gracac and Lovinac in the Dalmatian hinterland, which, up to 1991, had been almost exclusively settled by Croats. Today, this area has been "re-naturalized"! All buildings, including churches, have been razed to the ground. All Croatian residents were either killed or driven out; but no Serbs settled in their place, thus creating a completely empty "natural wilderness" of which Prince Philip would be proud. The ruins and rubble, now overgrown with bushes and grass, give one the impression that people must have stopped living here centuries ago, and not just four years before.

The end of the occupation of Bihac

One crucial result of "Operation Oluja" has been the breaking of the Serbian encirclement of the northern Bosnian enclave of Bihac. For more than three years, the city of Bihac and its suburbs has been defended by the Bosnian Army's Fifth Corps. In the spring of 1992, the defenders had a total

of 250 rifles to stave off a Serbian occupation. Ever since then, Bihac has been under constant Serbian artillery fire. In three large-scale assaults (February 1994, November 1994, and July 1995), the Serbs attempted to take Bihac. They had managed to push into the southern parts of the city, and even today, the southern front line is only 10 kilometers away from the city's center. Members of the staff of General Dudakovic told us how, during the siege years, the defenders of Bihac carried out countless commando raids in order to inflict material and psychological damage on the Serbian besiegers. Bosnian commando units of 10-20 men would repeatedly slip through enemy lines and assault Serbian artillery and supply depots. But they could only take back with them those weapons and supplies which they could carry in their hands. The military resistance was organized with with these seized weapons, and with the few supplies that reached Bihac from the outside via forest footpaths. Also, a certain minimal logistical supply line was organized for Bihac, by smuggling in funds coming from Bosnian refugees and Bosnian guest workers in Germany, Austria, Italy, and Scandinavia.

The Fifth Corps staffers emphasized to us, that the critical problem of the Fifth Corps, and of the entire Bosnian Army, is their dire lack of artillery. Without heavy weaponry, the Bosnian Army's infantry assaults must reckon on heavy losses. And if a Bosnian infantry assault is successful, it is usually extremely difficult to hold onto the conquered territory, since it will come under heavy bombardment from long-distance Serbian artillery. This lack of artillery support is also the reason why the Bosnian Army's operation in late June to break through the cordon around Sarajevo, did not succeed. Nevertheless, by breaking the siege of the Bihac region, significant Bosnian forces are now freed up in the north, west, and northeast, which can also be reinforced by the renegade Muslim units of the "local warlord" Ficaret Abdic. The Fifth Corps also counts on getting artillery support from the nearby Croatian Army, and from the Bosnian-Croatian HVO forces. While the HVO forces push out from Bosnaska Grahovo and Drvar toward the north into the Una River valley, it can be expected that the Bosnian Fifth Corps will push toward the south. And here again, it must be emphasized that in the Bihac region, a truly comradely spirit of cooperation exists between the Croatian Army and the HVO. However, the observer cannot fail to notice that the equipment—and not only the armament—of the Bosnian Army is far inferior to that of the Croatian forces. In Bihac, rage and disgust is especially strong against the criminal arms embargo that has been imposed upon Bosnia-Herzegovina, in violation of international law, by the United Nations and the "great powers."

The truly heroic accomplishments and sacrifices of the Bosnian Army Fifth Corps must also be viewed in connection with the indescribable suffering—and enormous tenacity—of the civilian population of the Bihac region. For three long years, men, women, and children lived in daily fear for their

lives, and on the edge of starvation. Wherever one goes in the city, one sees leaflet-sized death notices posted on the billboards. Bihac is a city full of "thin people"—not completely starved, but anyone you meet in Bihac is very lean. This suffering—a suffering which is practically beyond the comprehension of the outside observer—is chiseled into the faces of the residents of Bihac, and it has an intense impact on the observer who visited only six days after the lifting of the siege. Can one ever "get used to" the combination of being surrounded, fear for one's life, and hunger? One can sense a general feeling of relief over the end of the nightmare siege; but one likewise senses the dreadful psychological damage which the people of Bihac have suffered, even though they do not want to make this into a special subject right now. When, a few hours later, the Croatian military bus prepared to leave with its load of visitors, a decision was made to take two children, aged 5 and 3, back to Zagreb. Both had tiny crutches, because each had lost a leg during the siege, after being hit by Serbian grenade fragments.

Conclusions for Bosnia

Although the western media want to give the contrary impression, the soldiers and civilians in Bosnia-Herzegovina are happy, and feel encouraged, over the quick and thorough success of "Operation Oluja." For four years, Lord Carrington, Lord Owen, Cyrus Vance, Carl Bildt, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and all the other "diplomatic" representatives, have used every conceivable means to attempt to force the Croatian government to be "realistic" and to "accept" the loss of one-third of Croatia's national territory. But then, Croatia took decisive action, and created its own "facts." Now the Unprofor "peacekeeping" troops are leaving a Croatia which insisted upon defending its national sovereignty, and which—with the exception of eastern Slavonia—has now re-established its territorial integrity. And *what goes for Croatia, goes for Bosnia-Herzegovina, too*. Once again, international powers—centered in London—are putting pressure on Bosnia to be "realistic," and to write off its claims to sovereignty and territorial integrity.

But the Bosnian leadership knows full well, that it can only rely on its own powers. Under the most difficult circumstances imaginable, Bosnia has already created some important military "facts." The Bosnian leaders know that it must quickly create new military "facts," *now*, against the Serbian aggressors and their British friends. They are thankful for any form of external support—diplomatic, material, or military—but they know what it's only what they do themselves, that counts. Bosnia-Herzegovina's military-technological and economic resources are far poorer than those of Croatia. But the readiness of the Bosnian Army and the Bosnian population to make sacrifices and keep on fighting, is so great, that it can even resist the latest diktat attempts from London and from other practitioners of *realpolitik* within the diplomatic cabinets of the "great powers."

Kosova is a ticking time bomb

by Tom and Feride Istogu Gillesberg

The Serbian and British plan for a "Greater Serbia" received a severe blow with the successful Croatian-Bosnian military offensive to regain Croatian control of the so-called "Krajina," after three years of Serbian occupation, and to break the siege of the Bihac enclave in Bosnia. But that doesn't mean that Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic and his British masters have given up the idea of a Greater Serbia, and of continued war and genocide in the Balkans.

On Aug. 9, the Serbian media reported that 20,000 Serbians from "Krajina" were to be resettled in Kosova. On Aug. 10, they reported that the first 500 had already been bussed to Kosova. If not stopped, this will cause an acceleration of the process of colonization and "ethnic cleansing" of Kosova, directed against the Kosova Albanians, who comprise around 90% of the 2 million inhabitants of Kosova. This has been a fundamental theme of Greater Serbia propaganda and ideology.

A target of 'Greater Serbia'

Despite the fact that Kosova was almost entirely populated by Albanians, it was involuntarily kept as a part of Serbia after World War II. After the revision of the Yugoslavian Constitution in 1974, Kosova became an independent autonomous region of the Yugoslavian Confederation, with its own constitution and rights similar to the other Yugoslavian republics, except in questions of foreign policy and defense. When Milosevic took power in Serbia in the elections in 1986, it was under the banner of establishing a Greater Serbia, beginning by revoking the independence of Kosova, and making Serbia "whole again" by annexing Kosova. In the Greater Serbia mythology, Kosova was called the cradle of Serbia, making it the sacred soil of Serbia, that had to be reconquered, and, of course, the Albanian population living there had to be gotten rid of.

The Serbian Constitution of 1989 declared Kosova to be a part of Serbia. The tanks were sent in, and the independent authorities in Kosova were replaced by a Serbian dictatorship, backed up by the Yugoslavian-Serbian Army and paramilitary groups. The Albanian-language television was closed, together with *Rilindja*, the daily Albanian-language newspaper. The Albanian University in Prishtina, the capital of Kosova, was taken over by the Serbian authorities, and all Albanian professors and teachers fired. Only Serbian-language teaching was allowed. All higher educational facili-