
Mate
MEŠTROVIĆ

Columbia University, USA/Croatia

AMERICAN
FOREIGN
POLICY AND
THE CROAT
STRUGGLE
FOR FREEDOM

In the decades between the end of World War II and Yugoslavia's collapse in 1991, the Croatian Diaspora had a negligible influence on America's policy of strong support for "Yugoslavia's independence, unity and territorial integrity", to use the State Department's standard formula. Throughout this period the State Department opposed Croatian aspirations for independence, considering them injurious to American global and regional interests.

For a variety of reasons, until the late 1980s, Croats favoring independence were unable even to win a fair hearing from much of the media and the U.S. government. Only after Slobodan Milošević came to power in Serbia and began dismantling Tito's Yugoslavia, the State Department showed growing concern about Yugoslavia's survival, and began viewing more seriously the disruptive aspirations of the Croats, Slovenes, Albanians and others.

For a long time Croatian aspirations for independent statehood were rejected as attempts to restore the World War II Independent State of Croatia, generally regarded by the victors as a "fascist, enemy, and criminal state", guilty of genocide against Serbs and Jews.

Whatever one may think of the NDH, it marked an important watershed. For the first time in centuries the Croat state reappeared on the map of Europe. Thought detractors labeled it an "artificial, Nazi created state", the NDH possessed essential attributes of sovereignty – its own armed forces, currency, it issued stamps, and was recognized by a dozen states – and at least at the time of its establishment in 1941 it was cheered by a substantial segment of the Croat people.

American, and generally Western officials and academicians were convinced that Tito's Yugoslavia had once and for all set to rest the national question by granting constituent nations their republics or "autonomous" regions.

The West admired Tito, the "triumphant heretic", for successfully defying Stalin in 1948 and asserting Yugoslav

independence from Moscow. Consequently, Yugoslavia could count on Washington's strong support for its "independence, unity and territorial integrity". Western scholars wrote volumes extolling Yugoslavia's "workers self-management" as a marvelous concept of potentially global significance. Now these books gather dust on library shelves, a testimony to the ephemeral scholarship in the service of Cold War politics.

Croat aspirations for independence could not gain American sympathy or support because they clashed with Washington's perceptions and global and regional objectives.

The attitude of the American Croatian Community

Truth is that most American Croatians were uninterested in Croatia's independence before the collapse of Yugoslavia and the start of the "Homeland War". They were too involved in American daily life and influenced by American perceptions and policies. Even had they been united in support of Croat independence, they could have done little to change Washington policy due to their relatively small number and financial marginality. In fact, only a few diasporic communities – such as the American Jews and to a lesser extent the Cubans – can be said to have the power to substantially impact U.S. foreign policy, and this in part because the objectives of Washington, Israel, and anti-Castro Cubans, are substantially complementary.

Belgrade made great efforts to be on good terms with the Croatian Fraternal Union, the principal Croatian ethnic organization in the U.S. and Canada. Yugoslavia maintained a consulate in Pittsburgh whose job was to cultivate relations with the CFU. For its part, the CFU leadership sought to steer clear as much as possible from "disruptive old country politics".

We, advocates of Croatian independence, were a small minority in the Croatian community, deeply divided with respect to strategy and tactics. Should Croats engage in armed struggle against Yugoslavia, at home and abroad? Or, should they pursue propaganda, educational and public relations activities aimed at winning Western public opinion in favor of Croat independence? The latter believed that the "diaspora" could only be an auxiliary factor in the struggle for freedom. Only the Croats in the homeland under favorable international circumstances could achieve independence.

As the saying goes, one man's "terrorist" is another man's "freedom fighter". The violence that went on dur-

ing the entire period under discussion was in a sense a continuation of the World War II struggle between the Ustašas, Četniks and Partisans. Croatian revolutionary groups such as “Otpor” and the “Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood” attacked Yugoslav assets at home and abroad. The Yugoslav secret police in turn waged a brutal extermination battle against the Croatian revolutionaries in which it generally had the upper hand thanks to its far greater resources and tolerance of Western governments. And yet, the UDB-a was never able to completely destroy its Croat opponents.

The ill-fated attempts by Božidar Kavran and Ante Moškov to continue the armed struggle against the Yugoslav regime after World War II was renewed in 1972 by the “Bugojanci”, a group of 19 young Croats from Australia – who tried to start a Castro style armed struggle in Bosnia. The UDB-a murdered Croats abroad, notably Bruno Bušić in Paris in 1976 and Stjepan Đureković in Munich in 1983. Miro Barešić murdered Vladimir Rolović, the Yugoslav ambassador in Sweden and high official of Belgrade’s secret police, and so on. The violence continued till the collapse of Yugoslavia. In Scotland, in 1988, UDB-a agent Vinko Sindičić shot but failed to kill Nikola Štedul, head of the “Croatian movement for Statehood” (“Hrvatski državotvorni pokret”).

Negative International Reactions

Western media and governments responded negatively to Croatian-inspired violence, which gave credence to Belgrade claims that Croats seeking independence were “fascists” and “terrorists”. Croat revolutionaries paid a heavy price at home and abroad. Those engaged in diversions in Yugoslavia were mostly killed. UDB-a agents murdered or kidnapped suspected Croat opponents abroad, while UDB-a assassins mostly made a getaway, enabling Belgrade to claim that the dead were victims of feuds in the criminal “Ustaša underground”.

In the U.S., the most spectacular instance of “Croat terrorism” was the 1976 hijacking of a TWA plane by a group of young Croats led by Zvonko Bušić whose purpose was to publicize Croatia’s struggle for freedom. 26 years later Bušić remains almost forgotten in an American jail. After the hijacking and murders of several Croats in the U.S., President Carter ordered the FBI to put an end to the violence. Several “Otpor” members were arrested on conspiracy charges and given draconian 40-year prison sentences. An FBI report concluded that UDB-a

agents stood behind some of the violence, with the aim of discrediting the Croat struggle for independence.

For years after the TWA hijacking, whenever I identified myself as a Croat I elicited the response, “You are the hijackers”. Certainly the hijacking drew wide attention to the Croat struggle. But the publicity was entirely negative, convincing me and others that violence abroad against Yugoslavia was counterproductive. President Carter made it clear that the government would use force against those engaged in violence on behalf of the Croatian cause. It would use political means in dealing with those who were engaged in legitimate activities on behalf of their aims. Since some of those engaged in, or suspected of violence, were member of the CNC, the organization faced the prospect of being banned in some countries.

This produced a crisis within the CNC - the principal umbrella Croatian political organization of the Diaspora - which I had joined in 1979. I believed that the CNC should only engage in legal and legitimate activities in the Diaspora. An organization could not at the same time function as a legitimate political organization and pursue conspiratorial activities. The CNC majority shared this view. But, as it is often the case among Croats, the minority would not accept the decision of the majority, and left the CNC. The 1992 Vice Vukojević film about the murder of Bruno Bušić continued the long-standing dispute in the Croatian Diaspora between those favoring, and those opposed to violence.

After the demise of the “Croatian Spring” in 1971, the homeland opposition fell silent. Its leaders were imprisoned or fled abroad. At this point the Croat Diaspora again became the principal spokesman for the Croatian struggle for freedom.

Under my leadership in the 1980s, CNC focused principally on propaganda activities directed at the international community and the homeland. We took every opportunity to publicize the Croatian cause. For instance, we submitted a Memorandum to the 1980 Madrid conference on peace and security calling for the recognition of Croatian self-determination. In 1982, I delivered a lecture at the Sorbonne on the Moscow and Yalta agreements. The CNC developed excellent communications with the Islamic world through the Croatian Islamic Center in Toronto. The publishing activity of the Croatian Diaspora was amazing. The UDB-a claimed that Croatian émigrés published some 250 publications and bulletins with a total circulation of 400,000.

In 1981, unexpectedly, I was invited by Bulgarian diplomats in New York to attend the 1300 anniversary of Bulgarian statehood in Sofia. “When we give you importance, Washington will take note”, I was told. The Bulgarians were right. Some émigré Croatian publications criticized my Bulgarian adventure, warning that I was following in the footsteps of Dr. Branko Jelić, who claimed to have Soviet contacts, and was eliminated by the UDB-a in Germany in 1972.

The Croatian National Congress became an object of constant Yugoslav media attacks, which inflated its importance in the homeland beyond reality. We also drew the interest of Western intelligence services. The Belgrade government protested my every move. It repeatedly demanded that the State Department curtail my political activities, but with little effect. Washington’s standard reply was that “Mr. Meštrović is a free U.S. citizen and we cannot restrict his activities”. Belgrade threatened to break diplomatic relations with Bulgaria because of my visit there and appearance on Bulgarian television. Belgrade protested my visit to the Soviet Union in 1988 as well as my earlier trips to Australia and elsewhere.

Incidentally, Australia was the only country I had trouble entering. My visa had to be approved by none other than the Australian foreign minister. The Australian Consul in New York warned me, “We are giving you a visa on condition that you do not deliver inflammatory speeches”. “Surprise”, I answered, “that’s not my style”. “I see that”, replied the consul, “but I was instructed to tell you this”.

It remains unclear to me how I was chosen to receive in 1986 the “Ellis Island Medal of Honor” as the representative of the American Croatian community, together with such prominent Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds as Jacqueline Kennedy, the actors Gregory Peck and Kirk Douglas, Donald Trump, Mohammad Ali, Cardinals John Krol and John O’Connor, Senators Frank Lausche and Daniel Inouye, John Kluge, the billionaire, Jean MacArthur the widow of General Douglas MacArthur, Claudette Colbert, Walter Cronkite, the distinguished journalist, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Joe DiMaggio, the baseball hero. Probably it was meant as a recognition of the CNC as a legitimate political organization.

By 1987, thanks to Dr. Otto von Habsburgh, I was invited to address a caucus of conservative deputies of the European parliament in Strasbourg. I visited the parliament on three subsequent occasions to speak on behalf of Croatian independence. In 1988, I was received for the first time by the State Department. I was told by Timothy

Deal, Assistant Secretary of State for Eastern Europe, that (1) the United States supports Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and independence; (2) it considers a confederal solution the best for Yugoslavia; (3) a military takeover was the worst scenario; (4) Washington was not opposed to a peaceful separation of the Yugoslav republics; (5) it did not favor the interests of one ethnic group over those of others. I was specifically told that the meeting was "on the record", that is that the meeting could be publicized.

My conversation at the State Department seemed to indicate a slight shift in Washington's policy towards Yugoslavia. Of course, the main factors forcing Washington to review its standing policy were the progressive disintegration of the Soviet Union and Milošević's dismantling of Tito's Yugoslavia. Still the State Department and the White House under the influence of Lawrence Eagleburger and Brent Scowcroft, the old Belgrade hands, continued to do whatever they could to insure Yugoslavia survival. The CIA was more realistic. It warned that the collapse of Yugoslavia was imminent and that a bloody civil war was probable.

In the late 1980s, for a brief time, the CNC had assumed the role as principal international spokesman of Croatia's aspirations. The Communist leadership of the Republic of Croatia was passive and unable to stand up to Milošević's aggressive Serbian expansionism. The Croatian opposition in the homeland remained silent. Nobody in Zagreb even dared respond to the "Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art", which called for a radical reconstruction of Yugoslavia in favor of Serbia. So, we of the CNC wrote a reply. Interestingly, only the Belgrade "Duga" commented and published extensive segments of our response probably seeking to open public debate. The Zagreb press said nothing.

But once the Croatian Communist leadership conscious of its weakness vis-à-vis Belgrade decided to permit free elections in 1990, the political balance of power was progressively redressed. The Croatian Democratic Union under Dr. Franjo Tuđman swept the 1990 elections in Croatia. Having received a mandate of the Croatian people Dr. Tuđman became the leader and the spokesman of Croatian nation's determination to establish independent state. At that point the CNC became superfluous. The reason for its existence had come to an end.

Conclusion

tional aspirations in the Free World. Finally we were given the chance to present the Croatian point of view to the Western media and governments. I do not have the illusion that we significantly influenced Western views concerning Yugoslavia. Adam Fergusson, a British member of the European parliament and adviser of Marguerite Thatcher gave a "position paper" I had written to the British Foreign Secretary, who read it and dismissed it with the comment, "Interesting, but completely contrary to reports of our ambassador in Belgrade".

The State Department, the British Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsey, continued to oppose Croatian independence throughout 1991, as war began and it was clear that Yugoslavia had fallen apart. The Western Big Three took Germany to task for forcing the recognition of Croatian and Slovene independence. They sponsored the UN embargo banning the sale of weapons to Yugoslavia, which harmed poorly armed Croatia in favor of the well-armed Yugoslav National Army. Open hostility towards President Tudman continued throughout with brief interludes, as occurred at the time of the signing of the Dayton Agreement. I well remember the State Department's reaction to Dr. Tudman's 1990 election victory. I was told: "We recognize the legitimacy of all freely elected governments. But it does not mean we have to give them our backing!"

Has the international community given up completely on Yugoslavia? Certainly the illusion is gone that Yugoslavia as it was can be restored. But, perhaps, a common economic market, a military and political association of states could be formed? After the elections of January 2000, which brought to power an "anti-Tudman coalition" headed by the SDP, Croatia remains under strong pressure to join a vague association of former Yugoslav republics minus Slovenia and plus Albania.

The stubborn opposition of the State Department, the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsey to Croatia's independence, shows how difficult it is to alter long established prejudices, illusions and commitments. After all, Yugoslavia was the creation of the Versailles Peace Conference. It was brought back to life by the Tehran Conference in 1943. For Washington, London and Paris, the collapse of Yugoslavia represented a foreign policy reversal inflicted by hostile forces they failed to checkmate, and not a flawed concept that had outlived its time - a state that sought to hold together against their will peoples diverse in history, tradition, religion, cultural heritage and language.