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VUKOVAR '91
IN AMERICAN,
CANADIAN AND
BRITISH PRESS

Introduction

Serbian aggression and aggression of the Yugoslav National Army on the Republic of Croatia, and especially events that took place in Vukovar, were a daily subject of interest of the international public, particularly in the year 1991 and 1992. We have here noted and interpreted some of the most significant reviews and analyses on Vukovar from renowned American, Canadian, English and Irish newspapers.

The mentioned newspapers have continued to deal with evaluations of the Vukovar events in the years to come. However, during those two years, the western press had been rather accurately informing its readers of the essence of conflicts in Croatia, most of all of the Vukovar events. In those times, some political structures in the international community still had not worked out the adequate political programme and its implementation on territories of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, western press reports were still not completely under the influence of the often false viewpoints, which are today accepted in some political structures of the international community. Because of that, newspaper articles here selected are offering a mainly objective picture of *Vukovar in 1991* and events in that war zone.

This paper is divided into eight sections, according to different topics presented in the press.

List of referred newspapers

USA:

- *The Buffalo News* 1992: December 1st
- *Chicago Sun - Times* 1992: October 30th
- *Chicago Tribune* 1992: September 1st; October 29th
- *The Christian Science Monitor* 1992: December 15th
- *The Daily Morning News* 1992: October 4th
- *The Economist* (US) 1991: August 31st

- *The Houston Chronicle* 1992: October 29th
- *The Lancet* 1991: December 7th
- *The New Republic* 1991: December 16th
- *New York Times* 1991: August 29th; October 1st, 21st; November 4th, 14th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 21st; 1992: March 4th; August 17th; November 29th
- *Plain Dealer* 1992: December 18th
- *The San Francisco Chronicle* 1992: September 1st
- *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1992: September 29th
- *Times* 1992: October 24th, 31st
- *USA Today* 1992: September 1st; October 27th
- *The Washington Post* 1992: October 24th; 29th
- *Wall Street Journal* 1991: August 29th; October 1st; 14th; November 4th, 11th, 12th, 14th, 18th, 19th; December 5th; 1992: October 7th

Canada:

- *The Gazette* (Montreal) 1992: December 29th
- *The Ottawa Citizen* 1992: October 23rd
- *The Toronto Star* 1992: September 20th; November 8th; December 1st

England:

- *The Daily Telegraph* (London) 1992: September 19th; October 29th; November 2nd, 10th, 19th; December 16th
- *Financial Times* (London) 1992: September 12th; October 17th
- *The Guardian* (London) 1992: October 23rd
- *The Independent* (London) 1992: October 27th, 29th; November 19th

Ireland:

- *The Irish Times* 1992: September 28th

How was first information on battles for Vukovar received

As early as on August 29th, 1991, *Wall Street Journal* from New York had written about radio reports on tanks and aircrafts being involved in battles in the eastern Croatian city of Vukovar. On October 1st, 1991, the same journal published a text stating that the *Yugoslav Army* has sent tanks and armoured divisions in battles against the secessionist Croatia and wants to conquer the well-defended Croatian city of Vukovar in a single military action.

On October 1st, 1991, *The New York Times* informed the readers that Serb-dominated *Yugoslav Army* has entered the *secessionist* Croatia and started a new offensive on Sep-

tember 30th, with the goal to conquer the besieged city of Vukovar.

On October 21st, 1991, *The New York Times* wrote about sporadic battles that are going on in the *secessionist* Republic of Croatia. They also mentioned a convoy aid of the *European Union* observers that had finally arrived to the besieged Vukovar, after the three-day delay, trying to ensure the cessation of hostilities in the sixteen-day long Yugoslav conflict.

On November 4th, 1991, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the escalation of war, stating that the *Yugoslav Army* has intensified attacks on besieged cities of Dubrovnik and Vukovar.

On November 11th, 1991, this journal stated that the *Yugoslav Army*, led by Serbs, is fighting with rebel Croats for every street, in order to take control over Vukovar, the key national area in the *national civil war*.

The Economist, US, on August 31st, 1991, in an analytic article states that the *Yugoslav Army* has finally disclosed that it is by no means neutral in conflicts between rebel Serbs and Croatia, which is fighting for independence from Yugoslavia. When Vukovar was attacked on August 25th with all weapons, allegedly nobody knew who started it. Some say that Croats did, cynically provoking attacks on themselves, in order to gain international sympathies and recognition, which journals did not believe.

And finally there was news about the fall of Vukovar. On November 18th, 1991, *Wall Street Journal* reported that Croatia has admitted military defeat by the *Yugoslav Army* in surrounded Vukovar and requested the *Red Cross* to save citizens of the town. The same journal, on December 19th, 1991 points out that Croatian military authorities have ordered their units to end the three-month-long battle against federal troops. On October 23rd, 1992 Canadian *Toronto Star* also wrote that Serbs have gained control over Vukovar.

Evaluations of war actions around Vukovar

On September 19th, 1992, *The Daily Telegraph* from London, describing Serbian celebration of the *liberation of Vukovar*, states: "Serbs have conquered Vukovar in one of the most violent battles in the Yugoslav civil war". *The San Francisco Chronicle*, on September 1st, 1992 says that you should really have guts if you want to walk across Vukovar. This journal warns its readers that Vukovar was the first place in former Yugoslavia where centuries-long animosities between Serbs and Croats have emerged into the war of absolute vengeance, which knows no logic.

The Independent from London, on November 19th, 1992 writes about the celebration of the one-year anniversary of liberation of Vukovar by Serb-dominated *Yugoslav Army*: "Citizens are mourning after their town. When they are asked who did it, they avoid the answer. However, one Serb has nevertheless admitted that it was done by drunk Serbian officers". Serbian Orthodox priest Stavrofor, describing cruelties that have happened in the town, said: "This is European Hiroshima. This is a war of horrors, war from hell. This is a devil's war."

On October 7th, 1992, *Wall Street Journal* based in New York brings news that Vukovar museum was completely destroyed. Department of Archaeology resembled archaeological findings with scattered pieces of ancient statues. However, it is noticed that a miracle occurred here: "Pedestals with busts of Marx, Lenin, Engels and Stalin were remained intact".

The Houston Chronicle, on October 29th, 1992 informs its readers that mixed marriages between Serbs and Croats were common in Vukovar before the war. Now, if they are not dead, Croats are victims of ethnic genocide and exiled from that area. Serbs are afraid to ask the police for permissions for their spouses to return home. An Orthodox priest, who had lived in Vukovar for 37 years, says that there were never as many divorces as today.

Theses on the distribution of blame for the battle for Vukovar

On December 1st, 1992, *The Buffalo News* mentions ethnic cleansing on territories of former Yugoslavia. It is pointed out that Croats and Muslims have also practiced ethnic cleansing, but "their efforts" were not as systematic as those in areas controlled by Serbs.

The San Francisco Chronicle, on September 1st, 1992, obviously unobjectively informed, says that the greatest crimes committed by the Croatian side were those of the "ultra-right Ustashes", nationalists that are allegedly using the Nazi salute and walking in marching step.

On September 8th, 1992, *The Irish Times* published a letter to the editor in which some reader claims that the war recognition of Croatia by Germany has definitely provoked the war, started by Serbs and their *Yugoslav Army*, conquering and destroying a great part of Croatia. Serbian arguments - that they have protected the Serbian minority - are not true, points out this reader, and asks: "Why were they then attacking predominantly Croatian areas?"

On October 7th, 1992, *Wall Street Journal* tries to distribute blame for conflicts: "After Croatia proclaimed in-

dependency, tensions escalated between local Croats and Serbs, who were manipulated by nationalist politicians, accusing one another”.

Chicago Tribune shares this opinion. In the October 1st, 1992 issue, the journal states: “Report of the United Nations from the last Monday points out that all three ethnic groups – Croats, Serbs and Muslims are responsible for crimes. However, Serbian forces are held the most responsible for violation of human rights in the Bosnian war”.

On November 1st, 1992, *The Toronto Star* also sees the responsibility for the war on both sides and states that the tragedy of the battle for Vukovar lies in the fact that no one here, or at least it seems so, understands why it has occurred, why all those ruins. One Serb said: “There is no logic explanation for what has happened here. Croatian unilateral declaration of independency from Yugoslavia on June 25th last year has changed it all”.

Was it a conquering war?

On December 16th, 1991, *The New Republic* refers to Mile Šušnjar, *Yugoslav National Army* colonel, who has led a group of foreign reporters through Vukovar and claimed that it was a crucial issue for Serbs to liberate Vukovar. He accused *fascist Ustasbas* (Croats) for destroying the town. However, journalist of *The New Republic* notices that during 86 days of siege under the *Yugoslav Army*, the entire world has seen reports from the Croatian city of Vukovar.

The Times, on November 19th, 1992, followed the Serbian anniversary of conquering Vukovar with the speech of Veseljko Šljivančanin and his statement to the gathered crowd: “This is Yugoslavia, this is Serbia, this is Montenegro”.

On November 19th, 1992, *The Financial Times* quotes Šljivančanin’s speech, in which he, among other things, stated: “Europe and the rest of the world have to understand that we would betray those who gave their lives in order to make Vukovar a part of Serbia”.

The same journal also quotes Šešelj’s statement: “Serbia will never be brought to knees (...) International community is trying to weaken Serbia, but they will never break Yugoslavia”.

The Chicago Tribune, on September 1st, 1992, added to the above-mentioned statements the one by the Serbian officer Milko Dačević, in which he claims that it is the Serbian goal to create new borders after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. It does not only apply to Goražde, but also to

Vukovar, Bijeljina, Gospić, Foča and Čajnici, so there will be no more borders between Serbs.

On December 29th, 1992, *The Toronto Star* points out the solidarity of Serbs, quoting Zoran Trajković, the Kosovo Serb, who says: "I am a Serb, my motives for fighting are patriotic, I wish to help my brothers Serbs".

On October 29th, 1992 *The Washington Post* informs of the threat of the Serbian officer Petković, who said that if the *United Nations* with negotiations would some day award Croatia by placing Vukovar under Croatian control, and regardless of what they in Geneva are negotiating about, Serbs would definitely not leave Vukovar without the fight.

The Daily Telegraph on November 19th, 1992 points out that new citizens are irrevocably insisting on the claim that Vukovar will never again be Croatian, regardless of the fact that Croats were the majority in the city before the war, and that their heritage in Vukovar descends from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and not from Serbia.

The Washington Post, on October 29th, 1992, describes the situation in Vukovar: "Victorious Serbs, several thousands of them, surrounded by destroyed houses. Fundamental political issue of where is Vukovar - in Croatia, Serbia or somewhere called Serbian Krajina, is yet to be solved".

Responsibility for war crimes

The Toronto Star, on December 1st, 1992 states that Mazowiecki has strongly condemned Serbian crimes in former Yugoslavia. *Chicago Tribune*, on November 29th, 1992 writes that Sarif Bassiouni, a member of the *United Nations* commission and Professor of Law at the *De Paul University* in Chicago stated that there are numerous evidences of crimes in Vukovar, which could serve for prosecution of those responsible for war crimes in the Yugoslav war, only if the Security Council or some other international body would form a tribunal to conduct an investigation.

On December 1st, 1992, *The Buffalo News* publishes a report of the United Nations Secretary General Butros Butros Ghali, in which he accuses Serbs of creating or causing conditions for lawlessness and disorder.

For *The Daily Telegraph*, on December 16th, 1992, Vukovar is the first leading example of war crimes. This was also confirmed by the statement of the USA Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleberger, where he says that those war criminals should be prosecuted at the international court the same way as Hitler's collaborators in Nürnberg.

On November 29th, 1992, *The New York Times* informs its readers that after the investigation was completed, com-

mission for war crimes investigations intends to suggest to the *Security Council* for establishment of an *ad hoc* or permanent tribunal. A journal points out that investigators are convinced that there is enough evidence to identify perpetrators. Regardless of the nature of war, if you kill wounded people from the hospital, it is a war crime.

Placing Vukovar in context of other war actions

On November 1st, 1992, *The Toronto Star* warns that restoration of Vukovar would be a Herculean task, even for the brave ones. But they also cautiously notice that Vukovar would be a challenging area for development of historic prejudices that would encourage the continuation of war in the years to come.

The Daily Telegraph, on November 19th, 1992 quotes one Serb, Olivera Rokvić, who has stated that some people say that Vukovar must not be repeated. But battles have spread on other towns. This city is a symbol of war, and not a symbol of a need for peace. And nothing will change until Serbs and Croats understand that. And that is a long way ahead, said Olivera Rokvić.

Wall Street Journal, on December 5th, 1992 writes that citizens of Dubrovnik have directed an appeal for help to the world, where they say: "Citizens of Vukovar are no longer able to call or write for help".

On October 31st, 1992 *The Times* writes that there is only one possibility that could save Sarajevo from being destroyed as a town, as Vukovar was a year ago, and that is a determined military intervention or at least one convincing threat of such action from the *United Nations*, USA and the *European Union*.

The San Francisco Chronicle shares such opinion on September 1st, 1992, pointing out that nothing was done for people in Vukovar, partially because the attention was focused on Sarajevo.

The Daily Telegraph informs its readers of the spreading of war operations. Thus the issue from November 1st, 1992 states that Serbs are practicing the same war tactics in the north-eastern Bosnia, as in the siege of Vukovar. First they bomb their target from sides with artillery and rockets, and they also use tanks.

In the September 19th, 1992 issue it is stated that just after the Serbian and Yugoslav forces have made efforts to conquer the Eastern Croatian city of Vukovar during the last November, it is now expected that they will try to take control of the Sarajevo area and of the great part of the occupied territory in Southern, Eastern and South-Eastern Bosnia.

In the issue from the November 2nd, 1992 it is concluded that Serbs from Bosnia and Croatia are now one step away from achieving their war aspirations – creation of *Great Serbia*, which would occupy great parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Comments on the International Community activities

On November 12th, 1991, The *Wall Street Journal* claims that if any encouragement could be found in the fact that the *European Union* has imposed sanctions on Yugoslavia, it is the fact that the *European Union* is finally agreeing on something. Would that throw Slobodan Milošević and his masters of war to their knees is a big question. Economic sanctions are a small possibility of stopping the war and politic brutality. With the well-advanced civil war, Milošević's goal is to stay in war, and not to have friends. Sanctions are ineffective and uncertain. If USA and the *European Union* were more decisive in accepting the certainty of the inevitable dissipation of Yugoslavia in the past century, today their policy would be much more efficient. Simply, there was no unanimous Western policy. Why those twelve nations, which were in favour of political unity, were not able to do anything more than to impose economic sanctions. Disputes between Germany and France have delayed the sending of peacekeeping forces.

On October 7th, 1992 the same journal concludes that Vukovar in the Serbs-occupied Croatia is a city rich with symbolism of the irreconcilable demands of both countries. The city of the first great battle in the *Yugoslav civil war* is now a complete ruin. Although a peace plan of the *United Nations* is inviting Serbs to leave the occupied areas, such a plan is very weak. Serbs have no intention of leaving because for them Vukovar is a part of Serbia. If the *United Nations* continues to insist, Serbs will oppose. If the UN does not succeed, Croats are threatening to fight for the return of Vukovar in Croatia, concludes the journal.

Message regarding the Vukovar events

On November 19th, 1992, *The Independent, London* bitterly concludes that the ethnic logic has forced Serbs to liberate Vukovar by destroying it.

Journal *USA Today*, on October 1st, 1992 points out the fact that Vukovar is the earliest and the most destructive battle in the *Yugoslav war*. The journal quotes the Belgian Captain Malherge, who claims that Croatian refugees would be killed if they were to return to Vukovar: "We can

offer no guarantee to refugees. It would be a real massacre. The town conquered last year in the *blitzkrieg* is now a part of the Serbian Republic of Krajina. Seventy percent of the population owns machine guns. It is a Serbian tradition to have weapons”.

On December 15th, 1992, *The Christian Science Monitor* reminds of the fact that the *Yugoslav Army* tanks have caused that Vukovar resembles Stalingrad. Furthermore, the journal writes about the world sympathy for the Croatian cause. The Former Yugoslav Republic was seen as the victim of Serbian aggression, and there was an aim to fulfil its democratic aspirations.

On September 20th, 1992, *The Toronto Star* analyses the situation on the former Yugoslav territory, claiming that for journalists, whose first intention was to report on triumph of democracy in satellite states of the disintegrating *devil's empire*, development of events in the Eastern Europe turned out to be sending a completely different message. Different from Somalia, or any other place in Africa where poverty and hunger have contributed to chaos, tragedy that came upon Yugoslavia is entirely the result of complete frivolity.

The New York Times on March 4th, 1992 concludes that devastation of the 700 years old city of Vukovar is the result of the *Yugoslav civil war* between Serbs and Croats. Graves are also the silent warning of the bitter ethnic hatred, which was repressed for decades by the communist authorities, and exploded after the fall of communism in the Eastern Europe and USSR.

Vukovar was so heavily bombed that some here believe that it would never again be restored. They are quoting one Yugoslav Army officer – psychologist: “Perhaps the best we should now do is to leave the city exactly as it is, in order for future generations to see the consequences of human irrationality”. However, the journal relates this tragedy to proclamation of independence of Croatia and Slovenia from the “Serbs-dominated Yugoslav federacy”.

In the city military command there is no mention of Serbian forces returning Vukovar to Croatia. “Never, never”, said the Yugoslav Army officer Vojislav Đolović. Among *winners* it is emphasized that it was the *liberation of town*. Accidental passers-by said to journalists that there were no ethnic tensions in town, and those that have occurred were initiated by the new-comers, and have not culminated until the proclamation of Croatian independence. Furthermore, it is concluded that the development of *democracy* pushed Yugoslavia into hell.