
Dražen
ŽIČIĆ

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VUKOVAR '91
IN THE CROATIAN
EMIGRANT PRESS

I.

International aspects and reverberations of events that took place in Vukovar in the late summer and autumn of 1991 are impossible to completely understand without at least a glimpse into the Croatian emigrant press. In other words, the Croatian emigrant press, especially in English speaking countries, because of its availability to a wider range of readers than the Croatian emigration itself, to a significant degree contributed to the international perception of *Vukovar '91*.

It is easy to understand that the views of Croatian emigration regarding the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91*, events that occurred and the tragedy of Vukovar were reflected in the Croatian emigrant press. However, the opinions regarding the Croatian nation-building movement in the homeland as well as Serbian military aggression on the Republic of Croatia were also presented during the time which is particularly important - when the Croatian state was still not internationally recognised.

The Croatian emigrant press had and still has a great importance in informing emigrants, in preserving the Croatian identity of numerous Croatian settlements all around the world, but also in creating a bridge of its own kind for Cooperation and understanding between the homeland and emigrated Croatia, as well as between Croatian national interests and interests of the international community. The latter came into play especially in the process of preparations for Croatian independency, which were soon confronted with the open Serbian aggression. Among other things, it was then necessary in a well-argued and documented way to oppose well-established stereotypes and prejudices about Croats and the Croatian state, perseveringly spread by the Yugoslav and great-Serbian governing, political, diplomatic and scientific structures in the former Yugoslavia, as well as abroad.

The Croatian emigrant press played an important role in the preservation and development of nation-building

ideas among emigrated Croats, which was an important precondition for raising their awareness regarding the need for the creation of an independent Croatian state as the most important, in other words, the only condition for the survival and progress of Croatian people.

In general, the issue of the *Croatian Homeland War* is still an insufficiently studied subject of Croatian contemporary reality and its recent past. Evaluation of the *Croatian Homeland War* is possible and necessary from different aspects, but taking into account its causes and consequences, the historical, political, demographical and international aspects of war and aggression are the most important. In view of this, it has to be admitted that the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91* is still not absolutely objectively and comprehensively analysed and evaluated in the Croatian community.

Commemorating the 10th anniversary of the *Battle for Vukovar*, of the unspeakable destructions of the town and sufferings of its citizens, and elucidating some international aspects and reverberations of *Vukovar '91*, let us at least point out the role of the Croatian emigrant press in spreading the truth about Croatia, and especially in promoting rights of Croatian people to freedom, to achieve an independent state and above all in promoting the right to defend their own home and homeland. For the purpose of this paper it is not possible to embrace all aspects of the role and significance of the Croatian emigration in preservation of the Croatian identity and promotion of Croats' right to their own state. However, this is an opportunity to learn about the importance of *Vukovar in '91* in the Croatian emigrant press, that is, about the way the emigrant press presented and evaluated the situation in Vukovar.

Croatian emigrants contributed immensely to the creation and defence of the Croatian state. This contribution is obvious in many aspects and areas - from providing political, financial and material support, to the direct inclusion of emigrants into Croatian military formations.

Vukovar '91 was the central event in the formation of the Croatian state and in the *Croatian Homeland War*. *Vukovar '91* was the symbol of Croatian resistance to the aggressor, as well as also an advance sign of the victory in war. As such, it deserves to be reflected on and evaluated from different viewpoints, especially regarding international reverberations, including the contexts of the Croatian emigrant press, because it was responsible for all the relevant information on actual events in Croatia and in Vukovar in the year 1991.

In my analysis, I have focused on the events taking place between the end of August to the end of December 1991, because that was the period of the direct and most intense aggression on Vukovar and surrounding areas. I have selected six Croatian emigrant publications – two from Australia (*Hrvatski vjesnik* and *Spremnost*), two from the United States of America (*Zajedničar* and *Naša Nada*), and two from Canada (*Hrvatski glas* and *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*). In total, 71 copies of emigrant journals (weekly, fortnightly and monthly editions) were analysed.

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The phenomenon of *Vukovar '91* in the Croatian emigrant press should be observed in the context of its role in providing information about the war in Croatia and Vukovar to the Croatian emigration and the wider international public. In that sense, the role of the Croatian emigrant press should be also evaluated in the light of its contribution to the refutation of the widespread great-Serbian and Yugoslavian propaganda among Croatian emigrants, as well as in international political and other circles.

It is essential to determine to what extent the Croatian emigrant press represented valid sources of information on things that have actually happened in Vukovar and in Croatia in autumn 1991. In the mentioned context we may also raise certain questions: Did Croatian emigration, through Croatian emigrant press, recognise *Vukovar '91* as the core of the Croatian fight for independence and creation of the independent Croatian state? Did Croatian emigration accept the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91* as the base of new Croatia and foundations of Croatian future? In other words, which symbolic and connotative dimensions of *Vukovar '91* were evaluated and considered in the Croatian emigrant press during September, October, November and December of the year 1991?

It should be pointed out that the Croatian emigrant press was following events in Vukovar and its surroundings during the end of summer and autumn of 1991. However, the number of articles, as well as their analytic quality are undoubtedly indicating that there were serious limitations, due to the lack of relevant and, most of all, timely official and other information, which had to be, but obviously were not adequately directed from Croatia towards the emigration. The latter means that, in general, Croatian emigration was insufficiently informed on events in their homeland, at least in the context of contribution of the Croatian emigrant press to such information.

To a certain degree it is understandable; as one may expect, the Croatian emigrant press was mostly focused on presenting the Croatian question and Croatian way of life in new environments, and not as much on the transfer of information from the homeland. In the context of war in Croatia and Vukovar in 1991 this represented a serious flaw; not only the level of information of Croatian emigrants was reduced, but also the role of the Croatian emigrant press in informing the wider international public about actual events in Croatia and in Vukovar in 1991. This resulted in a smaller number of articles and reviews on Vukovar than expected, considering the significance of Vukovar, and even more so considering the engagement of the Croatian emigration in defence of Croatia.

Only a few of the analysed publications, especially the Australian *Hrvatski vjesnik* and *Spremnost*, were regularly and rather comprehensively reporting on events in and around Vukovar in 1991. In other publications such reports were occasional and evidently written with the lack of the actual and reliable information.

Regardless of all above mentioned, the Croatian emigrant press had soon recognised, both on the symbolic and identity level, the meaning of the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91*. It was especially obvious in days and weeks after the Serbian occupation of Vukovar. I will try to substantiate these facts with several selected and most evident examples.

In the November 1st, 1991 issue of *Hrvatski vjesnik*¹ there is a text entitled *Please, understand this message as an appeal*, with the overttitle *Stop the War in Croatia, Give Vukovar a Chance*, which is in fact the unsigned testimony of one sufferer from Vukovar dated October 27th, meaning in the period of the hardest ordeals of defenders and citizens of Vukovar. Among other things, this text states that “*the war until extinction is going on in Vukovar*”, that “*death has become the most important part of life in this destroyed town*”, that “*Vukovar is not only an assembly of buildings, it is a living organism that breathes. Vukovar has his blood stream, his life that is now being taken away from him. They are tearing apart his flesh, breaking his bones*”.

Author of this appeal humbly begs: “*We are not asking for mercy from no one, we are only asking for a life worthy of man. We are asking that our children have a chance, chance for these young boys to have their own children*”. In the same issue, *Hrvatski vjesnik* brings the text authored by Drago Veselčić, originally published in *Večernji list* in Zagreb, entitled *The Calm Before a Storm?*, which states the data on losses of Yugoslav military and paramilitary (Chetnik) for-

mations in attacks on Vukovar and its surroundings. The power of the military force that had pounced upon the town and its citizens becomes evidently clear from those losses.

The November 22nd, 1991 issue of the same journal includes the article entitled *Our Brave Vukovar*, which, among other things, says the following: “Croatian town Vukovar and all defenders of Vukovar have demonstrated and are demonstrating the chivalrous fight of Croatian people for freedom and free life in their Croatian homeland, for which they have made and are making superhuman sacrifices in defence of every little piece of Croatian land... Vukovar is not the Croatian Leningrad, nor is it the Croatian Stalingrad, or the Carthage... Vukovar was and is only one thing - Croatian Vukovar in superhuman fight against hundreds and hundreds of steel tanks and thousands and thousands of high explosive shells, bombs and rockets... Vukovar is the symbol, a pride and will of one people in fight for peace, order and human dignity against the barbaric terror from Serbia... Vukovar and defenders of Vukovar, alive or bodily dead are the conscience of the sleepy Europe... Vukovar, that is another life that unites us and invites us to go forward together, even stronger in this fight against terror, fight for To Be or Not To Be”.

The same issue of *Hrvatski vjesnik* includes the article entitled *Croatian Blood, Sweat and Tears* authored by journalist Željko Žutelija. In this article he reflects on the attitude of the international political and wider public towards the events in Vukovar. Žutelija writes the following: “The Tragedy of Vukovar consists of thousands of such destinies in the greatest post-war suffering of a town in Europe. Those who survive this hell will be able to give evidence of the genocide committed upon the nation that was unfortunate enough to live close to the Serbian border, over which constantly were passing new conquering hordes, killing people and destroying Vukovar, while the world was watching calmly and indifferently, ignoring appeals for help of the suffering and wounded citizens and defenders ... Europe and World have betrayed Vukovar. They have allowed the great-Serbian militant madness to destroy the beautiful town on Danube, and to expose citizens of that town to sufferings unremembered in the recent history of humanity. They have not offered help, they did not name the aggressor, they did not stop the war ... the world did not want to see the truth, and because of that Vukovar was suffering and finally fell”. Žutelija also points out the dilemma of the Croatian public, which is “divided in the evaluation of possibilities of the Croatian state to offer greater and more efficient help to Vukovar”.

In the December 6th, 1991 issue of *Hrvatski vjesnik*, there is another article by Željko Žutelija, entitled *Freedom Dawns in Croatia*, stating, among other things, the follow-

ing: "Fight of Vukovar against the superior enemy, sometimes in ratio of one to hundred, is a heroic victory of fighters who have surpassed all known military theories on endurance, bravery and resistance to the enemy incomparably stronger in technique and in numbers".

December 13th and December 20th, 1991 issues of *Hrvatski vjesnik* include the interview by I. Butković with the defender of Vukovar Marko Baketa, entitled *Hiroshima as the Mild Imitation of Vukovar*. In this comprehensive and very emotional conversation all horrors of war and the great-Serbian aggression that came upon Vukovar were presented, but certain unknown facts, even controversies related to the tragedy of Vukovar were also mentioned.

I would only like to quote several very impressive thoughts: "When Croatia needed to be defended, Vukovar has shown and proven how Croatia should really be defended... And never, I believe never again will any town live on promises as much as Vukovar did... Then at least try to understand how much did people of Vukovar had to convince themselves that they must succeed, because after all those sufferings we did not even try to imagine what would happen if we fell".

A shorter review of controversies concerning the defence and fall of Vukovar is included in the November 1991 issue of *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*.² The article entitled *The Twelfth Truce Is Signed And Destruction Of Croatia Continues* states the following: "In the last few days many critiques could be heard regarding the defence of this firm Croatian base. We have received different information via fax, from Radio Vukovar and from some officers, who are complaining that Zagreb has forgotten and abandoned Vukovar".

However, the December issue of the same journal evaluates the symbolic and the real importance of Vukovar. In the text entitled *Vukovar - The Croatian Siget*, it is stated that: "Broken, demolished, destroyed, occupied, bombed from the air, from Danube and from ground, enduring heroically all attacks and - losses, all troubles and lacks of the essential life provisions and of the defence - Vukovar has become the symbol of Croatian courage and determination to defend Croatian sovereignty and independence on this east position of the truncated Croatia".

After the information on the fall and occupation of Vukovar, *Hrvatski glas*³ from Canada, in the November 30th, 1991 issue, dedicated an entire page to Vukovar. In the article entitled *Vukovar Has Fallen*, it is written that: "Heroic resistance of citizens of Vukovar and courage of Croatian volunteers enters the bloody history of fight in the name of life of Croatia! They deserve gold medals from pillars of democracy of the world. New Vukovar will be the fortress on the border between the East and the West".

*Zajedničar*⁴ also writes about events in Vukovar. In the October 23rd, 1991 issue of that journal there is an article entitled *Heavy Defeat Of Serbian Elite Forces In Vukovar*, stating the following: “*When the history of the Croatian defensive war will be written, Vukovar will definitely have a honorary place*”.

I have already pointed out that regarding the systematic following of events in and around Vukovar, along with *Hrvatski vjesnik*, there is another significant journal of Croatian emigrants in Australia – *Spremnost*.⁵ I will only quote several titles of articles published in *Spremnost* in the period from September until December 1991, most of which are titles from the cover page. For example: *Thousands Of Terrorists Rushed At Vukovar* on October 8th, *Tragedy Of Vukovar* on October 22nd, *Enemy Broken Before Vukovar* on November 5th, *Legendary Defenders Of Vukovar* on November 26th.

In the November 26th issue of *Spremnost*, there is a title of the article on the cover – *There'll Be Meat, There'll Be Meat, We Will Slaughter Croats...*, in which, among other things, it is stated the following: “*Those were the words of the song that echoed the streets of Vukovar when 'liberators' were singing and getting ready for new massacres, carrying their symbols – skulls and knives. It was shown and heard on all continents of the world, but everybody acted as if they do not understand. Horrible!*” In symbolic sense, *Spremnost* compares Vukovar to Leonidas who is defending the pass of Thermopylae (in the October 29th, 1991 issue).

This was only a selection of the most significant articles and reviews published by the Croatian emigrant press on Vukovar in September, October, November and December 1991. It is not a large number of articles, but they are revealing the basic attitude of the Croatian emigrant press towards the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91*. And so, Vukovar is the *Croatian Siget*, Vukovar is *the symbol of Croatian courage and determinedness*, Vukovar is *the fortress on the border between the East and the West*, Vukovar will take a *honorary place* in the history of Croatian fight for freedom.

It is completely obvious that the more complete insight into the presence of *Vukovar '91* phenomenon in the Croatian emigrant press can only be obtained from the analysis of the entire ten-year period, which should involve the widest possible spectrum of emigrant publications and other Croatian media, especially the radio, from all parts of the world, in which Croats live. However, this short survey was more than sufficient to conclude that the

Croatian emigrant press, regardless of a series of limitations, dedicated enough deserved space to events in and around Vukovar, marking the phenomenon of *Vukovar '91* as the crucial event in Croatian fight for freedom and independence.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Hrvatski vjesnik* is a weekly journal of Croatian community in Australia, which has been published since 1983 in Melbourne, Victoria. For this review, 16 articles were analysed – issues from September 6 (issue No. 389) to December 19 (issue No. 404), 1991.
- ² *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* is a monthly journal, free organ of united Croats, which has been published in Toronto, Canada since the year 1961. For this review, four issues were analysed, from September (issue No. 365) to December (issue No. 368) of the year 1991.
- ³ *Hrvatski glas* is a fortnightly journal, organ of Radić's emigrated Croatia, from the Canadian town Nanaim. It has been published since the year 1929. In total, eight issues were analysed, published in the period from August 31 (issue No. 16) to December 25 (issue No. 23/24), 1991.
- ⁴ *Zajedničar* is a weekly journal, organ of the Croatian Fraternal Union from Pittsburgh. It was first published in the year 1905. Seventeen weekly issues were analysed, from September 4 (issue No. 34) to December 25 (issue No. 51), 1991.
- ⁵ *Spremnost* is a weekly journal that has been published since 1958 in Sydney, Australia. Sixteen weekly issues were analysed, from September 3 (issue No. 35) to December 17 (issue No. 50), 1991.