

INDEPENDENT CROATIA: HISTORY, ISSUES, AND POLICY

IVO BANAC

Prof. Ivo Banac
Yale University

Contemporary Croatia is a product of a long history and a momentary opportunity. The political framework of these processes is the real contribution of a rudimentary state that the Croat clans founded in the shade of the vestiges of Rome – literally outside the coastal Byzantine possessions in Dalmatia, itself a Roman administrative unit; and in the proximity of Charlemagne's empire, itself an imitation of Rome. The political marginality of the Croats in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has contributed to the aggrandizement of the Croat image of their medieval protostate. Still, just as elsewhere in Europe, medieval statehood generally was not ethnically conceived. Moreover, it was seigniorial and highly regionalized. Its territory varied from the original principality that extended from Nin to the Cetina River in present-day northern Dalmatia to the relatively larger territories of the last of the medieval kings. These included much of Croatia's present territory and most of western Bosnia (to the Vrbas River). From the modern point of view, the twelfth-century integration of this state with Hungary was an epic disaster. Contemporaries did not view it as such and were not in fact diminished in self-rule. Croatia, no less than Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary, developed in the maze of feudal ties that had nothing to do with modern ethnicities. The noble elites of these states practiced their own form of parliamentary rule, closed to the non-nobles, but open to the royally-appointed newcomers, including Orthodox Christians.

Which brings us to the question of religion, particularly in its supposed role of an ethnic marker? Though Croats generally speaking are Roman Catholics, it cannot be argued that the privileged position of Western Christianity, particularly in its Latin liturgical language and rite, was unchallenged through the ages. Croatian Catholicism developed on one of Europe's most sensitive frontiers with the Eastern Orthodoxy. On both sides of the frontier were Slavs, not Latins and Greeks. Moreover, their religious separation did not happen in a heap; it was a process that lasted centuries. The fact that the Croats, alone among the Catholic Slavs, use the Greek name for Jesus (*Isus*) is quite revealing. Likewise, the Latin influences, notably in architecture, are obvious on the Orthodox side of the divide. Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of Orthodox Slavs was used in parts of Roman Catholic Croatia until the twentieth century. And the divide was shifting. Through much of its history, coastal Montenegro, but also some of the highlands, was no less Latin than Dalmatia.

Ivo Banac is Bradford Durfee Emeritus Professor of History at Yale University and Professor of History at the University of Zagreb. From 1995 to 1999 he was the University Professor of History at the Central European University at Budapest, where he also directed the OSI/CEU Institute on Southeastern Europe. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Stanford University, and is the author of *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (1984), which was awarded the Wayne S. Vucinich Prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (1988), which was awarded the Josip Juraj Strossmayer Award by the Zagreb Book Fair, as well as numerous additional reviews, articles, and collections. He served as the co-chair of the Open Society Institute (Croatia) and as the Director General of the Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik. He was also the minister of environmental protection and urban planning in the government of Croatia (2003), a member of the Croatian parliament (Sabor) (2003-2007), and the president of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (2007-2009). He is a corresponding member of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU) and the past and current editor of *East European Politics and Societies*.

The Ottoman conquest, which started in the fourteenth century, prompted a partial Orthodox exodus to the West. By this time, however, the Catholics and the Orthodox were quite distinct. In addition, Islam made converts wherever the Ottoman state acquired new territory. Instead of being ethnic markers, great religious traditions contributed to the creation of modern nations, in Croatia no less than in the neighboring Balkan states. There is a contradiction here. Modern Croat nation-makers always considered the Croats to be multiconfessional. They were not put off by the Orthodox and Muslims for as long as they viewed themselves as ethnically Croat. In practice, however, it was the Catholic base in Croatia, no less than in Ireland and Poland, which graduated to the status of “ethnic” Croats in modernity. It is a story of an ethnic marker by a process of elimination. It is as difficult to explain to the beginners in Irish history that the founders of Irish nationalism, such as Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet, were Protestants. Likewise, it is difficult to explain to those who are barely acquainted with Croatian history that Nikola Zrinski (Zrínyi Miklós), the hero of the fifteenth-century anti-Ottoman wars, immensely popular in both Croatia and Hungary, was a Protestant.

The question of nationalism is highly contentious in contemporary Croat consciousness. There is no doubt that the belief in the common Croat ancestry and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements for autonomy and independence created the modern Croat identity. Yet, the concept of nationalism is avoided in contemporary Croatia as it triggers unwelcome associations. Croats are supposed to be notoriously nationalistic. Their falls from grace, particularly in the twentieth century, are always tied to nationalism. Yet, Croat nationalism was more often integrative than ethnic, more often in function of the South Slavic common cause than of Croat isolationism. Not only that, Croat nationalism was least often the property of the political Right. It was the political left, not just the Communists, but the various populists and social rebels, that popularized the main themes of Croat nationalism: struggle against the foreign rulers – against the Venetian galley masters and the Austrian frontier officers; incredulity at the standoffish West that does not appreciate the Croat sacrifices in defense of Europe against the Ottomans (Croatia as the rampart of Christendom); the virtues of Croat barbarian simplicity in face of supposed Western “decadence.” The political Right only added the cultural code: Croatia belongs to the West and hence her eastern borders are civilizational. On this side live the cultural and historical betters.

These messages have been compressed in the debates that have dominated internal Croat dialogue after the independence. On the one hand, the goal of independence was hardly controversial among the vast majority of Croatia’s people. On the other, it failed to elicit unanimous support among the significant sections of non-Croats. The question of how to define Croatia in an inclusive manner, not just internally but in relation to Croatia’s neighbors, remains the most important of the outstanding issues. It is connected with the political goal of entering the EU, but also with a modicum of internal self-realization in which the goal of a critical reading of Croatia’s history is paramount. Of course, this is not a unique problem. Europe as a whole faces a good deal of an internal stock taking. Its cultural unity is at issue as are the political means of addressing the new varieties of Europeans. Croatia’s complexities are merely a microcosm of the equivalent European concerns.

Still, there are some Croatian peculiarities, particularly in the reading of twentieth-century history. Before 1990 there were two camps. One held the monopoly of interpretation in Yugoslavia and the other in the emigration. Their dispute was historical and sealed in blood. Of course, there were opinions and even significant public voices that did not easily fit the two camps. (In every war there are some neutrals and a few spaces for parley.) One of the great paradoxes in the post-1990 public debates in Croatia, however, is that the structure of two irreconcilable camps still exists. Moreover, the spaces for parley have been reduced and the erosion of integral positions within the two monopolies has been significantly reversed.

To a degree the two camps are predictable. The narrative of the Right was simple. The Croats were a legitimist Nation and their Paliament (Sabor) elected the Habsburgs to the throne of the Kingdom of Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia in 1526. As a result, the Kingdom’s connection to the other lands of the Habsburg Monarchy was purely personal and dynastic, but not – at the same time – accidental. Croatia, with its thousand-year-old culture belonged to Western Europe and not to the Balkans. Croatia was for centuries the rampart of Christendom (*antemurale Christianitatis*) against the Ottoman Muslim menace and the Orthodox schismatics; hers was a Marian kingdom, Virgin Mary being the *Advocata Croatiae*.

Still, the superiority of Croatia’s culture and her services to the Monarchy were not duly honored under the Habsburgs. Though the Croats were certain that the throne really supported them against the Hungarians (*Aula est pro nobis*), and although they sacrificed themselves for the dynasty during the most dangerous threats, as under Jelačić during the Hungarian revolution in 1848 (*Moriamur pro rege nostro*), the dynasty did not award them with the prize of the trialistic division of the Monarchy. Had the South Slavic provinces of the Monarchy (the territory that legitimately was Croatian alone) received the same degree of autonomy as

Hungary after the *Ausgleich* (1866), the Monarchy most likely would not have collapsed in the course of the Great War and Croatia would not have fallen prey to the Serbs – “Turkish slaves until yesterday,” who within the first Yugoslavia (1918-1941) destroyed every vestige of Croatian autonomy – the Sabor, the Ban (*prorex* or viceroy), crown and banners, territorial army (*domobrani*) – that they enjoyed in Austria-Hungary.

The Right argued that the interwar Serbian domination was a result of treason. But the Right went beyond the policy of stiff opposition and calls for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. After the assassination of Stjepan Radić (1871-1928), the dominant Croat political leader after 1918 and the president of the Croat Peasant Party (HSS), moreover by a Serb deputy on the floor of the Yugoslav National Assembly in Belgrade, and the establishment of the dictatorial regime of Yugoslavia’s King Aleksandar Karađorđević (1888-1934), the Right opted for violent insurgency. The Ustaša (Insurgent) movement of Ante Pavelić (1889-1959), which operated since 1929 under the protection of Mussolini’s Italy and other revisionist powers, did everything in its power to discredit Radić’s pacifism. In the circumstances of the 1930s, this attitude inevitably led to the fascistization of the Ustaša movement. The domestic supporters of the Ustašas made their option for the “new order” obvious even before the Axis attack on and dismemberment of Yugoslavia in April 1941.

After the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which was really an Italo-German condominium under the formal leadership of the Ante Pavelić and his Ustašas, fascist policies, with all of their totalitarian aspects, including anti-Semitism – and, in Croatia’s case, anti-Serbianism – became official. During the period of Ustaša misrule and terror (1941-1945) perhaps as many as 120,000 people, mainly Serbs, but also Jews, Gypsies, and antifascist Croats, were killed in the Ustaša concentration camps. The terror of the Serbian royalist guerrillas, the Chetniks, directed mainly against the Bosnian Muslims and Croats, claimed far fewer victims not because it was qualitatively different, but because the Chetniks did not dispose with the repressive apparatus of the state. The chief Ustaša concentration camp of Jasenovac became the dark symbol of the Ustaša regime and the commentary on the historical trajectory of the twentieth-century Croatian Right. Claims about the millennial Croatian cultural achievements were put to rest in the ashes of Jasenovac.

The Left – and in Croatia this means the Communist Left – had its own reading of the twentieth-century Croatian history. The themes of the Left were best expressed in the writings of Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981), Croatia’s foremost twentieth-century writer, playwright, and social critic, and Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), the Croatian-born leader of Communist Yugoslavia. Krleža and Tito were nearly exact contemporaries. They came from the same part of Croatia – the northwestern area of kajkavian dialect, with Zagreb as its center. They became politically active before the First World War and experienced the war on the Eastern front. And they emerged from the carnaged plains of Galicia as convinced Leninists, Krleža having joined the party in 1919, before Tito.

The party was the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) and that presents the first problem in the camp of the Left: what should be Croatia’s proper place in Yugoslavia, and if Croatia ought to be independent of Yugoslavia, should its Communists, too, organizationally be independent in the KPJ? The Leninist answer to this riddle was negative long before 1917; hence the prospect of party independence or even autonomy stood no chance within the Third International. Yet, in 1919 Krleža was opposed to the establishment of a single, centralist Communist Party in a multinational state. He thought that this was a concession to Serbian hegemony, that there cannot be any unity in a state that was by definition anti-national and anti-popular.

In the meanwhile, the masses of Croats, notably the numerically significant peasantry, experienced the 1918 unification not as liberation from Habsburg tyranny, but as a new form of “political slavery”. And since Radić’s HSS was the sole political group in Croatia that negated Yugoslavism in itself, the votes that normally would have gone to the Left, including the left liberals, went to Radić’s party. The trouble with that was not just the marginalization of the Left, but the paradox that the HSS was capable of representing the Left program more effectively than the Left itself. But despite these advantages, the popularity of Radić’s HSS was nevertheless a product of mass passions, which Krleža saw as a sort of “clericalist Vendée.”

The Left was faced with a dilemma. Yugoslavia, for all the reactionary policies of the Karađorđevićs and the oppressive Serbian hegemony, was objectively the lesser evil. The “greater evil” would have been the Habsburg restoration or worse, in the 1930s, the German occupation. This “miserable policy” of the Yugoslav status quo, in practical politics meant support of those factions of the HSS that were ready to cooperate with the Communists. All the Communists needed to do was to compete with the Right in patriotism. In the absence of the liberal center, which Krleža accused of “Masonic-Mazzinist” orientation, that never had a mass base and additionally compromised itself through association with Belgrade, the masses could choose between the patriotism of the Right and the Left.

The rhetoric of the Left throughout most of the 1930s therefore stressed Croat patriotism and obscured the tacit support of Yugoslavia. Stjepan Cvijić, the organizational secretary of the Communist Youth International (KIM), subsequently a victim of the Stalinist purges, wrote in 1937 that the class conscious

workers are not alien to their people. With their struggle they are tending precisely toward the versatile development of Croatia as a nation in economic, cultural, and political sense. And August Cesarec, after Krleža, the most prominent Communist author, sought to appropriate the rhetoric of the nineteenth-century nationalist heroes like Eugen Kvaternik. This rhetoric was also used by Tito, the KPJ's new general secretary, well into the war.

Tito's programmatic article "The National Question in Yugoslavia in the Light of the National Liberation Struggle" (December, 1942) breathes fire against the Yugoslav experience. Tito denounced the Versailles Yugoslavia as the archetypical country of national oppression in Europe. According to him, Croats, Slovenes, and Montenegrins were subjugated peoples, second-class citizens of Yugoslavia. Macedonians and Albanians were enslaved and exposed to genocide. Muslims, German and Hungarian minorities served as small change in political horse trading or as an instrument in the struggle against the Croats and the other peoples of Yugoslavia. He noted that a numerically insignificant minority of Great Serbian hegemonists, insatiable in their greed for enrichment and headed by the king, ruled Yugoslavia for 22 years. They created a regime of torture-chambers, a regime of social and national oppression.

The remedy was in the Communist program of specific national liberation. Tito noted that the slogan – national-liberation struggle – would be simply a phrase, and even a fraud, if in addition to its all-Yugoslav meaning it did not have a national meaning for each people separately; i.e., if it did not mean in addition to the liberation of Yugoslavia, also and simultaneously a liberation of the Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Macedonians, Muslims, etc. He denounced Pavelić as an occupationist agent. In dealing with the Ustašas and Ustaša-sympathizers the Croat Communists were merciless. Executions followed takeovers of all areas held by the Ustašas.

The spring of 1945 was particularly harsh. After the fall of Zagreb and the flight of the remnants of Pavelić's army, accompanied however by numerous civilians, to the parts of Austria held by the Western Allies, the Communists carried out bloody executions of captured prisoners, many of whom were forcibly extradited by the British forces at the Austrian frontier. Some 30,000 to 50,000 people were executed NKVD-style in the pits and trenches of Slovenia and northwestern Croatia in the spring and summer of 1945. The border village of Bleiburg, in Austrian Carinthia, where the British turned over the bulk of captured Croat soldiers and civilians to the Partisan forces, became the byname for the Communist terror after the "liberation." Needless to say, the terror never ceased under the Communist regime, although it petered out after the middle 1950s, after the harsh repression of real or imagined adherents of Stalin, after the break with the USSR in 1948. The special camp for the Yugoslav Stalinists was established on Goli Otok (lit. Naked Island), off the northern Croatian littoral.

Pavelić and Jasenovac. Tito and Bleiburg (and Goli Otok). Two faces of terror and counterterror. The Right-wing school of interpretation held that Pavelić's Croatia was a genuine national state, that the Ustašas were not fascists but nationalists who accommodated to the political habits of the time, that the times were harsh, and that in war many undesirable things take place; that the Serbs were national enemies bent on destroying Croatia, that the Communists made use of the Serbs to bring down the NDH, and that in fact wartime Croatia contended with the Serbo-Communists, because unlike all the other Communists the Croat Communists were devoid of an ounce of nation sentiment – they led the nation into another sequence of Serb enslavement under the guise of Yugoslavia; that the Jews were unintended victims, a sacrifice owed to the alliance with the Reich, and that Jasenovac was an unpleasant but unavoidable part of normal security precautions and punitive policy.

The Left-wing school of interpretation held that the resistance to the occupiers and their Ustaša stooges was also a people's revolution that matured into a socialist revolution, that under the circumstances no quarter ought to have been given to the fascists and their sympathizers, who properly ought to be wiped out from the face of the earth as part of the single revolutionary process; that in every titanic conflict mistakes and excesses occur; that Goli Otok was legitimate defense against Stalinist subversion and had no camp at Goli Otok been constructed the whole of Yugoslavia would have been a concentration camp; that Croatia got the full measure of national liberation and sovereignty in the socialist Yugoslav federation, which continued to devolve more and more power to the constituent republics. (Krleža said with resignation in the 1970s that a failure to attain independence, as in the cases of Estonia or Croatia, was not necessarily a tragedy.)

After the collapse of Communist power the Left school of interpretation fine-tuned its position. Socialist revolution was dropped and the term "antifascist struggle" was vigorously embraced to the point that this vague expression found acceptance on the terrain of the wavering Center and even in sections of the Right. Because Yugoslavia as a concept was illegitimate in public discourse, the aims of Communist struggle have become nationalized: It was Tito's army that liberated Istria, Rijeka, Zadar, and the islands; it was Tito's leadership that safeguarded the Croats from Serbian revanchism, which surely would have fallen on their

heads had the Western allies – the government in exile and its Chetnik guerrilla – come to power in 1945. Besides, the borders of independent Croatia were a product of Tito's policy.

Admittedly, after coming to power in 1990, Franjo Tuđman (1922-1999), Croatia's first president, pursued his own policy of reconciliation (*pomirenje*), which he saw as necessary for national unity, not only during the period of defensive war against Serbia and the Yugoslav People's Army (1991-1992), but generally. Tuđman's policy practically meant that all Croatian camps were good, though some were in fact better. In the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990), it is said that the Croat "millenary national independence and state continuity" was manifested through the centuries in various historical examples, including the "establishment of the foundations of state sovereignty in the period of the Second World War, expressed against the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia (1941) in the decisions of the Land Antifascist Council of People's Liberation of Croatia (1943), and afterwards in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Croatia (1947) and in the constitutions of the Socialist Republic of Croatia (1963-1990)." According to the Constitution, the Left is evidently better, which was meant clearly to please veterans of the Partisan units, Tuđman included.

In practice, it was often the opposite. Communist and Partisan monuments were destroyed nearly everywhere, the significant exceptions being Istria, Rijeka, and parts of the Croatian Littoral. Tito and practically all Communist heroes lost their streets, with exceptions. Still, the Right occasionally was treated as a better option until the second mandate of Stjepan Mesić, Croatia's president from 2000 to 2010. After 2005 or thereabout the Right narrative has been eclipsed to the point of extinction.

What of the victims of the two terrors? Trials of Ustaša war criminals, such as that of Dinko Šakić, the commander of Jasenovac in 1944, who was tried and sentenced in 1999 to the maximum penalty of twenty years of imprisonment, were extremely rare and prompted by outside pressure or extraditions. Some attempts were made to try perpetrators of various Communist crimes, but the objects of these experiments were few and generally Serbs; e.g., General Rade Bulat. It was not practical to initiate procedures against those responsible for Communist repression for as long as Tuđman's inner circle included numerous veterans of Yugoslav secret police, the prime minister of Croatia in 1990-91 being Josip Manolić, who was the commander of all penal institutions in Croatia, including Goli Otok, from 1948 to 1960. Of the various kangaroo trials from the Communist period, only one was officially reversed, that of Alojzije Stepinac, the Catholic Archbishop of Zagreb, who was sentenced to sixteen years of penal servitude in 1946. There has been some restoration of confiscated property to the various victims of Ustaša and Communist regimes, but this process has been superficial and foot-dragging. Quite evidently the victims are not given any preferential treatment, nor are their testimonies regarded as important or welcome.

The standoff of the two schools of interpretation affected the nature of the movement for Croatian independence, which was initiated by the crisis of the Yugoslav state in 1980s and the collapse of the East European Communist regimes in the fall of 1989. It is important to note that despite the repressive nature of the Communist regime in Yugoslavia, the ruling Communist ideology in Croatia was accepted in various influential segments of Croatian society until the purge of the reform wing of the League of Communists of Croatia (SKH) in December 1971. Tito's purge of the Croat national Communists marked the end of the SKH's ideational hegemony and the beginning of the realization that the conditions for the betterment of Croatian society no longer existed inside Yugoslavia. All attempts on the part of the Communist elite to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of the Croats were illusory after 1971. All subsequent "reforms," including the decentralizing Constitution of 1974, were read as examples of fear by the ruling elite before real democratic aspirations, moreover, not just in Croatia.

A series of internal party conflicts, especially after Tito's death in 1980, additionally weakened the party's reputation and the operational might of the SKH. It was increasingly clear that the ruling elite was weak and but still unwilling to accept the any idea of power-sharing with a broad circle of opposition, among which the Catholic influence was particularly impressive in the wake of the Solidarity movement in Poland. There were in fact no reform ideas within the SKH during the 1980s, despite the mounting atmosphere of an encircled castle and the desperate need for solutions after Slobodan Milošević's rise to power in Serbia in 1987.

By 1989 Milošević undermined however attenuated Yugoslav federalism and thereby forced the SKH to think of alternatives to Yugoslavia. The problem for the ruling elite in Croatia was how to ride the awakened tiger of Croat nationalism without losing power and, if power could no longer be secured, how to prevent retribution and loss of privileges after four decades of dictatorship. The elite that did not know how to resist Milošević and that first started thwarting his attempts at exporting the Serb nationalist subversion to Croatia only in June 1989, started thinking of new legitimating devices and, after some hesitation, decided to permit legal functioning of a number of new organizations – not quite yet political parties. Amidst this process, the Berlin wall collapsed and the Yugoslav communists lost all advantages of ideological originality vis-à-vis

the bloc elites. Still, the acceptance of the multiparty elections at the last SKH congress (December 1989) would not have occurred had the Croat Communist elites not been confident of victory. They did not transfer power, but lost it in elections to Tuđman's Croat Democratic Union (HDZ), one of those self-confident movements, ideologically unclear and undeveloped, but fully incorporated in the tradition of cyclical all-Croat nationalist movements, which are almost impossible to stop in the formative period. Under the circumstances, in the absence of any protective interventions on behalf of the Communist elites throughout Eastern Europe, the Croat Communists left power almost without protest, but confident that the new authorities would not lustrate them nor otherwise do them harm.

Franjo Tuđman was not a particularly important participant in SKH's reform movement of 1971. His importance rose only after Tito's death, when he became a new target of repression, and especially after his triumphal tour of the emigration in 1987. Tuđman was important because, unlike many more important reform figures, he was politically active and more prone to taking risks. We still do not fully understand the range of his contacts and the scope of his political transformation, especially after 1989, when he took the helm of the Croat opposition.

Typical of the Croat political traditions, Tuđman legitimated himself in his various writings in which it is important to recognize his entirely original contributions to the Croat national policy. Tuđman advocated a national agreement with the Serbs in favor of establishing two independent and nationally homogeneous states – Croatia and Serbia. This had consequences for his subsequent Bosnian policies. Contrary to nationalist maximalism (the Ustaša policy of "Croatia to the Drina River") and the existing borders of Communist Croatia, Tuđman called for the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the exchange of population. This is evident in many passages of his book *Nacionalno pitanje u suvremenoj Europi* (The National Question in Contemporary Europe), which he published in emigration in 1981 and 1982. The application of this policy against the interests of Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) in agreement with Milošević (1991-1994) seriously weakened Croatian foreign relations during the Tuđman period. It was responsible for weakening the defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Serbian attack in 1992 and was afterwards salvaged only by the pressures of American policy under Bill Clinton, when Croatia was forced to abandon the war with the Bosniaks (Washington Agreements, 1994) and act as a proxy against the Bosnian Serbs.

Tuđman's Bosnian policy was certainly a new element in the confrontations of the 1990s. So was the new and active anti-Yugoslavism of the Serbs, who hitherto saw advantages of Yugoslavia as a political solution that offered the best deal for the Serbs. With Milošević Serbian policy became decidedly anti-Yugoslav, in the sense that it promoted the abandonment of those parts of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, northwestern Croatia) in which there were no Serbs. The inability of the Serbs in Croatia to free themselves from the pull of the Great Serbian ideologies was a painful point in inter-Croatian developments much before the rise of Milošević. With Milošević's ideology, the Serb elites in Croatia became committed not just to the mastery of Croatia, but to its partition. Of course, Croat mistakes did not help, Tuđman having carried out a purge of Serbs from the various political and judicial institutions.

Besides the weight of misplaced policy toward Bosnia and the Croatian Serbs, Tuđman faced several diplomatic challenges in the early 1990s. Although he succeeded in thwarting the brute force of the Yugoslav People's Army, the last vestige of Titoist communism, he had tougher time in persuading the international community to recognize Croatia (1991-1992) and to lend him support in lifting the Serbian occupation of parts of Croatia, something that he managed militarily (Operations Flash and Storm in 1995), with significant American support. Helmut Kohl's policy of German reunification operated against Croatia in many West European circles in 1991, especially in Britain and France, leading to the myth of German sponsorship for Croatian independence. In truth, the German opposition was more helpful in promoting the recognition of Croatia than many of the official circles in Bonn in 1991. But it was the collapse of the putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev in the U.S.S.R. (August 1991) that cleared the way for a more positive policy toward Croatian and Slovenian independence in the second half of 1991. It is important in this context to mention the role of the new East European democracies. Hungary, especially, greatly contributed to the defense and recognition of Croatia.

The second half of Tuđman's presidency (1995-1999) was noted for the steady decline of democratic practices and growing isolation. This was also the period when many wartime excesses came to the fore, leading to investigation of various war crimes. Perhaps as many as 200,000 lives were lost in the wars that were fought on the territories of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo during the 1990s. In addition, more than a million people were forcibly resettled ("ethnic cleansing") and a vast housing fund and other property were destroyed. The fixing of responsibility for these gross violations of international humanitarian law, a truthful accounting for the conflicts, as well as necessary steps for the reparation of various losses, continued to dominate Croatia's diplomatic and judicial concerns after the end of the hostilities.

Precisely because of the “defensist” limitations in the national justice systems the pursuit of war criminals would not have gotten off ground had not the UN Security Council created the ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), popularly (if imprecisely) referred to as the Hague Tribunal. The ICTY has taken on the most significant cases of war crimes, albeit with a few exceptions, going as far as to charge a sitting head of state – Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević, who died during the final stages of his trial. But its aim, even before some of the permanent members of the UN Security Council decided to pull the curtain on its operations, never was to try all war crimes suspects. From the beginning it was stressed that the majority of cases that the ICTY believed to be worthy of indictment would be referred to the national courts once the political circumstances so permitted.

This has occurred after the second transition(s) of 2000. Following the elections in Croatia and Serbia, the establishment of Iвица Račan’s coalition government in Croatia (January 2000) and the downfall of the Milošević regime in Serbia (October 2000), the ICTY passed on several cases to the national courts, with the prospect of still more in the wake of the Hague Tribunal’s endgame. Hence, transitional justice in the narrowest sense is a recent phenomenon, involving primarily major war crimes trials, some of them initiated by the ICTY, but with a significant domestic input. To date, although the trends are improving, leading to significant cooperation between the prosecutors in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, the record nevertheless remains rather mixed.

Croatia’s pursuit of transitional justice has been marred by a high incidence of trials against absent defendants and inconsistent measures governing pretrial detention and witness protection. In four high-profile war crime cases, however, involving the murder and torture of civilians and military prisoners by the Croatian army and civilian authorities – at the military prison Lora, at Split, from 1992 to 1997; murder of Serb civilians at Gospić in October 1991 (50 victims); during the Medak Operation in September 1993 (28 Serb civilians and 5 prisoners); and at Osijek (“adhesive tape” and “garage” cases) – the defendants were sentenced to significant terms and confined to penitentiaries. Still, the ICTY record remains checkered because of the choice of judicial procedure and selectivity in prosecution. This experiment in international justice has not succeeded in signaling the enormity of human rights’ violations during the period of conflicts. Hence the necessity of strengthening the alternative methods of justice-making after the ICTY folds its operations.

Croatia’s revival in the standards of democracy after Tuđman’s death in 1999 was largely the handiwork of three prime ministers – Iвица Račan, Ivo Sanader, and Jadranka Kosor. Račan, the last head of the SKH before the collapse of communism and the chief of the post-Communist Social Democrats, was a remarkable survivor. His aim was to preserve the political subculture that he represented, and to stem the tide of Croatian nationalism, which he greatly feared. His period was noted for various compromises, which disappointed the reformers, but never won the support of the marginalized Tuđman supporters.

Despite the fact that he is almost universally reviled in the wake of serious corruption charges, Ivo Sanader’s stewardship over Tuđman’s old party – the HDZ – produced a greatly revitalized center-right political leadership, ready to march in step with contemporary Western and regional needs. Sanader brought Croatian Serbs into his coalition and later his cabinet, stopped the influence of the old Right, greatly advanced regional cooperation, and put a stop to foot-dragging with the ICTY. Remarkably pragmatic in his approach, his record was compromised by the excesses of the period, not unlike those of his right-center equivalents in Dublin, Athens, and Rome. Still, his unideological approach, as that of his successor Jadranka Kosor, stands in stark contrast to the tragedies and passions that produced most of Croatia’s twentieth-century history.

Croatia is still dominated by its two twentieth-century ideological camps. But, during the last decade, these camps have learned to live with each other. They are still easily tempted to mutual intolerance, but are now conscious of their mutual responsibilities. A great deal of history still needs to be cleared away before there is a lasting cease-fire between the camps and the perspective of gradual transition to more liberal politics. In the meanwhile, Croatia’s long history can no longer be viewed as the dead weight that obstructs the country’s future.

*