Appendix A

Beliefs, Strategies, and Choices in Yugoslavia, 1990-1991


Nationalism among the Serbian minority in Croatia remained low in 1989, even after Milosevic’s infamous speech in Kosovo in June (Bennett 1995, 125). Support for nationalist leaders began to grow in early 1990 under the influence of the nationalist campaign rhetoric of Franjo Tudjman and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) leading up to Croatia’s first free elections in April. Tudjman, a former Yugoslav army general and revisionist historian persecuted for nationalism in the 1970s, downplayed the crimes of Croatia’s WWII state, the NDH, led by the fascist Ustaše, made anti-Serb (and anti-Semitic) statements, and courted the sizeable Croatian émigré community (including many extreme nationalists and, reportedly, Ustaša veterans), which eventually bankrolled his campaign (Bennett 1995, 128-129, 140; Silber and Little 1995/96, 84-85, 89).

In response to this and the vitriol from Milosevic’s propaganda machine in Belgrade, Serbs in the area around Knin formed the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) in February 1990. And yet the nationalism of the leader of this party, Jovan Rašković, was moderate and his demands limited to cultural and educational autonomy, with no call for territorially defined Serb autonomy, let alone secession from Croatia (Bennett 1995, 126; Silber and Little 1995/96, 95-96). Moreover, support for the SDS among Serbs was low; the vast majority of them lined up behind the Croat leader of the former communist party in the elections (Bennett 1995, 127; Judah 2000, 168). Indeed, “Croatia’s 600,000 or so Serbs had traditionally formed the bedrock of support for Tito’s Communists and were not all automatically cannon fodder for the Serbian media’s divisive rhetoric. In Lika, Kordun, and Banija memories of the Partisan
war were still strong and many Serbs were reluctant to give up on *bratsvo i jedinstvo*’ [brotherhood and unity] (Tanner 1997, 218). But Tudjman and the HDZ played right into the hands of Belgrade propagandists and, “far from disassociating itself from the fascist, genocidal history of the Usasha state, the new nationalist party reaffirmed its continuity with that history” (Denich 1994, 377).

And although former communists and centrists did relatively well with 37 and 18 percent of the overall vote respectively, the majoritarian electoral system gave the HDZ control over the legislature, the Sabor, with the SDS winning only 5 seats around Knin. The overwhelming victory of the HDZ surprised many Serbs (Bennett 1995, 129). And while Tudjman, soon to be president, offered Rašković one of the five vice presidential posts, the HDZ leader rejected the Serb’s demands to retain the constitutional definition of the Serbs as a “constituent nation” equal to Croats and for cultural and educational autonomy (Silber and Little 1995/96, 96). At this point, had Tudjman and the new Croatian regime extended a “gesture of reconciliation” toward Serbs on the part of the new Croatian leadership for WWII crimes such as the Jasenovac concentration camp, rather than promising to free Croats from the “Jasenovac complex” by dismissing it, had the HDZ agreed to guarantee Serb rights in the constitution, “the wind would have been knocked out of Milosevic’s sails [and] his claim that the breakup of Yugoslavia spelled genocide for the Serbs would have been significantly undermined” (Glenny 1992, 81; Štitkovac 1995, 155).

Tudjman did the opposite. On the day he was elected president at the end of May by the new Sabor, that body repealed by majority vote the 39th amendment to the constitution requiring a two-thirds vote on any change affecting the national minorities (Bennett 1995, 141). The June draft of the new constitution declared Croatia “the sovereign state of the Croatian nation” and dropped all references to Serbs (Silber and Little 1995/96, 97). The final constitution passed in December 1990, did mention Serbs, but reduced their status from a “constituent nation” equal to Croats to a “national minority” (Štitkovac 1995, 151).
These constitutional changes included and were accompanied by symbolic changes as well. The Sabor adopted as the new state symbol the HDZ party flag with the šahovnica, a red and white checkerboard pattern that extends back 500 years but was also employed by the Ustaše regime and which the Croatian Serbs considered as “the footprint of the Ustaše” (Tanner 1997, 223). The new regime also renamed the police the redarstvo, which had Ustaše connotations, renamed streets and public places after WWII generals, ordered the “purification” of the language of “Serbisms” and the Cyrillic script, and initiated “reconciliation” with NDH and Ustaše veterans (Bennett 1995, 141; Štitkovac 1995, 149-151; Denich 1994, 379, 386, fn.34).

These symbolic acts were followed by state discrimination against Serbs, with massive purges of Serbs from the police and the state administration (Woodward 1995, 119). Beyond the police and bureaucracy, Serbs were also fired from educational and medical institutions, the tourist industry, and even the private sector (Štitkovac 1995, 151). Those Serbs not fired from public employment were required to take a loyalty oath (Woodward 1995, 120). Serbs also became the only Yugoslav nationality to pay a special tax if they owned a second home in Croatia (Woodward 1995, 120; 229). More ominously, the regime was known to be collecting arms and in the intense recruitment drive for the new Croatian National Guard the regime let it be known that only ethnic Croats need apply (Štitkovac 1995, 150; Silber and Little 1995/96, 108-109).

Tudjman’s clumsy and ham-fisted policies played right into the hands of Milosevic’s propaganda machine in Belgrade, which continuously referred to Croatian authorities as “Ustaše” (Judah 2000, 171). On Belgrade television, “panel discussions orchestrated to warn of the imminent extermination of Serbs in Croatia crammed the programming. Genocide became a household word in the official television vocabulary and panels of experts and citizens, invited to discuss the events before TV viewers, continuously warned that Serbs faced annihilation similar to that of World War II” (Štitkovac 1995, 151). The popular magazine Duga featured a regular column called “Genocide” (Marković 2000, 603). From the summer of 1990 to through the outbreak of fighting in the fall of 1991, Serbian newspapers ran
headlines such as: “scenes from fifty years ago were repeated, when Croatian Ustashe attacked the Serb people;” “1941 started with the same methods;” “Genocide mustn’t happen;” “All means to resist the terror of the Ustashoid government;” “Serb People’s Council calls on the Serb people to resist the terror of the Ustashoid government;” “Genocide mustn’t be repeated;” “The ghost of Jasenovac threatens;” “Protecting Serbs from vampirical Ustashe;” “Ustashe are training special soldiers who are infiltrating Serb villages in Croatia. The goal is to revive NDH;” “Ghost of fascism awakens”. (Thompson 1994, 72-73, 76).

This combination of regime policies and Serbian propaganda began to ratchet up fear among Serbs about their future in an independent Croatia (Cohen 1993, 131; Bowman 2003, 333). “The re-emergence of the symbolism of an independent Croatia was, in SDS rhetoric, certain evidence of the re-emergence, too, of Croatian fascism, and along with it, a predisposition towards genocide against the Serbs” (Silber and Little 1995/96, 98). And yet there was countervailing evidence. Yugoslavs had access to European television which gave much more balanced coverage. On August 30th, for example, Yugoslav television broadcast a German documentary investigating Serb media claims of an “Ustaše” concentration camp and showed the only denizens in its reputed location – sheep.¹ Perhaps more convincingly, it should have been clear that Tudjman was in no position militarily to pursue genocidal policies; his regime lacked sufficient arms and the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army had forces throughout Croatia (Bennet 1995, 147). Moreover, Tudjman would have had to expect to lose the Western support he sought so desperately – and publicly. Croatia’s declaration of independence was opposed not only by the US, Britain, France, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark, but also by the Soviet Union and China; even the Germans initially held back (Ramet 1992, 265). Finally, shortly before his election as President, Tudjman offered the SDS’s Rašković a position in his government (Bennett 1995, 129).

Nevertheless, the SDS refused to take their seats in the Sabor, forming instead an association of Serb majority municipalities in late July (Silber and Little 1995/96, 98). At a rally at that time, Rašković declared “an uprising of Serb people.” But he also went on to say it would be an “uprising without
weapons” (Thompson 1994, 157). Moreover, there was little Serb support for armed mobilization outside Knin (Bennett 1995, 149). Even in what is perhaps the hotbed of militant Serb nationalism in Croatia, the Krajina, Serbs voted in favor of only political autonomy in August and September of 1990, not outright independence (Glenny 1992, 17).

Croatian paramilitary raids on some Serb towns quickly began to alter that calculus as they increasingly began to believe more militant Serb nationalists that “they no longer had a choice – it was Croats or Serbs and they were Serbs” (Glenny 1992, 93; Woodward 1995, 120). The discovery of mass graves in Croatia from WWII massacres only heightened those fears (Denich 1994; Woodward 1995, 229). With World War II persecution not just present in memory, but physically present, and Croatian armed response to radical Serb efforts to seal off their towns from Croatian authorities, violent incidents began to increase, each incident immediately followed by obligatory Serbian media hysteria about massacres by Ustaša shock troops, even where no one had been killed, as in Pakrac (Tanner 1997, 241). Following the Croatian declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991, the Serbs began initiating offensives against the Croatian police (Glenny 1992, 89). After a series of Croatian raids and Serbian attacks on towns and police stations, war broke out in the late summer of 1991.

1 I viewed the program myself in Jaz, Montenegro.