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## THE CROAT-BOSNIAK WAR: THE SELECT FINDINGS OF THE RECENT REGIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

**ABSTRACT:** *The Croat-Bosniak war is one of the least researched episodes of the Bosnian war. I reviewed the recent works of two regional authors who had access to original war records of the Bosnian Croats and the Bosniaks and then compared their findings with some of the representative views of secondary literature. Among other things, I focused on the Vance-Owen peace plan and the initial hostilities in the central Bosnian municipalities. My chief conclusion is that the importance placed on the Vance-Owen peace plan in secondary literature is misleading as it ignores the local military and political dynamics.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bosnian War, Hrvatsko vijeće obrane (HVO), Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine (ARBiH), Vance-Owen Peace Plan (VOPP), Gornji Vakuf, Croat-Bosniak war

Of all the events in the war in Bosnia, the war between the Bosnian Croats and the Bosniaks has been given the least scholarly attention. I will first discuss the possible reasons for this state of affairs before turning to two freshly published books by regional authors Davor Marijan and Mesud Šadinlija and comparing their findings with the established views in secondary literature.<sup>1</sup> I will focus on the initial hostilities at the end of 1992 and the beginning of 1993 and particularly on the role played by the Vance-Owen peace plan (VOPP) in the emergence of this conflict.<sup>2</sup> The standard view is that the ethnically-based

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<sup>1</sup> Just after I completed the manuscript, I became aware that Šadinlija wrote a review of Marijan's book, and that Marijan published his response. I refer the interested reader to Mesud Šadinlija, „Podrigivanje sukoba“. *Preporodov Journal*, (2019), 34–43 and Davor Marijan, „Politika povijesti ili politika laži – povodom jednoga prikaza u Preporodov Journalu“. *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, br. 3, (2020), 967–1003.

<sup>2</sup> The peace plan is covered by Marijan from the point of the Croat-Bosniak conflict. Šadinlija's book touches on the Bosnian Serb's engagement with the plan as well. For an in-depth treatment

map proposals of the VOPP contributed greatly to the ensuing carnage. My aim is to determine if any part of the scholarly consensus on these topics needs to be corrected in light of the evidence offered by the two new published books.

Scholars of the Yugoslav wars have tended to embed the Croat-Bosniak war in the wider story of the Bosnian conflict. I believe that this is caused by three distinct reasons. First, some scholars reduce (tend to reduce) all the wars in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia to a single cause – Serbian nationalism; clearly, it is not easy to connect the Croat-Bosniak war with Serbian nationalism. Second, the conflict itself was fought on a much smaller scale than the overall war between the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks.

Finally, there are, to be sure, good reasons to present the fighting between the Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats as being in part shaped by the larger turmoil that was the war in Bosnia. To name only a few examples, it is very doubtful that the fighting would have ended or that the BiH Federation would have been founded in 1994 had it not been for the decisive influence of the international community; likewise, it is hard to imagine that any fighting between the Bosniaks and Croats would not have involved a broader war in Bosnia.

Both Marijan and Šadinlija are definitely sensitive to the overall context in which that war was fought, but they both treat the Croat-Bosniak conflict as being essentially autonomous.

### **David Isby: The Croat-Bosniak War, The Battle of Gornji Vakuf, and the Croat and Bosniak War Aims**

I will briefly present some of the key points with regard to the Croat-Bosniak war made by David C. Isby. Rather than peruse several authors, I have chosen to focus on Isby as a stand-in for the secondary literature, both because, like Marijan and Šadinlija, he is, a military historian, and because his account of the war – although by no means universally shared by the academic community – comes close to representing the consensus view. This will provide us with a historiographical benchmark for a number of Marijan's and Šadinlija's claims noted below. *Balkan Battlegrounds* bases its account of the Croat-Bosniak war mostly on the regional and international press.<sup>3</sup> In reconstructing the political context, the author relies on the already published works in secondary literature. According to the author, the conflict is ultimately related to differing visions of a future Bosnia, with the Bosnian Croats fighting for a thoroughly decentralized state and the Bosniaks for a centralized one. The hostilities started already in the spring of 1992 as the two opposing forces squabbled over the abandoned JNA military facilities and

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of the Serb approach to the VOPP, see: Vladimir Petrović, *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan: Stenografske beleške sa proširenih sednica Saveta za usaglašavanje stavova o državnoj politici* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2010); Vladimir Petrović, *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan: Stenografske beleške sa zasedanja Narodne skupštine Republike Srpske* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> David C. Isby, *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990–1995 Volume I* (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Russian and European Analysis, 2002).

depots. The fighting began in earnest sometime in October in the central Bosnian towns of Vitez and Novi Travnik and quickly spilled over to Prozor. While the reader is thus far presented with a balanced account of the initial hostilities and the ensuing warfare, a couple of observations on the tone and main conclusions are in order. Firstly, David Isby paints Alija Izetbegović as being reluctant to engage in a war against the Croats in 1992 – albeit without discussing why this might be the case. Secondly, the author cites Ed Vulliamy in presenting the plight of the Bosniak civilians from Prozor while also noting the heavy damage Novi Travnik sustained after the bombardment of the Croat forces. At this point, Isby does not label the war as one of aggression against the Bosnian state.

*Balkan Battlegrounds* shifts its tone slightly in recounting the fighting of 1993. On page 177, the reader is informed that “The Bosnian Croats threw the first punch in mid-April, with their brutal Lašva Valley offensive”. During the summer, the account continues, the Bosniaks struck back and reduced the Croats to a couple of isolated enclaves in central Bosnia – “By the fall, the fighting settled down into vicious trench warfare.” The book returns to the Croat-Bosniak conflict with a much more detailed political discussion on pages 189–191. Three claims stand out. David Isby lays part of the blame for the open war that erupted in 1993 on the publishing of the VOPP, as that plan presumably prodded the Bosnian Croat leadership into conquering the ethnically mixed municipalities of central Bosnia and western Herzegovina. Next, the influx of a large number of Bosniak refugees, previously expelled by the Serbs, shattered the delicate balance of power in the ethnically mixed areas of central Bosnia, stoking fears among the Bosnian Croats that a Bosniak majoritarian take over was imminent. Lastly, the author claims that the two visions of the future of the Bosnian state, mentioned above, differed starkly not only with respect to the distribution of state powers (a centralized vs a decentralized state), but also, and indeed primarily, with respect to the multiethnic character of the future state: Alija Izetbegović, David Isby claims, advocated a multiethnic state, whereas Mate Boban fought for the dominance of one ethnic group in a given territory in what would be a *de jure* or *de facto* divided Bosnian state.

How does Isby describe the fighting in Gornji Vakuf in 1993? On 12 January the Bosnian Croats attacked the town from the surrounding hills. *Balkan Battlegrounds* describes the battle in the following manner:

“The Bosnian Croats demanded the unconditional surrender of all Muslim forces in the town and began using their heavy weapons advantage to systematically demolish the surrounding Muslim-majority towns like Bistrica. In Gornji Vakuf itself, HVO tanks advanced up the road from the south, destroying houses one at a time... an order from Bosnian Croat President Mate Boban finally brought the offensive to a halt.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

In introducing the Lašva Valley offensive in the spring, *Balkan Battlegrounds* shifts stylistically into a higher gear. No longer is the operation simply “brutal” (i.e. it is unclear if the brutality was planned or not), but instead:

“In planning its campaign, the HVO counted on ejecting the non-Croat population from the valley and assumed that this cleansing would be a relatively simple task... Because its military force was small relative to the sizable Muslim population in the area, the HVO’s objective was to terrorize the Muslim civilians into evacuating the Lašva Valley...”<sup>5</sup>

In recounting the ARBiH offensive in the following summer months, David Isby strikes a different tone. The chapter detailing the ensuing attacks of the ARBiH is prefaced with a biblical quote “For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind”. Moreover, the author takes care to ground the offensive in the military and political necessity the Bosniaks found themselves in. The more religiously zealous brigades of the ARBiH are described as having “harassed” the Bosnian Croats and their zealousness is derived from them having been expelled by the Serb forces early in the war.<sup>6</sup> *Balkan Battlegrounds* mentions the flight of the Croat civilians from the Travnik area, but attributes that flight not to the expulsion affected by the ARBiH but to the encouragement of the Bosnian Croat authorities.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, David Isby concludes this chapter by mentioning (and, at least so it seems to me, backing) the Croat claim that some 60,000 Croats had been expelled, but does not discuss any bearing this claim might have on the nature of the ARBiH offensive.

I conclude by summarizing the key claims of BB. Firstly, Franjo Tuđman’s goal was to carve out a Croat entity in Bosnia with only loose connections to the central authorities; he pursued this policy by, *inter alia*, sending between 3,000–5,000 troops from the Croatian Army to the Bosnian battleground. Secondly, the Bosnian Croat leadership planned and implemented a policy of ethnic cleansing. Thirdly, Alija Izetbegović advocated a multi-ethnic centralized state and the Bosniaks on the whole did not plan or implement a policy of ethnic cleansing.

### **Davor Marijan: Initial Fighting in Central Bosnia, Tuđman’s Policy Toward Bosnia, and War Crimes**

Davor Marijan, a distinguished Croatian historian, published his integral account of the war between the Croats and the Bosniaks in 2018.<sup>8</sup> In some of his prior works, he focused on a number of episodes from that con-

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 196, note 109. The claim is substantiated by the Sarajevo Radio broadcast on 7 June as well as the foreign press clipping prepared by the US federal agency “The Foreign Broadcast Information Service.”

<sup>8</sup> Davor Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini od 1992. do 1994* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2018) [The War between the Croats and the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 till 1994]. All translations from Croatian are my own.

flict.<sup>9</sup> He appeared as an expert witness for the defense of the accused Bosnian Croats before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 2002 and 2009.

Marijan's book, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini od 1992. do 1994* [The War Between the Croats and the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1994], contains 22 chapters and is over 470 pages long. Ten chapters are a detailed or empirical exposition of the key events of the war as well as of the key events preceding it. The rest of the chapters deal with a number of topics in a more conceptual manner. For my purposes, I will examine one chronological chapter (*Siječanj 1993. – Prvi veliki sukobi [January 1993 – The First Major Clashes]*<sup>10</sup>) and one thematic chapter (*Zločin i kazna [Crime and Punishment]*<sup>11</sup>). Marijan bases his account on the original war records of the HVO (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane – HVO) and the ARBiH (Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine – ARBiH). A large number of HVO records he uses in his account are not available to researchers, except for the documents published by Slobodan Praljak and the ICTY.<sup>12</sup> The ARBiH documents are also largely unavailable to researchers, except for a small sample of records of the 3rd ARBiH Corps published by the ICTY. The author, however, had access to the war records of the 4th ARBiH Corps.<sup>13</sup>

The book is an ambitious attempt to (re)write the history of the whole Croat-Bosniak conflict. The author's central claims are (1) war crimes were not committed equally on both sides, as the ARBiH committed more crimes than the HVO;<sup>14</sup> (2) the Bosnian Croat leadership fought for a territorially delimited autonomy within BiH and was pushed into the fighting by the coercive policy of the Bosniak leadership and the general warfare in Croatia and Bosnia;<sup>15</sup> (3) Croatia itself supported only the limited goal of a territorially marked autonomy for the Bosnian Croats and not their outright annexation.<sup>16</sup>

Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje<sup>17</sup> is a small town/municipality in the Vrbas River valley in central Bosnia. Before the war the population was 55.85% (14,063)

<sup>9</sup> Davor Marijan, „Vještački nalaz: O ratnim vezama Hrvatske i Bosne i Hercegovine (1991.–1995.)“, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, no. 1, (2004), 211–247; Davor Marijan, „Bosna i Hercegovina 1991.–1995. – u godinama nesvršenog rata“, *Status*, no. 3, (2004), 98–113; Davor Marijan, „Sukob HVO-a i ABiH u Prozoru, u listopadu 1992“, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, no. 2, (2006), 379–402.

<sup>10</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 237–253.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 437–449.

<sup>12</sup> The bulk of the HVO war records is now with the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Center in Zagreb. Ivan Brigović, „Pregled arhivskoga gradiva o Domovinskome ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini koje je pohranjeno u Hrvatskom memorijalno-dokumentacijskom centru Domovinskoga rata“, *Arhivska praksa* 21, no. 1 (2018), 519–541. Unfortunately, the website ran by Slobodan Praljak is no longer operational. As Slobodan Praljak committed suicide, it is likely the records published by the website are now lost.

<sup>13</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 451–452.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 164.

<sup>17</sup> The town is called Uskoplje by the Croats and Gornji Vakuf by the Bosniaks. In 2001, the Office of the High Representative, an ad hoc international body created by the Dayton Peace

Bosniaks 42.52% (10,706) Croats.<sup>18</sup> The town is strategically located on the road that connects Herzegovina to central Bosnia. This fact was to be of paramount importance in the events that ensued. The Croatian *Dr. Ante Starčević Brigade* from Gornji Vakuf numbered some 1,400 soldiers and the B-H Army's *317th Mountain Brigade* comprised around 2,200 to 2,500 fighters.<sup>19</sup> The Croatian brigade was under the command of the Sjeverozapadna Hercegovina (OZSH) Operative Zone and the 317th Brigade under the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARBiH Corps.

The town first saw violence in October of 1992, as the war erupted in Prozor and Novi Travnik, two municipalities in the vicinity of Gornji Vakuf.<sup>20</sup> In spite of the attempts of the local Croat and Bosniak leaderships to preserve the peace, the first bullets were fired on October 24. After a few days of fighting, the two sides agreed a truce. At the same time, however, the HVO leadership accused the Bosniaks of sabotaging peace by sending forces from Gornji Vakuf to attack Prozor.<sup>21</sup> What prompted the ARBiH troop movement from Gornji Vakuf into Prozor, however, was the concentrated attack of the HVO on the town a few days earlier, as the talks between the HVO and the ARBiH had broken down after one HVO soldier was killed.

For our purposes, it is important to note that the elements of the 317th Brigade tried to force their way into Prozor by storming the Makljen pass just north of Prozor. Ultimately, the Bosniaks were expelled from Prozor, the 317th Brigade's maneuver failed, and the skirmishes in Gornji Vakuf gradually stopped.

With the municipality itself already divided between the HVO and the ARBiH and the trust between them severely shaken, both sides prepared themselves for a continued conflict.<sup>22</sup> In early December of 1992, the ARBiH transferred one battalion of its 305th Brigade<sup>23</sup> to the village of Bojska and one battalion to the village of Voljevac; furthermore, a unit of the brigade was supposed to take position in the village of Voljice, but the transfer never materialized as the HVO protested the move. Now Marijan first draws our attention to the fact that at this point the 3rd Corps neither planned nor wanted to stage an attack against the Croats in Gornji Vakuf. He says, rather, that the 3rd Corps wanted to take the territory without a fight.<sup>24</sup> The HVO reacted by transferring

Agreement, ruled that the official name of the town/municipality is Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje. Out of convenience, I have used the name Gornji Vakuf in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, over 12,000 to 20,000 Bosniaks expelled by the VRS (Vojska Republike Srpske – VRS) in the summer of 1992 settled in Gornji Vakuf. D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 237.

<sup>19</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 237.

<sup>20</sup> Mijo Beljo, „Sukobi Armije Republike Bosne i Hercegovine i Hrvatskoga vijeća obrane u Gornjem Vakufu tijekom 1992. godine“, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, no. 2, (2016), 389–410.

<sup>21</sup> The accusation was well founded, cf. M. Beljo, *op. cit.*, 404.

<sup>22</sup> The breakdown of trust was already visible in early October as, for example, the HVO agreed a tentative truce with the VRS on the Bugojno frontline on 8 October, see: Bojan B. Dimitrijević, *2. Krajiški korpus Vojske Republike Srpske* (Banja Luka: Republički centar za istraživanje rata, ratnih zločina i traženje nestalih lica, 2019), 95.

<sup>23</sup> The brigade was mostly manned by the Bosniaks expelled from Donji Vakuf, after that municipality fell to the VRS in the Spring of 1992.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

troops in early January from Herzegovina into the nearby Bugojno municipality and putting all its units on high alert. On January 10 the command of ARBiH 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps ordered the 317<sup>th</sup> Brigade to block the road passing through Gornji Vakuf; the road that connects central Bosnia with Herzegovina. On the following day the shaky truce fell apart. The Croatian sources quote the arrest of several members of the HVO in the town center as the cause of the battle; the Bosniak sources, on the other hand, blame an HVO artillery attack on the town for the start of the fighting. On January 12, the commander of the OZSH ordered the invasion of both Gornji Vakuf and Bugojno with additional reinforcements from Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup> In the ensuing two weeks, the HVO managed to capture a number of Bosniak hamlets and villages surrounding Gornji Vakuf. By January 24, however, the attack had lost steam as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps regrouped; the nearby ARBiH 4th Corps attempted to send reinforcements but the local units failed to carry out the order. Eventually, the HVO failed to capture Gornji Vakuf but managed to secure the Makljen pass that overlooked the communication between Prozor and Gornji Vakuf.

Meanwhile, as early as January 13, the local political and military leaders of the Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks started negotiating a cease-fire. The ongoing peace talks in Geneva, and in particular the proposed provincial maps of the VOPP that accorded the Bosnian Croats a lion's share of territory in the Vrbas valley, stiffened the Croats' approach and all but scuttled the negotiations that formally ended on January 18 as the HVO renewed its attacks.<sup>26</sup> Curiously, it was on January 19 that Mate Boban, the leader of the Bosnian Croats, ordered a general stop to the fighting; the following day, the order was passed to the HVO by Milivoj Petković, the commander of the general staff of the HVO; and yet it was only on January 24 that the general staff of the HVO finally ordered the OZSH to halt its advance.<sup>27</sup>

Marijan concludes his account of the battle by claiming that "Although it was on the verge of victory in Gornji Vakuf, the HVO stopped and gave negotiations a chance."<sup>28</sup> It seems highly unlikely that the HVO was on the verge of victory in Gornji Vakuf – especially as Marijan himself points out that the attack lost steam on January 24 and that the ARBiH clearly possessed numerical superiority. It is even less likely that the HVO was much interested in negotiating at this point, unless as an opportunity to present the Bosniaks with ultimatums, save face, or buy extra time to regroup. And yet, Marijan does seem to me to have presented a credible case for his claim that the ARBiH in Gornji Vakuf was far from innocent and bears its share of guilt for the violence. In December, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps did move fresh troops into the municipality, tilting the delicate military balance of power in Gornji Vakuf in its favor, and, above all, threatening to cut the key communication between the

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

Croatian enclaves in central Bosnia and Western Herzegovina. Once the 317th brigade blocked the road in Gornji Vakuf on January 10, that threat all but materialized. Moreover, Marijan mentions the warmongering writings of the local Bosniak press and reports a number of brutal incidents perpetrated by the members of the ARBiH. But what prompted the ARBiH to attempt “bez borbe ovladati prostorom” [to capture territory without a fight]? Marijan mentions the proposal of the ARBiH 4<sup>th</sup> Corps in December to incorporate the town of Prozor, which fell to the HVO in October, into its area of responsibility<sup>29</sup> and blames the fighting in Gornji Vakuf on the military buildup that the ARBiH staged in that municipality in December and January. But one could just as well claim that after the HVO captured Prozor in October, the ARBiH had no reason to trust the Bosnian Croats that further invasions would not occur. Alternatively, one could claim that the military thinking of the ARBiH revealed, and their troop maneuvers showed, that their response was disproportionate as it threatened the Croats in the whole of central Bosnia. Be that as it may, the operating term that is missing from Marijan’s account, which might better explain the events in Gornji Vakuf, is the *security dilemma*.<sup>30</sup>

Marijan claims that it was the Croats, not the Bosniaks, who were on the receiving end in the Croat-Bosniak war. The penultimate chapter of his book, *Crime and Punishment*, is a thematic treatment of the war crimes committed by both sides. Marijan argues his claim by simply listing a number of criminal acts perpetrated by the HVO and the ARBiH, including killings, unlawful detention centers, and ethnic cleansing operations. Unfortunately, his account is entirely impressionistic and can at best establish that crimes were indeed widespread in both armies. This is inadequate not only in light of his strongly worded claims,<sup>31</sup> but also given the fact that we now have a reasonably detailed, if not necessarily entirely accurate, count of the civilian and military casualties provided by Mirsad Tokača.<sup>32</sup> I have cross-referenced the numbers for the list of

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Tomislav Dulić made use of this and related concepts to explain much of the events and violence in the Croat-Bosniak war in 1993. Tomislav Dulić, “Perpetuating Fear: Insecurity, Costly Signalling and the War in Central Bosnia, 1993”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 18, no. 4, (October 20, 2016), 463–484. Incidentally, Dulić agrees with Marijan’s central claim that Tuđman, beginning in the fall of 1992, pursued a policy of territorial autonomy for Bosnian Croats, contingent on further political developments; but unlike Marijan, Dulić suggests a possibility that such policy led the Croatian elites to instrumentalize fears of the populace to stoke violence.

<sup>31</sup> Marijan pulls no punches: „Sve vrste nedjela koja su se zbilja na strani HVO-a nalaze se i na strani Armije BiH, i to većinom u osjetno većem opsegu. K tome, hrvatska nedjela nastala su kao odgovor na muslimanska“. [All the kinds of misdeeds committed by the HVO were also committed by the ARBiH, and to a greater extent to boot. Moreover, Croatian misdeeds were the response to the Muslim ones.] D. Marijan, *op. cit.*, 437.

<sup>32</sup> Mirsad Tokača, *Bosanska knjiga mrtvih: ljudski gubici u Bosni i Hercegovini 1991–1995* (Sarajevo: Istraživačko dokumentacioni centar, 2012) [The Bosnian book of the dead: human losses in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1991–1995]. Calculations are my own. For a recent critique of the numbers relating to Serbian losses, see: Republički centar za istraživanje rata, ratnih zločina i traženje nestalih lica: „Projekat popisa i evidentiranje srpskih žrtava u ratu u BiH“ (Banja Luka, 2018).

districts presented by Marijan as being part of the Croat-Bosniak battlefield.<sup>33</sup> According to Tokača's tally, Bosniak civilian losses amounted to around 1,200 and Croat civilian losses to around 600. Taken on its own, the number of dead civilians – arguably one of the strongest ways to establish the morality of a given policy – hardly speaks in favor of Marijan's thesis. To be sure, Marijan could argue that the disproportion reflects the Bosniak's demographic preponderance. Moreover, he could compare the two census results (1991–2013) to point out that there were up to 66,000 permanently displaced Croats versus up to 16,000 Bosniaks.<sup>34</sup> Whichever way he defends his claim, anecdotal evidence he presented does seem methodologically inadequate. To his credit, Marijan does not deny or ignore the crimes committed by the Croats.

The question of the nature of the Bosnian war is at the center of Marijan's attention throughout the book. His main thesis is that Croatia advocated territorial autonomy for the Bosnian Croats in an independent but confederally organized B-H. Apart from a number of Franjo Tuđman's public statements to the contrary,<sup>35</sup> the key evidence to the contrary offered by both the scholarly community and the ICTY concerns the military engagement of the Croatian forces proper in the Croat-Bosniak war. According to Marijan, however, the military involvement of the Croatian Army (HV) was modest. The HV first entered the war in April of 1993, when a platoon from the HV Special Forces, mainly comprised of Croats from B-H, engaged the ARBiH in Konjic.<sup>36</sup> From July onwards the HV was permanently engaged in combat against the ARBiH. Marijan does not offer an estimate for the average number of HV soldiers in the war against the ARBiH. Instead we are informed that, for example, on the Prozor-Uskoplje battlefield, the HV comprised between 10% and 15% of the overall Croat fighting force.<sup>37</sup> Incidentally, this estimate chimes well with the numbers given by Boutros Ghali, the UN secretary general, during the war.<sup>38</sup> Marijan concludes that Tuđman, ultimately, employed a small, (mainly) volunteer force, because his political goals had fallen short of the putative desire to divide B-H with Milošević or to annex the adjoining parts of B-H populated by Croats.<sup>39</sup> There is something to be said for the rather limited involvement of the HV

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<sup>33</sup> 18 in total. I have excluded Mostar as the city saw heavy fighting involving the Serbs in 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Marijan did in fact make precisely this point in the preface of the book on page 6, but rather than develop it further, he leaves it at merely hinting at the census numbers. Again, it is unclear why he doesn't treat this issue in the chapter devoted to crimes. For the above estimates, I have consulted <http://www.statistika.ba/> Calculations are my own. Of course, part of the decline in both the numbers of Croats and Bosniaks is due to negative demographic trends, although the initially stronger demographic growth of Bosniaks, that ended sometime in the 2000s, understates the number of expelled Bosniaks from the mentioned counties.

<sup>35</sup> Marijan is both aware and does not ignore Tuđman's numerous public comments that called into question the Bosnian state as such. He attributes such comments, especially those made after 1992, to Tuđman's personal views rather than to any actual Croatian policy.

<sup>36</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 187ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> D. C. Isby, *op. cit.*, 227, note 16.

<sup>39</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 451.

in the Croat-Bosniak war. Marijan discusses the intense pressure from the West Tuđman had to face in pursuing his policy in Bosnia, and the obvious impact that pressure had on the military issues: Tuđman couldn't allow himself to go all out against the ARBiH simply because he still had to defeat the Croatian Serbs, a victory over which largely turned on Western benevolence.<sup>40</sup>

But Marijan fails to consider a number of obvious rejoinders that immediately spring to mind or were raised already by the secondary literature or the ICTY. The bulk of the HV forces were professional soldiers and made a decisive contribution to the HVO's battle effort in Mostar and the Prozor-Gornji Vakuf axis – this is a fact stressed by Marijan himself.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, precisely because of the immense pressure from the West, Tuđman had to employ a small but powerful force to achieve his professed political goal: a de facto division of Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to the ICTY Trial Chamber judgement in the Prlić case, the deployment of foreign troops with one of the combatants – regardless of its size or battlefield impact – transformed the Croat-Bosniak war from an internal to an international conflict.<sup>42</sup> While historians should accept at face value neither the findings nor the judgments of the ICTY, it is a pity Marijan did not dwell in more detail on this aspect of the Prlić trial.

Marijan's book is written in a polemical tone but is, above all, distinguished by remarkable attention to detail and sober presentation of facts. The book, therefore, offers the interested reader a chance to judge for himself the validity of the number of claims of the academic community with regard to the Croat-Bosniak war.

### **Mesud Šadinlija: Peace Plans, Croat Policy Toward Bosnia, and the ARBiH**

Mesud Šadinlija, a researcher at the Institute for Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law from Sarajevo, has in the past couple of decades published a number of important articles and books dealing with the military, political, and diplomatic aspects of the Bosnian war.<sup>43</sup> His comprehensive account of the war, *Između pravde i realpolitike. Odnos mirovnih planova i vojnih operacija u Bosni i Hercegovini 1992–1995* [Between Justice and Realpolitik. The Relationship between the Peace Plans and Military Operations in

<sup>40</sup> Marijan's testimony at the ICTY conveys the same message. IT-04-74-T, 27.09.2009, p. 36011.

<sup>41</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 190, 407 and the context.

<sup>42</sup> IT-04-74-T, Trial Chamber Judgment, Volume 3, p. 131. The Appeals Chamber confirmed the findings of the Trial Chamber.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, *Teritorijalna odbrana Bosne i Hercegovine 1986–1992* (Sarajevo: Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava, 2013) and *Za Sarajevo, za Bosnu svoju. Od 13. novosarajevske do 111. viteške brdske brigade* (Sarajevo: Udruženje „1. Slavna – 111. Viteška brigada“, 2010). Particularly noteworthy is his article on the deleterious juridical consequences of ignoring the military aspects of the war „Sudije ili historičari? O značaju proučavanja vojne historije na primjeru jedne presude Suda Bosne i Hercegovine“, *Prilozi* 40, (2010), 195–210.

Bosnia-Herzegovina 1992–1995], appeared in 2018.<sup>44</sup> The title of the book is slightly misleading as Šadinlija does not simply zero in on the ways the numerous peace plan initiatives and battles shaped each other, but is rather equally interested in presenting a rich and meticulously researched picture of practically all the major political, diplomatic, and military events of the war, regardless of their bearing on his central thesis. What is his central thesis? Simply put, from the very start the international community adopted the principle that “might makes right” and so the entire peace effort can best be understood as a long and winding series of maneuvers to ratify or encourage Serbian (and later on Croatian) war gains. Similarly, the battles waged by the Bosnian Serbs and Croats tended to follow the presumed enabling signals of the various peace plans just as much as the military outcomes had shaped the structure of those plans.

The relationship between battles and peace plans that emerges from his book, however, is not a symmetrical affair. Šadinlija is much more convincing in showing that Western diplomats were at pains to structure their peace proposals to reflect “the facts on the ground”, than that the Bosnian Serbs and Croats planned their military operations to fit into or shape various peace agendas. As he himself emphasizes on multiple occasions, the basic political and military strategies of the Serbs and Croats were adopted at the outset of the war and could hardly be said to have been influenced by the West.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, one could plausibly argue that the peace plan proposals, except for the final one, all imposed significant territorial losses on the Serbs (and, occasionally, on the Croats). Šadinlija, however, argues, as it were, from the position of the purported initial impact of Western diplomacy on the military and political plans of the Serb and the Croats. The original sin of the West, according to him, consisted of initially accepting the principle of ethnicity and the recognition of political legitimacy of the Bosnian Serbs (and later of the Bosnian Croats) even after they started their military offensive in the spring of 1992. It is thus, Šadinlija argues, that the Western efforts shaped, and so supported, the military and political plans of the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. From this point of view, *any* peace effort that did not usher in a complete dismantling of the Serbian military control and a reversal to the principle of “one man, one vote” on the whole territory of B-H (ie., with no ethnically delimited provinces or cantons), was simply illegitimate, indeed, criminal. On this reading one can say that Šadinlija is right: the Western peace conferences and plans all “complemented” the political and battle plans of the Serbs and Croats, because they

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<sup>44</sup> Mesud Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike. Odnos mirovnih planova i vojnih operacija u Bosni i Hercegovini 1992–1995* (Sarajevo: Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava, 2018) [Between Justice and Realpolitik. The Relationship between the Peace Agreements and Military Operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995.]. All translations from the book are my own.

<sup>45</sup> Consider, for example, his article Mesud Šadinlija, „Prsten za glavu aždaje: Sarajevo u strateškim ciljevima Republike Srpske 1992–1995“, *Radovi. (Historija, Historija umjetnosti, Arheologija)*, 3 (2014), 355–382.

affirmed the principle of an ethnically based territorial division and refused (until the very end) to outlaw their military and political leadership.

A full response to his thesis is entirely beyond the scope of this review, but I will offer one, admittedly generic, rejoinder. At no point in his book does Šadinlija argue in favor of, or even explains, his basic premise that the only legitimate institutional arrangement could entail no cantonal or provincial devolution of the central powers along the ethnic lines (where possible to be sure). This is exactly what, as Šadinlija himself shows, the Cutileiro plan attempted to do. Rather than create just three ethnically dominated and geographically contiguous entities (nota bene: precisely something that all subsequent peace plans tried to implement), the Cutileiro plan envisaged the establishment of numerous provinces, in some of which the power would be in the hands of the majority ethnicity, and in some of which the power would be shared. According to Šadinlija:

And so during the middle of March of 1992, a second typical principle of the international mediation emerged under the auspices of the European Community – after the principle of the ethnic division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, as we will see, in this phase was strengthened through the offered geographical maps with ethnically delimited borders. Namely the principle of the respect for and the appeasement of the side in possession of superior military force. These two principles will remain present in the actions of the international mediation until the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>46</sup>

And how were these two principles embodied in the initial peace plan proposed by the Cutileiro Commission in March of 1992? “The Cutileiro initial proposal ... accorded the Bosniak constitutional region [*konstitutivnoj jedinici*] 42 existing municipalities covering 44% of the state territory, the 20 Croat municipalities covering 12%, and 37 Serb municipalities covering 42% of the state territory. There would be 18% Bosniaks, 59% Croats and 50% Serbs left living outside their respective regions”.<sup>47</sup> Once one recalls the ethnic distribution of the country on the eve of the war, the plan can hardly be decried as either unjust or rewarding of military superiority. This is not to say that it is beyond reproach. As Šadinlija describes in detail,<sup>48</sup> Radovan Karadžić never really considered the maps seriously and accepted only the overall principles of the plan, both because he agreed with them and because doing so shifted the burden of the refusal of the plan to Izetbegović (the latter duly obliged).<sup>49</sup>

Rather than review his book in detail, something that, at any rate, I cannot do in an economical way, I will focus on select episodes of the war that are also covered by Marijan and Isby. Šadinlija is predominantly a military histori-

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<sup>46</sup> M. Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike...*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

an and is one of the very few authors who had access to the ARBiH military records, other than those tendered as evidence at the ICTY trials.

How does Šadinlija describe the eruption of war in Gornji Vakuf in January of 1993? In mid-December of 1992, Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance kicked-off the negotiations and by 2 January presented the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks with their initial map proposal.<sup>50</sup> As the proposal disproportionately favored the Bosnian Croats, both the Serbs and Bosniaks were displeased. On 15 January, Šadinlija continues his account, the HVO passed an order that sought to subjugate all ARBiH units under its command. Šadinlija connects this order to both the VOPP and Tuđman's aggressive policy toward Bosnia.<sup>51</sup>

On the military front things started to deteriorate as early as December. Šadinlija mentions the forceful takeover of a number of buildings in Jablanica by the HVO military police, numerous road blockades imposed by the HVO, and a breakdown in establishing joint civilian and military authority in a number of central Bosnia-Herzegovina municipalities. To top it off, the HVO sent troops to Novi Travnik that arrived on 8 January. When the HVO then started the piecemeal harassment of Bosniak forces in Gornji Vakuf, the ARBiH imposed a roadblock on 10 January. The details of the battle presented by Šadinlija correspond on the whole to those of Marijan's account. Where Šadinlija parts ways with Marijan is in his claim that the HVO attack lost steam and had to be broken off due to hardened ARBiH defenses.<sup>52</sup> He is also almost silent on the previous deployment of the ARBiH units to Gornji Vakuf that, according to Marijan, triggered the January HVO troop transfer to central Bosnia and Gornji Vakuf.<sup>53</sup>

The January Gornji Vakuf battle touches on the question of how Šadinlija understands the Croat policy toward Bosnia during the war. Early on in his book, Šadinlija describes the two meetings between Milošević and Tuđman in 1991 as having laid the foundation for their dealings with the Bosnian crises: the division of the country so as to effect an ethnic and state delimitation between its peoples.<sup>54</sup> His restatement of the Croat policy as it emerged toward the end of 1992, is slightly different. According to Šadinlija:

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 304–307.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>53</sup> I say “almost”, because Šadinlija points to this fact, unwittingly perhaps, by briefly discussing and then dismissing the work of Charles Shrader, a US historian, who structured his narrative of the Croat-Bosniak war around a supposed ARBiH plan to attack the HVO in January 1993. But the deployment of the ARBiH forces to Gornji Vakuf in December 1992 cannot be dismissed as easily and it is an unfortunate fact that Šadinlija, who had access to the ARBiH war records, does not discuss it in more detail. M. Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike...*, 410, note 1364. See Charles Shrader, *The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Central Bosnia: A Military History, 1992–1994* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> M. Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike...*, 29. The meetings were from the start shrouded in mystery and practically all information we possess is based on secondary sources. For the discussion of the sources and some circumstantial evidence that the partition of Bosnia was at least

The actual political vision of Franjo Tuđman and the actions of the official Croatian policy of that period... contain the following clarification [of their public commitment to “equal and unified community of the three constitutive peoples”]: “Bosnia-Herzegovina can only exist as a community of three peoples, which will have to be territorially defined”... That kind of policy and the harsh ways by which it was implemented on the soil of Bosnia-Herzegovina soon led to the conflict between the HVO and the HV with the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina.”<sup>55</sup>

We may say therefore, that according to Šadinlija, although Tuđman’s policy evolved from an outright negation of Bosnia’s sovereignty, its insistence on territorially defined ethnic regions within Bosnia was equally bellicose and illegitimate. This claim is in line with Šadinlija’s overall interpretation of the Croat political and military goals.

A final note on Šadinlija’s book. He is most persuasive in describing the precarious military position of the ARBiH and the consequent relatively timid military plans of the ARBiH. While his work on the inner workings of the ARBiH will be indispensable to all future researchers of the Bosnian war, it is unfortunate that some of the key military topics were not discussed in more detail. In particular, the reorganization of the ARBiH in 1994, and its effect on the war in 1995 deserved an in-depth treatment.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

The established scholarly view, we may say, chimes well with Marijan and Šadinlija’s account of the war in many points of detail. The hostilities leading to open war are mentioned and described; the battle of Gornji Vakuf is generally consistent with the one laid out in Marijan and Šadinlija’s works; in contrast to Šadinlija’s narration, the Croatian military involvement is presented as more measured and consistent with more modest political goals; Isby, naturally, puts far more stress on the ethnic cleansing policy implemented by the Bosnian Croats, but Marijan, although not without equivocation, recognizes the presence

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discussed, see: Kosta Nikolić, *Bosna i Hercegovina u vreme raspada SFRJ 1990–1992*. Tematska zbirka dokumenata (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2011), 26–39.

<sup>55</sup> M. Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike...*, 293.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 683. Šadinlija references the ARBiH order on 18 October 1994, that envisaged a major force restructuring. But the order is not entirely reflective of a major reform. On the hand, the ARBiH established a commission to monitor and implement the reorganization, tasked one of its service arms to prepare payroll changes, and provided formation plans for new units. On the other hand, however, the order barely mentions the RBiH Ministry of Defense and for a number of new units no formation plans were provided. As any major reform of the armed forces would have to have involved a heavy distribution of resources between the existing military and civilian structures, the virtual absence of the political power centers (above all the Ministry of Defense) casts serious doubts about how reforming the reform was.

of more sinister aspects of Croatian actions;<sup>57</sup> finally, Isby presents Tuđman's policy as having wanted, in the event, to create a Croat political entity *within* Bosnia-Herzegovina. On the other hand, Isby blames the VOPP for the eruption of the fighting in the spring of 1993, something that Marijan's account does not support, but Šadinlija's account does. Isby is mostly at odds with Marijan in presenting the actions of the Bosnian leadership and in particular those of Alija Izetbegović and is on the whole much closer to Šadinlija's point of view in consistently interpreting Tuđman's Bosnia policy as being belligerent and uncompromising, even if one assumes that this policy officially made peace with a sovereign Bosnia-Herzegovina. Of the three abovementioned key claims contained in Marijan's, the second claim about the Croats being pushed into fighting against the Bosniaks is the least consistent with the facts presented by Šadinlija and Isby. Moreover, Marijan's own account offers ample evidence that – at least with regard to the military issues – the Bosnian Croats were initially far more eager to bite the bullet and push on with fighting than was the case with the Bosniaks. This is clearly on display in the conquest of Prozor in 1992, the battle in Gornji Vakuf in 1993, and the January HVO battle orders. But *pace* Šadinlija and Isby, Marijan does make a strong case that the Bosniak military and political leadership shares the blame for the Croat-Bosniak war in its general refusal to engage seriously in talks about the country's internal constitution, which would have been more acceptable to the Bosnian Croats, and by being ready to use military means to impose its will.

I conclude this review with a short note on the VOPP. The open war between the Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks erupted at the beginning of 1993 – that is to say, as soon as the frontline against the VRS had calmed down. While the VOPP no doubt prompted the Bosnian Croat leadership to take the initiative, the HVO capture of Prozor and the fighting in Novi Travnik and Gornji Vakuf in 1992, are clear evidence that the spiral of violence started earlier and was in essence caused by the conflicting political and territorial aims pursued by the Croats and the Bosniaks. Once those political goals were set and the populace at large began arming, it was indeed only a road blockade away from all-out war.

The two studies then help us fill the gap left open by the earlier research, which focused more on the impact of Western diplomacy,<sup>58</sup> by outlining the frequently overlooked local political and military dynamics which, alongside the plans of international and regional capital cities, crucially influenced the course of events. Combining these perspectives might show which element prevailed at which stage of the conflict and would certainly invigorate the much-needed Post-Yugoslav scholarly debate about the war.

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<sup>57</sup> D. Marijan, *Rat Hrvata i Muslimana...*, 437. Marijan, if I am not mistaken, does not use the term *ethnic cleansing* in reference to the Bosnian Croats in his book and does not directly attribute such policy to the Bosnian Croat leadership. Nevertheless, I take the page just referenced to amount to as much.

<sup>58</sup> A good example of this omission is an otherwise excellent study of the Vance-Owen peace plan by Vladimir Petrović quoted above.

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## THE CROAT-BOSNIAK WAR: THE SELECT FINDINGS OF THE RECENT REGIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

### *Summary*

The War in Bosnia, virtually from its inception, helped produce a veritable stream of scholarly works. While war crimes, diplomacy, and political affairs attracted most attention, a good number of books were also devoted to local case studies. The Croat-Bosniak war, however, seems to have aroused no one's interest. Except for the book by Charles Shrader (*The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Central Bosnia: A Military History, 1992–1994*), who focused on the military aspects of that conflict, the scholars from the West dealt with the Croat-Bosniak war in broad and shallow brushes. But while their treatment was perfunctory, their claims about the causes and nature of the war were not hesitant. One such claim puts the lion's share of the blame for the outbreak of the violence in 1993 on the Vance-Owen peace plan (VOPP).

Recently, however, Davor Marijan and Mesud Šadinlija, historians from Croatia and Bosnia respectively, published integral accounts of the Croat-Bosniak war. Their studies were based on original war records and followed both political and military events, as they unfolded on the local level, in great detail. In this article, I zero in on the local violence in Gornji Vakuf in late 1992 and early 1993 as well as on the effects of the VOPP on the military and political events. I compare the account of David Isby (in *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990–1995 Volume I*), whom I take to represent the consensus view of the academic community, with the accounts

offered by Davor Marijan and Mesud Šadinlija. My key findings are that (1) the hostilities started earlier and were rooted in the conflicting political goals of the Croats and Bosniaks (2) the VOPP at most encouraged the Croats to take the initiative in the conflict and that (3) the fact that war broke out in 1993 had ultimately to do with the fact that the frontlines against the Serbs had calmed down at that time.

The two studies then help us fill the gap left open by the earlier research, which focused more on the impact of Western diplomacy, by outlining the frequently overlooked local political and military dynamics which, alongside the plans of international and regional capital cities, crucially influenced the course of events. Combining these perspectives might show which element prevailed at which stage of the conflict and would certainly invigorate the much-needed post-Yugoslav scholarly debate about the war.

**KEYWORDS:** Bosnian War, Hrvatsko vijeće obrane (HVO), Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine (ARBiH), Vance-Owen Peace Plan (VOPP), Gornji Vakuf, Croat-Bosniak War