

Croatian Path to Freedom

Exhibition marking 35 years since Croatia's first multi-party elections, 30 years of peace following the end of the Homeland War, and 12 years of EU membership.

From Struggle to the European Union: Croatia's Path to Freedom



In 2025, Croatia marks four historic milestones that reflect the enduring continuity of our statehood, the sacrifices made for freedom, and our steadfast European vocation. In addition to commemorating 1,100 years since the coronation of King Tomislav and the founding of the Croatian Kingdom in 925—an early affirmation of our national identity and deep historical roots—we also mark 35 years since the first multi-party elections, which ended decades of communist rule; 30 years since peace was secured through the defensive Homeland War; and 12 years of active, constructive membership in the European Union.

Throughout history, the Croatian people have preserved their language, their faith, and their identity. Yet it was in the 1990s that their centuries-long aspiration for freedom reached a historic turning point. Amid the transformative moment marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Croatian people affirmed their place among the free nations of Europe.

Croatia was compelled to defend its freedom and independence in a war imposed by the Greater Serbian regime of Slobodan Milošević. This exhibition is dedicated to that Croatian struggle for freedom in the early 1990s—a struggle that was difficult, but resolute. This visual narrative, co-organised with the Croatian Memorial Documentation Homeland War Center, stands as a tribute to a path shaped by sacrifice and to the enduring values that guided it.

The memory of this difficult struggle, marked by the loss of many lives, deepens our appreciation for the path that led us to the European Union. It is with particular pride that we celebrate 12 years of membership in the European Union, which Croatia joined in 2013. This moment marked not only the fulfilment of a long-held aspiration, but also a return to the European family to which we have always belonged—by history, by culture, and by conviction.

In this context, this exhibition is both a tribute to the past and a reminder of the responsibility we share in preserving peace and freedom for future generations across Europe.

Dr. sc. Karlo Ressler
Head of Croatian EPP Delegation

Croatia 1990–1995: From Occupation to Victory, Freedom, and Democracy



The Republic of Croatia is a Central European (Pannonian-Danubian) and Adriatic-Mediterranean country, defined by its Constitution as a unified and indivisible, democratic and social state, in which power derives from the people and belongs to the people as a community of free and equal citizens who enjoy the same rights regardless of their race, religion, nationality, social status, or political beliefs. Its statehood and legal continuity, rooted at least as far back as the 9th century, were confirmed by international recognition from the then-European (Economic) Community and by admission to the United Nations in 1992.

Following democratic changes in 1990, Croatia came under attack in 1991 by Serbia, specifically by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian-Montenegrin forces, which went on to occupy nearly a third of its territory. Despite heavy losses and widespread devastation, Croatia managed to defend itself and, by the end of August 1995, had liberated the majority of the temporarily occupied areas, creating conditions for the peaceful reintegration of the remaining occupied territory in the Croatian Danube region. Under the pressure of looming military defeat, the leadership of the rebel Serbs in Croatia ultimately agreed to return this final occupied area to Croatian authority by January 15, 1998,

through the so-called process of peaceful reintegration. Although the Croatian Armed Forces held clear military superiority in the region, President Tudman and the Croatian leadership chose to prioritize peaceful negotiations, reaffirming Croatia's commitment to a peace-oriented policy it guided since 1990.

Between 1992 and 1995, Croatia also played a significant role in defending Bosnia and Herzegovina from attacks by Serbian forces and in liberating parts of its occupied territory. In cooperation with Bosniak Muslims, Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina contributed to the recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state and to the preservation of its internationally recognized borders.

By securing victory in the imposed war 30 years ago thus liberating its temporarily occupied territories and achieving territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders, along with its accession to NATO (April 1, 2009) and the European Union (July 1, 2013), with which it shares civilizational and cultural values, Croatia fulfilled the main strategic goals of its foreign policy as defined at the time of its declaration of independence in 1991.

Prof. dr. sc. Ante Nazor
Director of Croatian Memorial Documentation
Homeland War Center

History of Croatia

www.croatia.eu

Contemporary Croatia, which gained independence in 1991, is the successor of the 9th century Croatian medieval principalities established in the marches of the Carolingian Empire, followed by the Kingdom of Croatia, founded in 925 by King Tomislav. Soon after the death of the last great Croatian king, Dmitar Zvonimir, Croatia entered into a personal union with Hungary, and in the 14th century, the throne belonged to the French Anjou dynasty.

After the Ottoman invasions in the 16th century and the loss of large tracts of land, Croatian dignitaries elected Ferdinand Habsburg as monarch in 1527, and the country remained within the Habsburg Empire until 1918. The first half of this period was marked by constant wars with the Ottomans and Venetian encroachment upon greater and greater areas along the coast (Istria and Dalmatia), apart from the far south, where the independent Dubrovnik Republic developed free trade in the Mediterranean between 1358 and 1808.

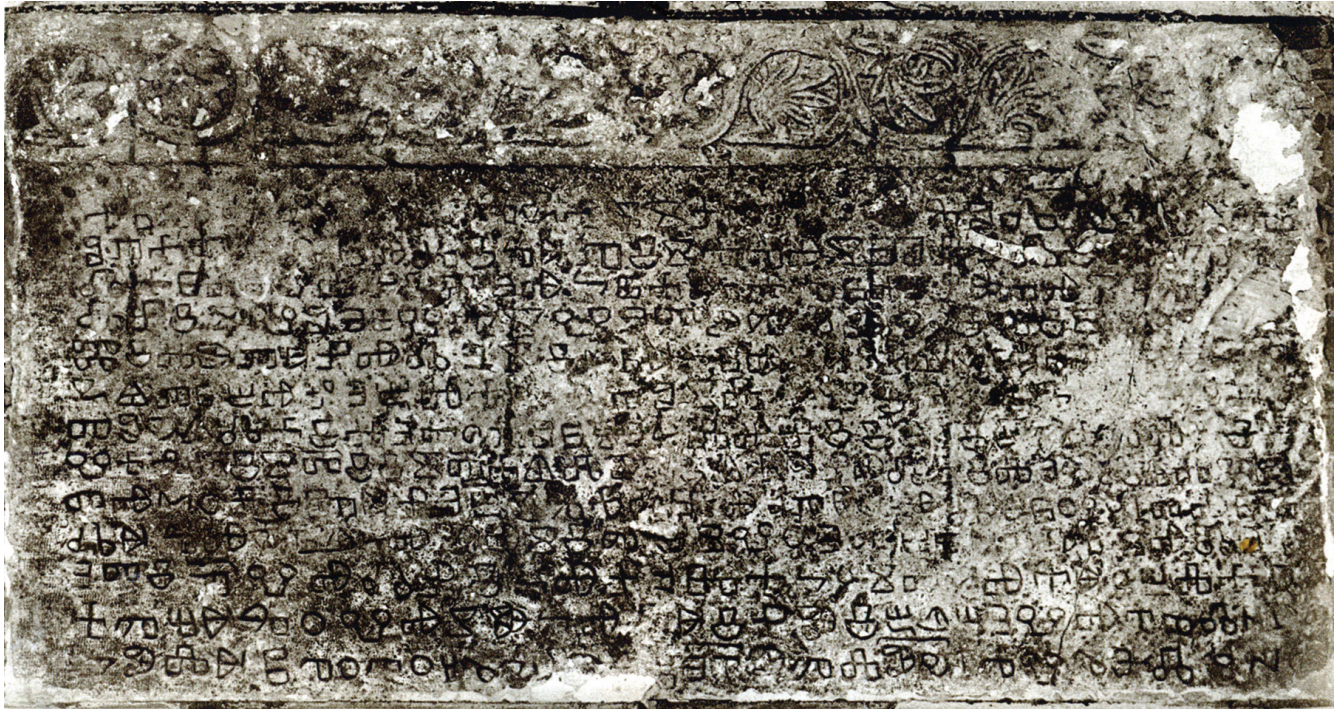
After the defeat of Venice and a short period in which Southern Croatia was incorporated in Napoleon's Illyrian provinces (1809–13), all the Croatian lands were brought together within the Habsburg Monarchy, though they were still separate entities.

They were united briefly in 1848, during the Croatian national revival. After the First World War, Croatia became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was transformed after 1945 into a Communist federation, in which Croatia was one of six republics until 1991.

Although recognised as an independent state by the international community on 15 January 1992, Croatia was forced to defend its independence by armed struggle until 1995, when its occupied territories were liberated. In 1992, Croatia became a member of the United Nations, in 2009, of NATO, and on 1 July 2013, of the European Union. Croatia presided over the Council of the EU in the first half of 2020.

The Hymn to Freedom by Ivan Gundulić (1589–1638), one of Croatia's greatest poets, from Dubrovnik:

*„Oh beautiful, oh dear, oh sweet freedom,
a gift in which all fortune God gave us (...)
every bit of silver, every bit of gold,
all human lives, can not repay your pure beauty.“*



The Baška tablet from 1100 AD, the most important Croatian epigraphic Glagolitic monument.

[illegible]



The Missal According to the Law of the Roman Court (1483), printed in the Croatian Glagolitic script. It is the first European missal not printed in the Latin language or script.

Historical foundations of modern Croatia

Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia

The millennial national identity of the Croatian nation and the continuity of its statehood, confirmed by the course of its entire historical experience in various political forms and by the perpetuation and development of a state-building idea grounded on the historical right of the Croatian nation to full sovereignty, have manifested themselves in:

- the formation of the Croatian principalities in the seventh century;
- the independent medieval state of Croatia established in the ninth century;
- the Kingdom of the Croats established in the tenth century;
- the preservation of the attributes of statehood under the Croatian-Hungarian personal union;
- the independent and sovereign decision of the Croatian Parliament in 1527 to elect a king from the Habsburg Dynasty;
- the independent and sovereign decision of the Croatian Parliament to ratify the Pragmatic Sanction in 1712;

- the conclusions of the Croatian Parliament of 1848 regarding the restoration of the integrity of the Triune Kingdom of Croatia under the authority of the ban (viceroy), rooted in the historical, national and natural right of the Croatian nation;

- the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement Agreement of 1868 regulating relations between the Kingdom of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia and the Kingdom of Hungary, resting on the legal traditions of both states and the Pragmatic Sanction of 1712;

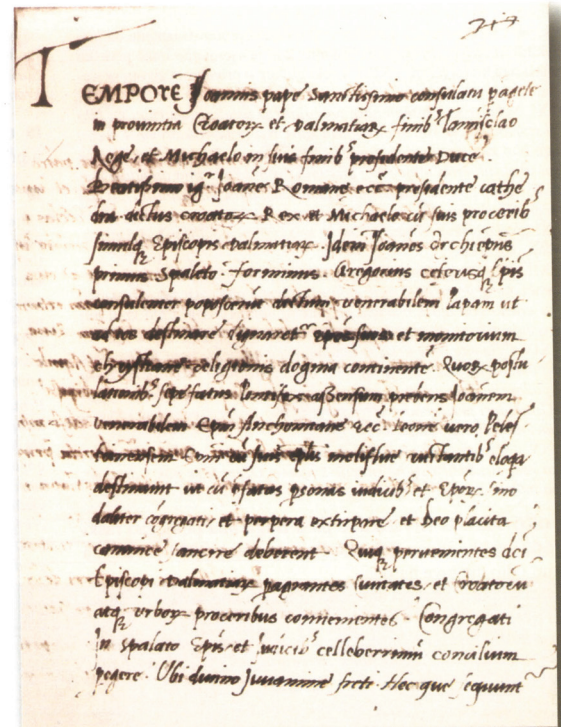
- the decision of the Croatian Parliament of 29 October 1918 to sever all constitutional ties between Croatia and Austria-Hungary, and the simultaneous accession of independent Croatia, invoking its historical and natural national rights, to the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, proclaimed in the former territory of the Habsburg Empire;

- the fact that the Croatian Parliament never ratified the decision made by the National Council of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs to unite with Serbia and Montenegro in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1 December 1918), subsequently proclaimed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (3 October 1929);

- the establishment of the Banat of Croatia in 1939, which restored Croatian state autonomy within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia;

- the establishment of the foundations of state sovereignty during the course of the Second World War, as expressed in the decision of the Territorial Antifascist Council of the National Liberation of Croatia (1943) in opposition to the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia (1941), and then in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Croatia (1947) and in all subsequent constitutions of the Socialist Republic of Croatia (1963-1990), at the historic turning point characterised by the rejection of the communist system and changes in the international order in Europe, in the first democratic elections (1990), when the Croatian nation reaffirmed, by its freely expressed will, its millennial statehood;

- the new Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990) and the victory of the Croatian nation and Croatia's defenders in the just, legitimate and defensive war of liberation, the Homeland War (1991-1995), wherein the Croatian nation demonstrated its resolve and readiness to establish and preserve the Republic of Croatia as an independent and autonomous, sovereign and democratic state.



A document in which Pope John X, in 925, called the Croatian ruler Tomislav a „King“

In the Yugoslav Federation

(1945–90)

www.croatia.eu

After World War II, together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia, Croatia became one of the six socialist republics that formed Yugoslavia. Within the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (renamed in 1963 the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) Croatia's present-day borders were set. The purges within the Communist regime were intensified after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948.

Despite declaring the federal nature of the state's organisation, the principles of republican statehood and national rights, the Communist powers systematically denied Croatian state individuality, which led to the Croatian Spring in the 1960s, a cultural and political movement led partly by the Croatian Communist League and partly by cultural and scientific activists gathered around Zagreb University and Matica Hrvatska. This movement for reform demanded recognition and protection for Croatian as a literary language, the strengthening of the position of the republic towards the federation, the democratisation of society in line with the idea of self-management and the introduction of some forms of market economy.

Although the Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito, crushed the movement in 1971, and politically and judicially persecuted those who had participated in it, the Yugoslav republics were acknowledged as the bearers of sovereignty of individual nations and gained greater rights in the Constitution of 1974. This policy of Tito's was an expression of the need to maintain equilibrium between the federalist (Croatia and Slovenia) and centralist (Belgrade) powers.

After Tito's death, some individuals in the leadership of the republics, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro, expressed dissatisfaction with these changes, and openly advocated the reorganisation of Yugoslavia, initially on the basis of a unitarian, centralist Yugoslav state, then, in the early 1990s, on the basis of the formation of a Greater Serbia. This provoked resistance in Croatia and Slovenia, which were seeking a reformation of the state along confederal lines. The conflict between these two concepts came to a head in the first half of 1990 with open aggression on the part of Serbia, Montenegro and the federal army (JNA) against Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991–95) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–95).



Croatian Spring. Political rally in Zagreb, 1971. The most prominent leaders of the movement were Savka Dabčević-Kučar (1923–2009) and Miko Tripalo (1926–95). After 1971, more than 2,000 people were sentenced for participating in the Croatian Spring, and tens of thousands were dismissed from their jobs or demoted. The work of Matica Hrvatska was proscribed and many newspapers and journals extinguished. A period known as the 'Croatian silence' ensued, which lasted until 1989. (www.croatia.eu)

What is considered by 'Homeland War'?

The term "Homeland War" is widely accepted in Croatia as the designation for the period of recent national history in the early 1990s, from 1990 to 1995, during which the modern Republic of Croatia was established and then defended in an imposed war. In legal terms, the war—or more precisely, the state of war—formally ended on August 23, 1996, with the signing of the Agreement on Full Normalization and the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This agreement was ratified by the Croatian Parliament on September 20, 1996.

The term "Homeland War" refers to several key phases and elements:

- The period of final preparations by the Serbian aggressor to launch a war of conquest and to annex significant parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, under the objective of “all Serbs living in one state.”
- The period marked by unconstitutional and terrorist activities, as well as the arming and armed rebellion of a segment of the Serb population in Croatia, beginning in the mid-1990s, known as the so-called creeping or covert aggression.
- The establishment of Croatian defense and armed forces, a process initiated in August 1990 within the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, and completed by the end of the war.

– The beginning of open warfare and the direct aggression by Serbia and Montenegro, executed through the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian-Montenegrin forces, which followed immediately after the Croatian Parliament adopted the Constitutional Decision on the Sovereignty and Independence of the Republic of Croatia on June 25, 1991.

– The defense of the Republic of Croatia and the military liberation of most of its temporarily occupied territory, conducted between 1991 and the end of 1995.

From a political perspective, the final end date of the Homeland War is considered to be January 15, 1998. On that day, the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region—including Baranja, and parts of Eastern Slavonia and Western Srijem—into the constitutional and legal order of the Republic of Croatia was completed.

Among Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who participated in large numbers in the defense of Croatia, the term "Homeland War" is also commonly used to describe the period from 1991 to the end of 1995. This includes the Serbian attack on the majority-Croat town of Ravno in Eastern Herzegovina in early October 1991, as well as the broader defense against Serbian aggression, armed conflict with Bosniak forces over control of territory, and the joint participation of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) and Special Units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (SP MUP HRHB), alongside the Croatian Army and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the final operations to liberate Southwestern and Western Bosnia.



JNA tank stopped at Stari Grabovac in Western Slavonia, October 1991; the defeat of the JNA in Croatia in 1991.
(photograph by Željko Gašparović)



Improvised armoured vehicles of the Croatian Armed Forces in 1991.
(photograph by Toni Hnojčik)



An-2 „combat“ aircraft of the Croatian Armed Forces in 1991. The first Croatian Homeland War airmen, the brave crew of the First Independent Air Force Platoon from Osijek – Marko Živković, Mirko Vukušić, Ante Plazibat and Rade Griva – were killed in this aircraft while flying, with no navigation instruments or equipment, on a combat mission in the night of 1/2 December 1991, at Otok in Slavonia.



"Croats do not fear anyone" graffiti / exhibition of war photography and insignia of the units of the Zagreb corps district 1991-1995 / Author: Ivo Vrtarić, Zagreb, 1995. (photograph by: Željko Gašparović, published by: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, General HV Staff, Zagreb Corps District)

International Recognition, Confirmation of the Legal Continuity of Croatia

The present-day borders of the Republic of Croatia were confirmed through the defensive and liberation efforts of the Homeland War. Following the rejection of communism and the democratic transition in 1990, and with the establishment of an independent and sovereign Croatian state in 1991, a new chapter in Croatian history began. As with previous historical turning points, this period was shaped by major social and political changes across Europe, most notably the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern European countries.

The state-legal continuity of Croatia, which dates back to the medieval Croatian principalities and kingdoms, was affirmed through international recognition. The Holy See recognized Croatia on January 13, 1992, followed by the member states of the then European Community on January 15, 1992. Full international legitimacy was achieved with Croatia's admission to the United Nations on May 22, 1992, alongside the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Even before this, several countries had recognized Croatia during 1991. Slovenia extended recognition on June 26, followed by Lithuania on July 30. In December of the same year, Ukraine recognized Croatia on the 11th, Latvia on the 14th, Iceland on the 19th, and Estonia on the 31st.

Several key dates stand out in the process of creating the modern Republic of Croatia. Among them is May 30, 1990, when, after decades of one-party communist rule, the democratic Croatian Parliament was constituted, based on the results of the country's first multi-party elections. The victory of the Croatian Democratic Union confirmed the national awakening of the Croatian people and their demand for greater decentralization. This event, celebrated with great emotion by the Croatian people, marked the beginning of a new era. As a result, many regard the constitution of the Croatian Parliament on May 30, 1990, as a foundational moment in recent Croatian history and the starting point for the creation of a modern Croatian state. This date is commemorated as Statehood Day.

The members of that parliamentary assembly went on to proclaim the new Constitution of the Republic of Croatia on December 22, 1990, adopt the Constitutional Decision on the Sovereign and Independent Republic of Croatia on June 25, 1991, and pass the Decision on the final severance of state and legal ties with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on October 8, 1991.

HRVATSKI
SABOR
JUČER JE
ZASJEDAO
U RATNIM
UVJETIMA



NEOVISNA HRVATSKA

**Večernji
list**

15
DINARA

GOD. XXXV BR. 10.109
SRJEDE
ZAGREB, 9.X.1991.

NEZAVISNE NOVINE

Registarski broj: 1241, 475, 509, 111, 1991.
CIP: 1181, 1182, 1183, 1184, 1185, 1186, 1187, 1188, 1189, 1190, 1191, 1192, 1193, 1194, 1195, 1196, 1197, 1198, 1199, 1200.



Skica zaključaka

- Republika Hrvatska raskida sve državno-pravne veze s dosadašnjom SFRJ
- Pravni poredak SFRJ prestaje vrijediti na cijeloj teritoriji Republike Hrvatske
- Republika Hrvatska poziva Srbiju, Crnu Goru i JNA da prestanu s ratom protiv Hrvatske, a Bosnu i Hercegovinu da ne dopusti korištenje svog teritorija za napade na Hrvatsku
- Tzv. JNA se proglašuje okupatorskom i agresorskom vojskom i mora napustiti teritorij Republike Hrvatske
- Pozivaju se sve države, posebno Europske zajednice, da priznaju Republiku Hrvatsku
- Hrvatska će u cijelosti poštovati obveze SFRJ u dijelu u kojem se one odnose na nju
- Hrvatska će nastaviti sudjelovanje na Mirovnoj konferenciji u Haagu

STR. 2-5.

Front page of
Večernji List,
Wednesday, 9
October 1991:
"Independent
Croatia"

Referendum and Constitutional Decision of the Croatian Parliament on a Sovereign and Independent Republic of Croatia

In the context of an armed rebellion by a portion of the Serb population in Croatia against the Croatian government, and after the Serbian leadership rejected the joint Slovenian-Croatian proposal to reorganize Yugoslavia into a confederal state, both Slovenia and Croatia began the process of declaring independence.

To strengthen Croatia's position in this process, a referendum was held on May 19, 1991, on the establishment of an independent and sovereign Croatian state.

Approximately 85 percent of eligible voters, out of a total of 3,652,225, participated in the referendum. Of those who voted, about 94 percent supported the creation of an independent Republic of Croatia, while around 92 percent were opposed to remaining in Yugoslavia.

Based on the outcome of the referendum and the clearly expressed will of the majority of Croatian citizens, the Croatian Parliament adopted a series of key constitutional documents on June 25, 1991. These included the Constitutional Decision on the Sovereignty and Independence of the Republic of Croatia, the Constitutional Act on Amendments to the Constitutional Act for the Implementation of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Declaration on the Establishment of a Sovereign and Independent Republic of Croatia, and the Charter on the Rights of Serbs and Other Nationalities in the Republic of Croatia.

On this date, the process of Croatia's separation from the other republics and from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia officially began, along with the procedure for seeking international recognition of the Republic of Croatia.

Croatian Parliament, 25 June 1991: Adoption of the Constitutional Decision on the Sovereignty and Independence of the Republic of Croatia.
(photograph by Stanko Szabo)



At the request of the European Community, and in order to allow time for continued negotiations toward a peaceful resolution of the Yugoslav crisis, particularly after the JNA launched an armed intervention in Slovenia on June 27, 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia agreed to a three-month postponement of the implementation of the Constitutional Decision on Sovereignty and Independence. This postponement was formalized in the Brijuni Agreement, signed on July 7, 1991.



Poster for the referendum on the annexation of part of Croatian territory to Serbia: "Serbian people in one state – for annexation".



Poster: "Referendum for Croatia"

The Government of Democratic Unity and the Peace-Making Activities of Cardinal Franjo Kuharić

At the same time that the Croatian Parliament decided to begin the process of disassociation from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Greater Serbian aggression against the Republic of Croatia began. Rather than seeking a peaceful solution, the terrorist actions of Serbian extremists in Croatia during July 1991 escalated into open and brutal aggression by Serbia—specifically by the JNA and Serbian forces, and from October 1, also by forces from Montenegro—against the Republic of Croatia.

In these dramatic circumstances, the Croatian Parliament gave its confidence to the newly formed “Government of Democratic Unity” in early August. This government symbolically confirmed the unity of Croats and all citizens of Croatia who supported the democratically elected Croatian leadership. The entire Croatian economy was mobilized and subordinated to the defense of the country.



Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, Mass for the Homeland, Zagreb Cathedral, 30 May 1990. (photograph by Jadran Mimica)

The Croatian diaspora provided essential support during this time, not only through lobbying for international recognition and supplying material and financial aid, but also through direct personal involvement in the ranks of the Croatian Army and police forces.

The Catholic Church in Croatia also stood firmly with the people. Its moral guidance during this period of national defense and state-building was powerfully embodied in the leadership of Cardinal Franjo Kuharić. His sermons, delivered at the very beginning of the war in August 1991, echoed the messages of Pope John Paul II and called for the upholding of moral values even in times of conflict:

“Love of God is necessarily love of humanity, and love of humanity is also love of patriotism. Therefore, our patriotism must not be poisoned by even a drop of hatred or desire for revenge. Defending freedom and peace is a right and a duty, but always within the legality of a state governed by the rule of law. Therefore, our patriotism must not be racist, imperialist, or chauvinistic. Our patriotism is Christian.”

If my opponent burned my house, I will not burn his. If he destroyed my church, I will not even touch his; on the contrary, I will protect it. If he left his home, I will not even take a needle from his home. If he killed my father, brother, sister, I will not return the same measure, but I will respect the life of his father, brother, son, sister.”



Pope John Paul II welcomed by the President of the Republic of Croatia Franjo Tuđman during his visit to Croatia and the Croatian Church on 10-11 September 1994. (photograph by Marko Perić)

Attack on Banski Dvori and the Croatian Parliament's Decision to Sever State and Legal Ties with the SFRJ

During one of the most intense phases of the aggression, on October 7, 1991, the day when the three-month moratorium on Croatia's and Slovenia's declarations of independence expired, aircraft of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) bombed and fired rockets at Banski Dvori, the official residence of the President of the Republic of Croatia and the seat of the Government, located in the historic center of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia.



THIRTEEN CENTURIES OF CROATIAN CULTURE IN ASHES.

THE AGGRESSORS ARE SERBIA AND THE YUGO COMMUNIST ARMY.
THE AGGRESSORS ARE SERBIA AND THE YUGO COMMUNIST ARMY.

Banski dvori, bombed by the JNA in October 1991.

The target of the attack was President Franjo Tuđman, who was meeting at the time with Ante Marković, the Yugoslav Prime Minister, and Stjepan Mesić, the Croatian representative in the presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). All three survived the attack. Shocked by the assault on Banski Dvori, and amidst constant reports of destruction and casualties arriving from other Croatian cities and towns under attack, the Croatian Parliament convened the following day. On October 8, 1991, in the context of open military aggression by the JNA and Serbian-Montenegrin forces, the Parliament adopted a formal Decision declaring that "the Republic of Croatia is severing all state and legal ties based on which, together with other republics and provinces, it had constituted the former SFRJ."

In this decision, the Parliament also concluded that the Republic of Serbia and the JNA had committed armed aggression against the Republic of Croatia. The JNA was officially designated as an aggressor and occupying army. Furthermore, the Parliament called on the Republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro not to allow their territories to be used for waging war against Croatia.

Despite clear evidence that southern Croatia had already come under attack by Montenegrin Ministry of Interior forces and soldiers from Montenegro, Croatian political leadership chose to extend a hand of goodwill to Montenegro through this decision, hoping that its leadership would abandon Belgrade's expansionist and aggressive policy.

The Destruction of Dubrovnik and Vukovar

Disregarding peace negotiations and the efforts of both the Croatian Government and the international community to resolve the crisis peacefully, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian-Montenegrin troops launched a general offensive on all Croatian battlefronts in late September and early October 1991. Their minimum objective was to secure the planned borders of the so-called Serbian Krajina within Croatia, but their broader ambition was to capture the capital Zagreb and the city of Varaždin, effectively seizing Croatian territory up to the border with Slovenia.

At that time, it seemed unlikely that Croatia would be able to defend itself. This concern was amplified on September 25, 1991, when the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 713, which imposed an arms embargo on all of Yugoslavia. The decision also applied to Croatia, which had only just begun to build its military defense forces. Given the JNA's vast stockpiles of ammunition and overwhelming superiority in weaponry compared to Croatian forces, this UN resolution effectively made it easier for the aggressor to occupy Croatian territory, and later to expand into Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Dubrovnik, aftermath of attacks by the JNA and Serbian-Montenegrin forces, November-December 1991. (photograph by Pavo Urban)



Vukovar, consequences of the 1991 attacks by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian forces; photographed in 1998. (photograph by Marko Perić)

In the autumn of 1991, international media reported on the widespread destruction of Croatian towns and villages. The global public followed the situation with growing concern and shock, particularly the attacks on Dubrovnik, a historic city protected under the UNESCO World Heritage Charter. The destruction inflicted on Dubrovnik was unlike anything seen in Europe since World War II. At the same time, intense media coverage was also focused on the siege and destruction of Vukovar, whose exceptionally brave defenders resisted Serbian aggression from August until the city's complete occupation between November 18 and 20, 1991.

The unexpectedly strong, determined, and prolonged resistance by Vukovar's defenders against a far superior enemy, combined with the massive destruction the city endured—over 90 percent of its buildings were damaged or destroyed—transformed Vukovar into a powerful symbol of suffering and of Croatian resistance to Serbian aggression in 1991. Today, November 18 is marked in the Republic of Croatia as the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Homeland War and the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja.



Dubrovnik, 6 December 1991; the author of this photograph, Pavo Urban, was killed on that day near Orlando's Column (in the picture), symbol of freedom and independence; its flagstaff carried the banner dedicated to freedom (Libertas).



War-torn Vukovar in November 1991, following a three-month siege by the JNA and Serb paramilitaries. Vukovar was the most severely damaged town in Europe since the Second World War. (www.croatia.eu)

Foreign Volunteers in the Defense of Croatia

Jean-Michel Nicolier



Jean Michel Nicolier, Vukovar, October 1991.
(photograph by Viktorin Jurić Paša)

News of the devastation in Croatia inspired individuals from around the world to come to the aid of the Croatian people. Among more than 800 foreign volunteers from 45 countries who extended a hand of solidarity and came to defend Croatia in the summer of 1991 was a young Frenchman from Vesoul, Jean-Michel Nicolier (1966–1991).

As a member of the Croatian Defense Forces (HOS), Nicolier's wartime journey brought him to Vukovar, where he endured the horrors of the siege and was wounded while defending the city from attacks by the JNA and Serbian forces. His interview on November 19, 1991, with French television journalists Agnès Vahramian and Hervé Ghesquière, recorded inside the half-destroyed Vukovar hospital, reveals his deep loyalty to the people whose struggle he had joined, and his unwavering resolve to stand by them:



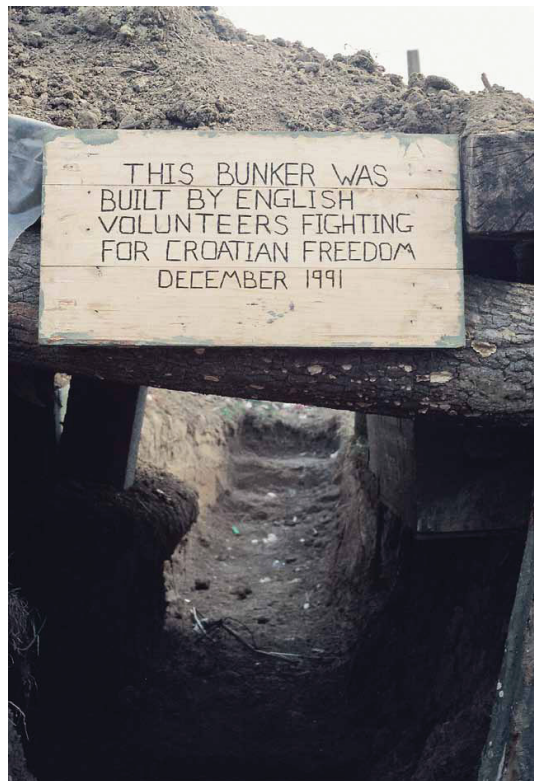
Monument dedicated to Jean Michel Nicolier, located in the centre of Vukovar.

“I lost too many friends, I saw too many people crying and suffering. They offered me several times to leave the city and return to France, but I refused. We lost. I knew it would be difficult, but not that difficult, it is terrible, especially for civilians. I came to Vukovar as a volunteer. It was my decision, for better or for worse. Why as a volunteer? Because I think they needed help. That is why I chose their side.” When asked, “What does Vukovar actually symbolize for you?” he replied: “Slaughterhouse, slaughterhouse, slaughterhouse...”

The following day, on November 20, 1991, members of the JNA took him from the hospital, along with other wounded individuals and medical personnel, and transported them to the Ovčara farm, just east of the city. That afternoon, as night fell, members of the JNA and Serbian forces tortured and executed him. The remains of Jean-Michel Nicolier have never been found.

Croatia has not forgotten him, nor will it. The Croatian people remember those who stood by them in their most difficult hours and remain deeply grateful. In the center of Vukovar, the largest bridge was named after Jean-Michel Nicolier, beside which a monument has been erected in his honor. In Split, a mural commemorates his legacy. The Republic of Croatia posthumously awarded him the Order of Nikola Šubić Zrinski, the highest national decoration for heroism in war.

His courage and willingness to sacrifice serve as a timeless message about the necessity of solidarity with nations under attack. Today, in light of the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine, that message resonates more strongly than ever with the people of Europe.



Vinkovci 1991: bunker with the inscription: This bunker was built by English volunteers fighting for the freedom of Croatia, December 1991.

The Arrival of UN Forces in Croatia (the “Vance Plan”) and the Spread of the War to Bosnia and Herzegovina

After a series of attempts to end the conflict, a comprehensive ceasefire agreement in the Republic of Croatia was finally signed in Sarajevo on January 2, 1992. The agreement, mediated by Cyrus Vance, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy, was reached between representatives of the Republic of Croatia and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). It was based on the agreement to unblock JNA barracks and facilitate their withdrawal from Croatia, as well as the implementation of the United Nations peace plan, known as the “Vance Plan.” This plan called for the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in parts of the temporarily occupied Croatian territory, specifically in the designated United Nations Protected Areas (UNPA zones). The plan fulfilled a crucial condition for the international recognition of Croatia and opened the path toward its membership in the United Nations.

The Sarajevo ceasefire came into effect on January 3, 1992, at 6 p.m., and it largely brought an end to major combat operations in Croatia for a time. This marked the beginning of a period often described as “low-intensity armed conflict.”

An assessment of the battlefield situation at that time shows that, despite significant military superiority, the JNA and Serbian-Montenegrin units failed to achieve their two primary objectives: the military defeat of the Croatian Army and the full occupation of the territory envisioned in the Greater Serbia project.

Following the Sarajevo Armistice in January 1992, Serbian leadership, with the support of the JNA, shifted its military campaign to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim was to finalize the borders of the projected Greater Serbia by seizing control of as much territory as possible. By the end of 1992, Serbian forces had taken control of nearly 70 percent of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The European Community recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state on April 6, 1992, followed by the United States on April 7, 1992. On the same day, April 7, 1992, Croatia also extended recognition to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia, or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, did not recognize Bosnia and Herzegovina until the end of the war, due to its territorial ambitions in that country.



The UN patrols in Lipik – Western Slavonia, 1993.
(photograph by Toni Hnojčik)



"Blue helmets" in Western Slavonia, 1992.
(photograph by Željko Gašparović)



Areas under UN
protection (UNPA),
1992–95.
(www.croatia.eu)

The Leadership of the Rebel Serbs in Croatia Rejects the International Community's Peace Plan ("Z-4 Plan")

With the admission of the Republic of Croatia to the United Nations on May 22, 1992, the strategic goal of Croatian policy at the beginning of the 1990s was achieved. This also implied recognition of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia. Accordingly, the Croatian leadership, with the support of European and global diplomacy, attempted to achieve the peaceful reintegration of the occupied parts of the country. However, the leadership of the rebel Serbs in Croatia, relying on the support of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, that is, Serbia, disregarded the resolutions of the United Nations which stated that the UN Protected Areas (UNPA zones) were “temporarily occupied but an integral part of the Republic of Croatia.”

In early 1995, the Serb leadership in Croatia rejected a peace proposal put forward by the international community—including

representatives of the United Nations, the European Community, the United States, and the Russian Federation—known as the “Z-4 Plan.” This plan offered an exceptionally broad degree of autonomy for Serbs in parts of the Republic of Croatia with a majority Serb population, specifically in the UNPA North and South zones and in the areas around Glina and Knin.

Following the failure of all peace initiatives from both the Croatian government and the international community, due to the exclusive and uncompromising position of the Serb leadership, Croatia was compelled to liberate the occupied parts of its territory through military and police operations. Among the most significant and victorious liberation actions carried out by Croatian forces were Operation “Flash” in May 1995 and Operation “Storm” in August 1995.



Croatian Army and BiH Army soldiers near Tržacka Raštela, 6 August 1995. (photograph by Reconnaissance and Anti-Sabotage Unit “Tigrovi”, 1st Guards Brigade, Ljubomir Kačić i Ivica Matošević)



Croatian Army forces cross the river Sava near the village of Krapje in the early morning of 4 August 1995.
(photograph by Željko Gašparović)

Military-Police Liberation Operation “Flash”

Operation “Flash,” carried out from May 1 to 2, 1995, and effectively concluded by May 4, resulted in the liberation of the occupied territory of Western Slavonia. In retaliation, and in line with the previously declared strategy of a “real threat” involving artillery and rocket attacks on civilian targets in Croatian cities—a tactic publicly announced by Serbian forces in early 1993 and implemented throughout the Homeland War—the Serbian leadership once again ordered the shelling of Croatian cities. The Croatian capital, Zagreb, was among the targets. The attack killed six civilians and one police officer, injured at least 176 civilians, and struck civilian infrastructure, including a children’s hospital.

During and after Operation “Flash,” Croatian authorities ensured the humane treatment of approximately 1,500 to 1,700 captured Serbian soldiers. They also guaranteed full civil rights to the Serbian civilian population in the area and pledged the application of the Amnesty Law to members of Serbian military units. Despite these measures, most of the Serb population in the occupied part of Western Slavonia left the region before and during the operation. Under significant pressure from the Serbian leadership and amid continued threats of renewed attacks on Zagreb, the United Nations organized Operation Safe Passage, which facilitated the departure of most of the remaining Serb population from Western Slavonia.



Croatian Army liberates Jasenovac from Serbian occupation, Liberation Operation Flash, 1 May 1995; Commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 125th Home Guard Regiment, Ivica Čaja – shown in the photo speaking on a Motorola radio – was killed shortly afterward in enemy action. (photograph by Željko Gašparović)



Croatian soldiers during Operation Flash, 1–2 May 1995,
during which western Slavonia was liberated.
(www.croatia.eu)

Military-Police Liberation Operation “Storm”

Croatia conducted its final liberation operation, known as “Operation Storm,” from August 4 to 7, 1995, with military activities and full stabilization continuing until August 10. During this operation, Croatian forces liberated occupied areas of the Republic of Croatia in Northern Dalmatia, Lika, Banovina, and Kordun, covering a total area of approximately 10,500 square kilometers, and advanced to the state border of the Republic of Croatia.

Croatian flag on the fortress in the Croatian royal city of Knin. A symbol of „free Croatia” as Knin was liberated in operation Storm 1995.



The liberation of the Croatian royal city of Knin on August 5, 1995, held particular symbolic significance, as Knin had become the center of the Serbian rebellion against the Croatian government in 1990. This date is now commemorated as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and Croatian Defenders' Day.

At the same time, Operation “Storm” saved the city of Bihać in Western Bosnia, whose defenses were on the brink of collapse after being under siege by Serbian forces since 1992. This action prevented a new humanitarian catastrophe in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a possible repetition of the genocide committed in Srebrenica in July 1995, when, according to data from the Memorial Center in Potočari, more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed by Serbian forces.



Retrieving the body of a fallen comrade from an area under enemy control; in the picture: general Ante Gotovina, Damir Tomljanović-Gavran and others, Novi Varoš, Western Slavonia, September 1991. (photograph by Mario Filipi) Ante Gotovina was a Croatia Army general who was, together with generals Mladen Markač and Ivan Čermak, acquitted by the International Criminal Tribunal of all charges related to war crimes and crimes against humanity during Operation Storm in 1995, confirming their innocence with a court decision in November 2012.



Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak inspect the honors detachment of the 4th and 7th Guards Brigades, Knin, 6 August 1995. (photograph by Gordan Laušić)



Croatian Army forces cross the river Sava near the village of Krapje in the early morning of 4 August 1995. (photograph by Željko Gašparović)

Preventing the Serbian Occupation of Bihać and a New Humanitarian Catastrophe, the Reason Operation “Storm” Could Not Be Postponed

Croatia could not postpone the final Operation “Storm” due to the dire situation in Bihać, a city in western Bosnia that had been under siege by Serbian forces since 1992. By the end of July 1995, the city was on the verge of falling, despite the fact that the Bihać area had been declared a “safe zone” by United Nations Security Council Resolution 824 on May 6, 1993. Its capture would have represented a major strategic success for Serbian forces.

As early as 1939, Serbian political strategy had envisioned Bihać as the center of a new Serbian territorial unit within what was then Yugoslavia, named “Krajina,” which was intended to be separated from the recently established Banovina of Croatia. The area defined as “Krajina” in 1939 closely corresponded to the territory that rebel Serbs in Croatia later, in the early 1990s, declared as part of the “SAO Krajina” or the “Republic of Serbian Krajina,” in an attempt to separate it from the Republic of Croatia.

To prevent the occupation of Bihać and to protect its population, the majority of whom were Bosniak Muslims, but also due to the city’s strategic importance, Croatia assisted the local 5th Corps of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina in defending Bihać on three occasions:

Operation “Winter 94” in December 1994,
Operation “Summer 95” in July 1995,
Operation “Storm” in early August 1995.

With Operation “Storm,” Bihać was finally relieved, and its population was saved from suffering the same fate as Srebrenica, where Serbian forces committed genocide in July 1995. In addition to the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the city was defended by local Croats organized into the 101st Regiment of the Croatian Defense Council (HVO), while being completely encircled by Serbian forces.

Your Excellency,

The long-prepared offensive on the Bihać area, openly supported by Serbia, began a few days ago. The main directions of the attack were launched from temporarily occupied parts of the Republic of Croatia, and the concentration of Chetnik forces has also been observed along other fronts within the responsibility zone of the 5th Corps of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the General Staff of the Croatian Defense Council of the Bihać Region, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Bihać.

Due to the intensity of the artillery attacks, the population from the border zones is fleeing toward the city of Bihać. The dramatic situation is worsening by the hour, as the humanitarian crisis had already reached catastrophic levels. You are likely aware that we have recorded the first deaths due to starvation. Hopes of improving the situation through the harvest of grain from nearby fields have now been dashed.

These areas are under heavy fire from the aggressor, who is bombarding them with incendiary grenades. Conditions are especially severe in the Bihać hospital, which lacks medicine and medical supplies. Due to a lack of food, patients receive only one meal a day. The fate of approximately 180,000 residents of the Una-Sana Canton remains uncertain. We can only promise to continue fighting, no matter the cost or the hesitation of the international community. We place our only hope in our brave soldiers and in the friendly Croatian people, as we face a common threat. Therefore, I respectfully ask you to do everything in your power to help save this heroic city and its suffering population.

Sincerely,

Adnan Alagić, Mayor of the Municipality of Bihać

-The critical situation in Bihać during July 1995 is described in a letter sent by the mayor of Bihać, Adnan Alagić, to the President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, on July 21, 1995:

Map: Operation „Storm“
August 4-7 1995.

After five years of status quo and futile negotiations, three weeks after the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, the Croatian government resigned itself to forcibly liberating the territories occupied since 1991 by Serbian forces. Operation Storm, launched on August 4, 1995, liberated almost all of Croatia and broke the siege of the Bihać enclave in Bosnia, where 230,000 Bosnians had been besieged since May 1992. The Dayton-Paris Peace Accords, concluded three months later, marked the end of five years of war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, triggered by Belgrade's military aggression. Only eastern Slavonia, along the Serbian border, remained occupied until January 1998, when it was finally and peacefully reintegrated into Croatian territory. (Source: croatia.org, Ambassade de Croatie en France)

L'opération "Tempête" : 4-7 août 1995

Après cinq ans de statu quo et de vaines négociations, trois semaines après le massacre de Srebrenica en Bosnie, le gouvernement croate se résigne à libérer par la force les territoires occupés depuis 1991 par les forces serbes. L'opération Tempête, lancée le 4 août 1995, permet de libérer la quasi totalité de la Croatie et de briser le siège de l'enclave de Bihać, en Bosnie, où 230 000 Bosniaques sont assiégés depuis mai 1992. Les Accords de paix de Dayton-Paris, conclus trois mois plus tard, consacrent la fin de cinq ans de guerre en Croatie et en Bosnie-Herzégovine, déclenchées par l'agression militaire de Belgrade. Seule la Slavonie orientale, le long de la frontière serbe, restera occupée jusqu'en janvier 1998, lorsqu'elle sera finalement réintégrée pacifiquement au territoire croate.



Territoire sous contrôle :

Croatie :

- Gouvernement croate
- Forces serbes

Bosnie-Herzégovine :

- Gouvernement bosniaque
- Conseil croate de Défense (HVO)

- Forces serbes

- Serbie et Monténégro

- Zones de déploiement de l'ONU en Croatie
- Zones de sécurité de l'ONU

Territoires libérés (armée croate)

- du 4 au 5 août
- du 6 au 7 août
- après le 8 août

- Violents combats
- Déploiement préventif

Territoires libérés (armée bosniaque)

-

Forces serbes :

- Reddition des 21^e et 39^e corps de l'Armée serbe de Krajina
- Base aérienne
- Raids de représailles des Serbes de Bosnie
- Retraite des forces serbes
- Evacuation des civils serbes

Basic Agreement on the Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region

Following the successful liberation operation “Storm,” the only remaining territory under Serbian occupation was in eastern Croatia, specifically parts of Eastern Slavonia, Western Srijem, and Baranja. This area represented about 4.5 percent of the total territory of the Republic of Croatia and was designated as the so-called UN Sector East.

Influenced by the military victories of Croatian forces in both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the leadership of the rebel Serbs ultimately agreed to sign the Basic Agreement on Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Srijem on November 12, 1995. The agreement was signed separately in Zagreb and Erdut by representatives of the Croatian government and the local Serb leadership in the occupied area.

Through this agreement, the remaining occupied territory was peacefully returned to the constitutional and legal order of the Republic of Croatia by January 15, 1998, in a process known as “peaceful reintegration.”

"A victor who does not know how to forgive sows the seeds of new discord and future evils. And the Croatian people do not want that. They did not want all that we have endured here in Vukovar and throughout Croatia. Everything we are doing is not only in the narrow local interest, but also in the broader Croatian interest, the broader European interest, in the interest of peace, and the future of this region and of Europe. And long live the coexistence of the Croatian people with the Serbian and other ethnic communities in these areas. Long live the one and eternal Croatia!"

— From a speech by the President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, Vukovar, June 8, 1997



Meeting of allies: Croatian Army general Marijan Mareković and BiH Army general Atif Dudaković near Tržačka Raštel, 6 August 1995. Miroslav Tuđman, Director of the Croatian Intelligence Service, in the background.

In an emotional statement to Croatian Television, General Atif Dudaković of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina said that “after 1,201 days of siege, after four years, the residents of Bihać finally welcomed freedom.” He added, “I take this opportunity to give all recognition and praise to the Croatian Army and the Croatian state, which at this crucial moment for us has fulfilled its mission.” The meeting of Bosniak and Croatian allies on the bridge near Tržačka Raštel symbolically recalls the meeting of Allied American and Russian soldiers on the Elbe River bridge near the town of Torgau in Saxony, Germany, 50 years earlier.



„Peace Train“, Vukovar, 8 June 1997.
(photograph by Božo Biškupić)

Croatian leadership and representatives of displaced Croats arrived in Vukovar on 8 June 1997 as a symbolic announcement of the return of displaced Croats to their devastated homes.

From the Split Meeting in July 1995 to the Dayton Agreement in November 1995, Croatian Forces Defeated the Serbian Army in Parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Enabled Negotiations in Dayton, USA

Peace negotiations in Dayton (USA) in November 1995, through which the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was brought to an end. (www.croatia.eu)



In addition to defending and liberating its own territory, Croatia made a significant contribution to the defense and liberation of part of the occupied territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the eve of Operation “Storm,” the President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, and the President of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović, signed an agreement in Split on July 22, 1995. Through this agreement, the Bosniak leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina formally requested military assistance from the Croatian Army, particularly in the Bihać area.

Based on this agreement, Croatian forces—which included the Croatian Army, the Croatian Defense Council, and the Special Police Forces of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosna—launched Operation “Summer ‘95” in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of July. By capturing Bosansko Grahovo and Glamoč, they prevented the fall of Bihać to Serbian forces and created essential conditions for the subsequent liberation of Knin, the stronghold of the Serbian rebellion in Croatia.

In September 1995, Croatian forces, in symbolic coordination with the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, liberated approximately 2,500 square kilometers during Operation “Maestral,” and in October 1995, they liberated a further 800 square kilometers during Operation “Southern Move” in the Southwestern

and Western parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had been under Serbian occupation. The Croatian Army also launched an offensive operation in the Pounje region, known as Operation “Una” on September 18 and 19, 1995, which was repelled by Bosnian Serb forces.

Amid the success of these Croatian military operations against Serbian forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, coordinated with the actions of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international community, led by U.S. diplomacy, compelled the warring parties to reach a peace agreement. This resulted in the Dayton Agreement in November 1995, which was formally signed in Paris in December of the same year.

The agreement brought an end to the war that had begun with the open military aggression of the JNA and Serbian forces against Croatia in the summer of 1991. It defined Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state composed of two territorial entities and three constituent peoples—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The Serbian entity, Republika Srpska, was allocated 49 percent of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina received 51 percent, even though the aggression that led to the war was initiated by Serbian policy aimed at creating a “Greater Serbia” through territorial conquest.

Displaced Persons and Refugees

During the summer and autumn of 1991, the JNA and Serbian forces occupied nearly one-third of the territory of the Republic of Croatia, approximately 17,000 square kilometers. On December 19, 1991, the so-called "Republic of Serbian Krajina" was proclaimed in Knin, with the goal of annexing the occupied area to Serbia. By the end of 1991, a total of 536,000 people, mostly Croats, were registered in Croatia as having been forced to leave their homes due to attacks by the JNA and Serbian forces.

In 1992, after the war expanded to Bosnia and Herzegovina, a large number of refugees, including Muslims and Croats, sought refuge in Croatia. In addition, some Croats from Serbia, mostly from Vojvodina, and from Montenegro also fled to Croatia. By December 1992, there were approximately 800,000 displaced persons and refugees in Croatia, representing more than 15 percent of the country's total population. This included 260,705 displaced persons from within Croatia, 402,768 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and other former Yugoslav republics, and around 136,000 individuals who left Croatia for Western European and other countries.

By mid-October 1994, Croatia had provided care and shelter for more than 600,000 refugees and displaced persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina, including approximately 425,000 Bosniak Muslims, about 170,000 Croats, and around 5,000 others.

During the war in Croatia in 1991, many Serbs also left areas under the control of the Croatian authorities. They relocated to parts of Croatia occupied by the JNA and Serbian forces, as well as to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

When the Croatian Army launched the successful military operations "Flash" and "Storm" in 1995, the majority of the Serb population left the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina. Most of them departed in an organized evacuation carried out by the RSK authorities prior to the arrival of the Croatian Army. According to estimates by Croatian authorities, around 130,000 Serbs left Croatia at that time.



Croats fleeing from Vitez and central Bosnia due to attacks by the ARBiH and Mujahideens on the HVO and Croats, Tasovčići, summer 1993. (photograph by Stanko Ferić)



Displaced persons from Sisak.
(photograph by Renato Brandolice).

Refugees from
Bosnia and
Herzegovina in
Resnik near Zagreb.
(photograph by
Renato Brandolice)



Missing Persons and Mass Graves

Many members of the Croatian forces and civilians killed by the JNA and Serbian forces in the summer and autumn of 1991 were buried in numerous mass or individual graves in what was then occupied territory. So far, in the course of searches for missing persons, the remains of 5,243 victims have been found in more than 1,300 individual graves and at least 150 mass graves. In Eastern Croatia alone, which borders Serbia and was subjected to intense attacks by the JNA and Serbian forces, 71 mass graves were discovered after the war.

One of the most significant mass graves, both symbolically and in terms of the number of victims, is located near the Ovčara agricultural estate, not far from Vukovar. The remains of 200 victims have been exhumed from this site. These were Croatian soldiers and civilians, most of them wounded and hospital employees, who were taken from the Vukovar hospital after the Serbian occupation of the city and executed during the night of November 20 to 21, 1991.

Even today, 1,746 people who went missing during the war are still being sought in Croatia. Most of them, approximately 1,040 individuals, disappeared in 1991, and Croatia continues to expect information from Serbia about the fate of the majority of these missing persons. The issue of the missing is both a humanitarian and a civilizational matter, and its resolution is essential for reconciliation and the final establishment of appropriate interstate relations. For the families who lost their loved ones in the war, this remains a lasting consequence of the conflict.



Pakrac, Western Slavonia, summer 1992. (photograph by Toni Hnojčik)

Coffins and crosses of fallen Croatian soldiers waiting to be buried after the holy mass in their honour. Coffins are covered with a Croatian flag, the country they fought for.



A Holy Mass in front of the completely demolished church. It was a prayer for all fallen members of „The Tigers“ Army battalion and the mass was attended by their fellow soldiers from the local front line, 1992.
(photograph by Mladen Genc)



The remains of the bridge spanning the Struga River, October 1991. (photograph by Željko Gašparović)

War Damage, Destroyed Buildings and Cultural Heritage

During the Homeland War from 1991 to 1995, in addition to the large number of citizens killed or wounded, the Republic of Croatia experienced widespread destruction of houses, churches, and other cultural and historical monuments. The consequences of this destruction and the resulting enormous material damage had a profound impact on the social, economic, and political development of Croatia in the post-war period. The total war damage in the Republic of Croatia during the Homeland War is estimated at approximately 142 billion US dollars, with 56.5 billion in direct war damage and around 85.5 billion in indirect damage. A total of 217,009 damaged and destroyed residential units were identified across the territory of the Republic of Croatia. Croatia's cultural and historical heritage, which, beyond its cultural and artistic value, also symbolized national identity, was systematically targeted and devastated by the JNA and Serbian forces. In total, 2,323 historic buildings classified as cultural monuments were damaged or destroyed in Croatia during the Serbian aggression and occupation from 1991 to 1995.



Prekopakra, Western Slavonia, 1992.
(photograph by Toni Hnojčik)



Vodice, consequences of rocket
and artillery attacks, 1993.
(photograph by Stanko Ferić)

Human Losses and Suffering



Memorial cemetery for the victims of the Homeland War; 938 white crosses, one cross for each victim exhumed from the massive grave in that area. (photography by Marko Perić)

According to the data from the Croatian Memorial and Documentation Center of the Homeland War (HMDCDR), around 19,500 soldiers and civilians were killed during the Homeland War. This data is not final, as it is still being updated.

During the aggression against Croatia in the summer and autumn of 1991, the Serbian side established several dozen concentration camps in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in parts of Croatia occupied by the JNA and Serbian forces. Some captured Croatian civilians and soldiers were deported to these camps. According to the records of international organizations, 7,815 Croatian soldiers and

civilians passed through such camps and were later released, mostly through prisoner exchanges.

With the escalation of the war in Croatia from the summer and autumn of 1991, and in areas under the control of the Croatian authorities, especially those heavily affected by the conflict and devastated by attacks from the JNA and Serbian forces, there were instances of murder and abuse of Serbian civilians. Murders of Serb civilians were also committed during certain operations by Croatian forces, including Operation "Storm", particularly in several locations in Northern Dalmatia and Southern Lika.

Croatia's Admission to NATO and the European Union, Achieving the Strategic Goals of Croatian Policy in the 1990s and Returning to a Shared Civilizational and Cultural Sphere

After successfully defending itself against Greater Serbian aggression in 1991, Croatia liberated the majority of its occupied territory by the end of August 1995 using its own forces, which created the conditions for the eventual reintegration of the remaining occupied area in the Croatian Danube region.

At the same time, by voting in favor of the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the referendum held from February 29 to March 1, 1992, which was largely boycotted by the Serb population, and by participating from 1992 to 1995 in the defense and liberation of parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Greater Serbian aggression and occupation, Croats, alongside Bosniak Muslims and with strong support from the Republic of Croatia, contributed decisively to the recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state and to its survival within internationally recognized borders.

By liberating temporarily occupied territories and achieving full territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders, that is, by prevailing in the imposed war, and by joining NATO on April 1, 2009, and the European Union on July 1, 2013, both of which share Croatia's civilizational and cultural values, the country accomplished the key strategic goals of its foreign policy as defined upon gaining independence in 1991.

Croatian and EU flag. Croatia joined the European Union on 1 July 2013. (www.vlada.hr)





Celebrating Croatia's admission into the UN on the main square in Zagreb, 22 May 1992. (www.croatia.eu)

