*Discourses, actors, violence: the organisation of war-escalation in the Krajina region of Croatia 1990–91*¹

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Introduction

ON 6 MAY 1990 the second and final round of the first free multi-party elections since the end of the Second World War were held in Croatia. At that time it was still a socialist republic within the Yugoslavian Federation. The results of the elections were quite surprising. It was expected that the former Communist Party would lose its absolute political predominance, but the decisive victory of the nationalistic Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), led by Franjo Tudjman, was remarkable.² This party became the new leading political force after forty-five years of socialist autocracy. The HDZ was able to form the new government in the Croatian federal parliament (Sabor) without other parties. Two weeks later, on 20 May 1990, the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the small nationalistic party of the Serbs in Croatia, which had only a few representatives in the newly elected Sabor, suspended its contacts with the parliament.³ Their withdrawal from formal politics in Croatia was one of the first signs of the growing conflict between Croats and Serbs within Croatia's official political life.

The background of this move by the SDS can be summed up as follows: the first two weeks after the elections brought a completely new orientation to the political scene in Croatia. After coming to power, the leaders of the HDZ immediately began to launch initiatives for increasing the autonomy of Croatia within Yugoslavia or, if this could not be achieved, Croatia's full independence. But they were threatened by the aggressive policy of the president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic. Using Serbian nationalistic movements, Milosevic was on the way to realising a more centralised, Belgrade-dominated concept of Yugoslavia. The HDZ, as well as almost all other Croatian political parties, feared a Belgrade-organised military intervention by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in Croatia. There were constant rumours that actions had already been planned in Belgrade to 'restore order' in Croatia and put down all democratic efforts and 'national' aspirations by such a military intervention. Under these circumstances 'Serbophobic'

tendencies became increasingly popular in Croatian society and began to dominate public and political discourse. This anti-Serbian attitude was also one of the key factors in the electoral success of the nationalist HDZ.

But there were also opposing developments, which tended to lessen national antagonisms; thus, after the elections the leader of the SDS, Jovan Raskovic, wanted to disassociate himself from the nationalistic proponents on his own side. He stressed that he saw a positive future for Serbs in Croatia, if the political leaders of both sides would be willing to cooperate and try to eliminate the growing 'national phobias' among the people (*Vjesnik* 1990a: 5). Shortly after the elections Raskovic and Tudjman began to discuss the possibility of a 'historic compromise' for future coexistence between Croats and Serbs after the fall of the Communist Party in Croatia.

However, the first Croat–Serbian attempts at cooperation, between the HDZ and the SDS, were soon overshadowed by violent events. On the first Sunday after the elections in the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb, a football game between the football clubs Dynamo Zagreb and Crvena Zvezda (Red Star) Belgrade ended with a major brawl between the Croat and Serb fans. The police became increasingly involved. The riot later moved from the stadium to the centre of the city. More than one hundred people were seriously hurt. Then, just a few days later, there was an attempted assassination of a local SDS functionary in Benkovac, a small ethnically mixed town in south-western Croatia. This event politically radicalised the SDS. Since it was not known who was responsible for this act of violence, the SDS functionaries interpreted it as a political move against their party. In reaction, as already mentioned, they suspended their collaboration in the newly elected parliament until responsibility for that event could be established.

These violent events would soon be followed by other smaller incidents. Attempts to contain hostile Croat and Serb interpretations of the situation in the country became increasingly complicated. Also influential politicians became increasingly uninterested in this approach, since the media and the public discourse tended more and more to accept only 'clear' and nationally one-sided explanations. In the course of 1991 this conflict escalated into a war and, by its end in 1995, thousands of people had been killed and hundreds of thousands made refugees.

In this chapter we attempt to investigate the interplay between hostile and threatening public discourses, the action of political leaders, and subsequent violent events in the Serbo-Croatian conflict in Croatia. Special attention will be given to the changing interpretations of the threatening situation within the communities involved and to the role of institutional reform and institutional formation in the process of societal transformation. The leader–follower-oriented perspective was chosen to avoid the hypothesis that conflict escalation was inevitable.

The analysis of the year before the outbreak of open war in June 1991 is sub-

divided into three sections focusing on distinct phases in the development: first the popularisation and institutionalisation of national front-lines, secondly, the mobilisation for violent conflict resolution and, finally, the importance of the potential of war. Clearly these aspects overlapped in the course of conflict escalation but, as will be shown, their respective importance changed over time.

Popularisation and institutionalisation of national frontlines

On 30 May 1990, three weeks after the elections, the HDZ sponsored a big celebration on the occasion of the official inauguration of the new Croatian parliament. This day, declared as the 'Dan Hrvatske Drzavnosti' ['Day of Croatian Statehood'], developed into the biggest Croatian festival since the 1970s. (*Vjesnik* 1990b: 3) It was an impressive event not only in Zagreb, but also in the whole country. These festivities expressed first of all the end of the communist system and the introduction of a multi-party democracy but also the celebration of the Croatian 'ethno-nation' (Sundhaussen 1994). The new ruling party had thus converted their national programme into the new official position of the federal state.

This programme was represented by several 'Croatian' symbols. One of the crucial symbols was the 'Sahovnica', the red and white chessboard flag, which later became the official Croatian national flag. But the 'Sahovnica' as well as many other Croatian symbols also recalled the fascist wartime Croatian state which was formed by Nazi Germany in the Second World War.⁴ Because of their Second World War connection, these symbols could also be read as a threat to the Serbs living in Croatia.⁵

In the light of this, those Serbs of Croatia who felt alienated by these symbols did not participate in the celebrations. On a political level all SDS members of parliament boycotted the official ceremonies. However, most of the members of parliament of Serbian nationality in the SDP-SKH (the former Communist Party) were present at the official celebrations. At that time, hostile boundaries between Serbs and Croats were not yet so well established.

In socialist times, ethnic or national affiliations were known in neighbourhood situations as well as at work places and other spheres of everyday life. However, up to 1990 everyday inter-ethnic relations were depicted as being to a large extent harmonious, and it was often asserted that ethnic affiliations were not at all important for the people (Nyström 1987; Siber 1988; Dugandzija 1991; Denich 1994a). But at the time of the election campaign and especially after the elections in May 1990 discussions about possible 'cultural and material discrimination' and also about violent aggression – especially those put in the context of the Second World War – were of growing importance (Grandits 1998; Zakosek 1998b). The people became involved in a process of increasing national self-consciousness and consequently also one of ethnic segregation (Elwert 1995a: 114–115).

Feelings of being endangered on both the Serbian and Croatian side were in fact evident in some ethnically mixed regions at that time, and they began to increase, as the following interview illustrates. When asked who after the elections in 1990 had been more frightened in the Kordun (an ethnically mixed region in south-western Croatia), the Serbs, because the HDZ had come to power in Croatia, or the Croats, because here the Serbian-dominated SDP (former Communist Party) was in power at the regional level, S. Livada, a sociologist who came from that region, answered:

Both sides were frightened. On the one side was a movement with really dangerous intentions [he refers here to the ruling HDZ], on the other side a structure came into being, I think here of the Serbs in the Kordun, which had no longer any kind of political centre. In former times this had been the Central Committee of Croatia or the Central Committee of Yugoslavia, but both were already dissolved at that time. Because of the danger they were facing or they thought themselves to be in, the political structure of the Serbs now turned exclusively to a monstrous power, the Yugoslav National Army. (Livada 1995: 19)

In this statement, reference to the missing political centre of the Serbian community in Croatia and the broken relationship to Croatian governmental institutions are of particular interest.⁶ In this way Livada explains the strong movement of the 'Serbian structure' in Croatia towards a new orientation, to the JNA. At the same time the JNA was subjected to transformation from a Yugoslav to a Serbian-national institution.

This political institutional deficit of the Serbs in Croatia and the new orientation of Serbian political life from Yugoslav to Serbian national institutions form the background for the enormous popularisation of the nationalistic Serbian SDS in the summer of 1990. Not until then was a network of local SDS organisations, extending over all regions with Serbian settlements in Croatia, organised. In all communities with a large proportion of Serbian inhabitants – for the most part ex-communist SDP functionaries were still governing the local affairs – founding ceremonies of new SDS branches took place in June 1990.

After the elections of April–May 1990 the ex-communist SDP in Croatia was increasingly shifting from their former Yugoslav orientation into a Croatian nationalist one, very much in reaction to the strong centralist and Serbian-nationalist developments in Belgrade. Consequently, the ex-communists successively lost the support of their functionaries and voters of Serbian nationality. This was an important precondition for the success of the SDS politicians in Croatia.

Also significant was the ceremonial organisation of the SDS gatherings: often several times a week, so-called '*mitings*' were held by the SDS in the course of the founding of new local branches of the party. They were attended by several hundred, and sometimes even several thousand Serbs. The key person in these

foundation ceremonies was Jovan Raskovic, the leader of the SDS and charismatic main speaker in most of these meetings. In these very emotionalised mass gatherings, the speeches of the SDS leaders, and in particular of Raskovic, were full of national pathos and historic myths. These views fell on fertile ground and were really able to generate a following for the SDS movement. The principal political core of Raskovic's speeches, not to prevent a possible independence of Croatia at all costs, but to fight for the official acknowledgement of the special individual and collective rights of the Serbs in Croatia, was pushed into the background by his emotional nationalistic rhetoric.

Already during these emotional days of the political mobilisation of large parts of the Serbian population for the SDS, the local SDS mayor of Knin, Milan Babic, began his 'Initiative of Knin', which soon came to be of prime importance for the 'Serbian question' in Croatia. His plan aimed for a reorganisation of the local administration borders in the south-west of Croatia. The Knin area should become a newly established administrative unit containing all Serb-populated villages of the region. Knin was proposed as the centre of this administrative district, with the name 'District of Northern Dalmatia and Lika' ('*Općina sjeverne Dalmacije i Like*'). On 28 June 1990, the Serb holiday 'Vidovdan' (this day is also one of the most important Serbian national holidays commemorating the legendary Kosovo battle), an assembly of SDS regional leaders, quickly organised by Babic, adopted this proposal as an 'official' resolution. In this way a project was initiated which would soon become the centre of the violent escalation of the conflict in Croatia.

But at the end of June, the public discourse in Croatia did not take much notice of the occurrences in Knin. The people were primarily interested in the presentation of the first draft of the first post-communist constitution by the HDZ. When this draft was presented in a working meeting of the Sabor, which also took place on the Serb holiday of 'Vidovdan' on 28 June 1990, it became obvious that the HDZ wanted with this constitution 'to give Croatia a new identity' (*Vjesnik* 1990c). This new identity was built upon 'breaking free from socialism' and was an increasingly 'Croatian' one. Croatia should be the state of the Croatian nation. In this draft, which dealt with various aspects of the social and political transformation, the Serbs were labelled as a national minority. Under communist rule they had always been a 'titular nation' within the Social Republic of Croatia. Thus the Serbian politicians in Croatia perceived this plan to declare the Serbs a 'minority' as an act of discrimination and a massive undermining of their status.

The coincidence of these two events on 28 June 1990, the presentation of the draft of the first constitution and of the resolution in Knin, marked the first official antagonistic moves of national(-istic) Croatian and Serbian political projects and were firmly linked to the process of Croatian state building. The reorganisation of old and the foundation of new state institutions formed the

background for ethnicised competition for participation in the new state. The question of the ways in which power could be allocated became the prime political question and source of conflicts.⁷

Cautious and compromise-oriented institutionalisation policies might well at that time have calmed emotions and reduced the danger of violent conflict. But another path was chosen by initiatives which promoted political radicalisation and the consequent mobilisation of competing groups. In this short period after the democratic elections, the political positions were thus quickly transformed into differences and became irreconcilable antagonisms leading to nationalistic mobilisation of the respective populations and subsequently to violent conflict.

The mobilisation for violent options of conflict resolution

Barricades were built on the outskirts of villages in case the Croats would come at night, four or five armed men, who would come and kill people . . . That was the reason why the barricades were built, to block off the Serbian villages from the Croatian ones. In my town the Serbs were in the majority, but half way to Knin there was a village mainly inhabited by Croats. We built up our barricades in this direction, because the people were frightened. ('J' from Knin 1996; INT)⁸

This recollection from a 1996 interview refers to circumstances in the Knin area in August 1990, barely two months after the above-mentioned political confrontation over constitutional provisions and administrative jurisdictions. The situation escalated in some of the regions in south-western Croatia where a high percentage of the total population was Serbian. Part of the Serbian people had taken up arms. What had happened? To better understand the perspective of the Serbian people who participated in this uprising we can gain perspective from an interview dealing with those critical days in August 1990:

Then we saw many people from our village with arms. Hunting rifles, but not weapons from the army. They gathered in the village centre and discussed, what to do at night. They were frightened that the Croats would come at night to kill Serbs. They also told my father that he should go to the barricades, but he said that he did not have a gun. One of the neighbours gave my father a kind of rifle with ammunition and told him, that he should go to a certain place. He did go, since he did not want to get into a quarrel with the neighbour.

My mother began to cry – what should she do with the little children? My father left a long knife by the door. We usually used it to slaughter the pigs in autumn. He told us, that we must use it, if someone should come. We were very nervous and scared during the night. I stayed at home with my mother, while my father was at the front. To have this weapon in the house and to be scared at the same time, that was really a horrible time. Of course, I had never had a weapon before – CDs and a television yes, of course. ('S' from Knin 1996; INT)

In this and the other interview with two Serbs, who later fled from the region of rebellion, the 'taking up of weapons' has been described as an act of self-defence, which resulted from intense fear (Elwert 1995b: 130–131, 1997: 91–92). They pointed out that fear of extremists made life really unsafe in the region. They felt endangered just for the reason that they were of Serbian ethnicity. The strong meaning that the ethnic identification came to represent indicates the extent of national mobilisation (Scheffler 1995).

However, a deeper analysis of this fear leading to the national mobilisation reveals that it did not necessarily correspond to a real threat. Rather it represented a reaction to perceptions of threat as an interpretation of reality not necessarily closely linked to external 'objectifiable' criteria (Nicklas 1991).

In this setting it is absolutely necessary first to point out the most important initiatives of those strategic actors and their clients, who were the main driving forces of the threat messages. These people can be called 'ethnic' or 'national' entrepreneurs (see Bailey 1970: 44–57). These ethnic entrepreneurs propagated a discourse of the conflict promoting escalation into a violent conflict. In their discussions the use of violence was always legitimised by representing it as being defensive. The Serbs would have to defend themselves or they would soon become victims of violent acts coming from the others. This was their message. In the escalating conflict, the majority of the affected population followed the interpretations presented by their leaders. In this way, the former dominant local or even Yugoslav self-definition was successively replaced by a widened national one.

Generally in the Krajina region this process of strategic escalation of violence was strongly connected to the 'Knin initiative', which was driven by the SDS mayor of Knin, Milan Babic, step-by-step. While his SDS colleague but opponent Raskovic was partly engaged in negotiations with official representatives of the new Croatian government, Babic worked on his ambitious project to unify Serbian communities. He visited different settlements with a Serbian majority. By that summer Obrovac, Dvor, Vojnic, Donji Lapac, and all communities in the region of Knin, had agreed to the unification (Silber and Little 1995: 105). However, many communities, especially those where the SDP was still in power, were not immediately ready to support the Knin initiative. On the contrary, it would not have been surprising if the project had failed. In these cases, to 'win over' these communities, Babic, together with his closest followers, started to strategically use violence in the emotionally heated atmosphere. Thus he succeeded in creating support without democratic legitimisation. These methods are shown very vividly in the following description of the village Titova Korenica:

In Korenica . . . the SDP [the former Communist Party] members composed the majority in the regional assembly. They did not want to join the union of Babic. Instead of this they invited Tudjman's Minister for Regional administration, Slavko Degoricija, into the region. They wanted to negotiate about internal investigations and plans to develop the tourist potential of the Plitvice National Park . . . Babic anticipated this

meeting by sending forty armed men from Knin into the city in the night before Degoricija was supposed to arrive. In the following weeks, the SDS organised demonstrations in Korenica until the SDP representatives were chased away from their positions. (Silber and Little 1995: 106)

During that summer, while questions of the transformation from socialism and the consequences of the possible independence of Croatia from Belgrade dominated media in Croatia, Babic and his followers, at that time not really taken seriously by Zagreb, continued to work on their plan. Their objective of autonomy from the Croatian government and administration became increasingly clear. It also became increasingly apparent that this was supported by Belgrade.

The next step in Babic's plan was the call for a 'people's assembly' of Serbs, who lived in regions of the Krajina, the area in Croatia with a high proportion of Serbian population. On 25 July 1990, a 'Serbian National Council' was founded in Knin and it decided to hold a referendum in August about the autonomy of the 'Serbian Krajina'.⁹

Parallel to this first step of building up a parallel political institution, Milan Martić, the chief of police in Knin and associate of Babic, encouraged the predominantly Serbian police of Knin to disobey the authority of the newly elected government of Croatia. Initially the officers refused to wear the newly introduced uniforms. Milan Martić legitimised this by pointing out that police forces of Serbian nationality should not be forced to wear the same badges and uniforms 'which were worn by Croatian fascists at the time of the criminal NDH state' (BBC/ORF-TV 1996).

The government in Zagreb was provoked by the acts of the police in Knin, but they still counted on mediation of the conflict. They sent a high-ranking delegation to Knin. It consisted of the Croatian Minister of the Interior, his deputy and the chief of police of Sibenik, which was the direct superior of Martić. They tried to normalise the situation by making concessions to the police in Knin in order to bring them into line. But this action ran counter to that of the leadership of Martić and Babic in Knin. The delegation was confronted with a tumultuous situation shortly after the beginning of the negotiations. An agreement could not be reached and soon it became an open disagreement. At the same time more than a thousand people were organised by Babic and Martić to gather in front of the police station where the negotiations were taking place. They loudly 'supported' the position of 'their' police. Finally, the delegation was forced to hastily leave Knin (BBC/ORF-TV 1996; *Vjesnik* 1990d). This first attempt at a peaceful agreement with the protesting police, which could have led to a wider dialogue, and possibly a compromise between the Croatian and Serbian protagonists, had failed.

When some weeks later the Croatian Ministry of the Interior sent special police forces to reclaim control of the police station and to disarm the disobe-

ent police of Knin, an open revolt began in the villages of Krajina. It was organised under the energetic leadership of SDS activists led by Babic and Martić and soon got called the 'Balvan revolution'. The name derives from the building of barricades from tree trunks which, during the revolt, were manned by armed guards to 'protect' the Serbian villages.

Let us turn here again to the motives of the local Serbian population in participating actively in this armed 'Balvan rebellion'. As explained above, the Serbian population has to be seen as behaving in a scenario of threat. Following the fact that 'Croatian special forces were sent to punish Serbs', as the Krajina Serb leader claimed, the situation appeared increasingly dangerous to them and formed a new, somehow 'second reality' (Rösel 1997: 165). In this reality the present developments were constantly mixed with the experience of the Croatian Serbs in the Second World War, when Serbs were violently persecuted by the Croatian Ustasha. In the interpretation of the Serbian people the violence suffered during the Second World War threatened to be repeated. This increased the fear of the imminent use of violence. Thus, the historical situation was projected onto the current situation.

Paradoxically, because of the authoritarian suppression of nationality issues by the Yugoslav communists, these unresolved issues became more explosive. Especially after the collapse of communist rule at the end of the 1980s, stories about the atrocities in the Second World War began to circulate again. They were often based on the experiences of the older generation. This situation is reflected in the views of the above-cited respondent who described the Ustasha crimes as 'national events', experienced by his grandfather in the Second World War:

My grandfather was in the Partisan army of Tito . . . he knew many problems between Serbs and Croats during the Second World War. He told me that at the beginning of the Second World War, the Croats killed 520 Serbs not far from our house, only twenty to twenty-five kilometres away. Civilians, girls, young children, etc. . . I know, that Croats, Ustasha, killed at least 10,000 people in our area within a radius of about a hundred kilometres. I do not know why . . . In Glina, about sixty miles from our home, I am not sure, but there were about 1010 or 1012 people shot by Ustasha, that means shot by Croatian soldiers . . . ('B' from Vojnic, Kordun region 1996: INT)

In these detailed explanations, it is striking that the exact locations of the crimes, and even the numbers of victims, could be given. Although it is possible that these details were really given by the grandfather, as most of the Serb families did have victims of the Ustasha terror during the Second World War among their relatives, it is more probable that the informant knows about these events from the media, which were increasingly controlled by nationalists.¹⁰

Since the end of the 1980s, the Yugoslav population was permanently influenced by actualised pictures of the enemy and by historical myths with little opportunity to verify the information given (Sundhaussen 1994: 418). In the

Krajina the rhetoric of the SDS constantly re-emphasised that with the 'return' of the symbols of the Ustasha period, e.g. as with the introduction of the new police uniforms, it could be 'assumed' that the return of the fascist policy of the ethnic cleansing of Serbs would soon follow. The fear of a 'new genocide' was therefore increasingly based on synchronised representations of the present and the past, which were one-dimensionally described along friend–enemy schemes opposing Serbs and Croats.¹¹

Smaller acts of violence, which slowly began to increase in number, intensified fears even more. Often ethno-political entrepreneurs consciously planned this violence. In this way they, along with their initial small group of supporters, created loyal relationships along ethnic lines. Thus through these acts of violence the ethno-political entrepreneurs, which at the beginning represented only a small minority of the proclaimed 'nation', eventually created a frame of conflictual relationships manifested in notions of protection and obedience. National unity was manifested by a reliance on force (for comparison, see Scheffler 1995:33 and Waldmann 1999).

In this context, the extreme fear of violence was often linked to the social expectation of self-defence. To defend one's home and family was accepted as the norm in a perceived situation of threat. It was propagated and even expected that men would take up arms in Krajina in 1990.

The readiness to use violence for self-defence is a widespread attitude. Still, the question may be asked whether people act in situations of conflict totally without any reference to so-called 'cultural dispositions'.¹² This matter can be examined by reference to two levels of meaning. First the symbolic level can be investigated, in which 'culturally immanent pictures' may be awoken which recreate a special tradition and which may effect the escalation of violence (Elwert 1989). Secondly, one should investigate the 'level of action', which may relate to traditional patterns of behaviour.

The culturally immanent pictures in connection with the armed self-defence of Krajina society are partly taken from a culture of armed self-defence, which has characterised life in this region at different stages and in different forms: as border peasant soldiers up to the end of the nineteenth century, during Partisan battles in the Second World War and during the communistic organisation of territorial defence. The first particularly represents a regional characteristic.¹³

In 1990, in the situation of threat, the Krajina–Serb group consciousness was strengthened by those culturally specific characteristics. A tradition of taking up arms for self-defence was present in the form of historic pictures, which were at the same time deprived of their context. They functioned as symbols which were used in a specific way to strengthen the demarcation of nationality and to influence social attitudes and expectations. Present value systems could be modified and/or – in the actual situation of threat – constructed anew.¹⁴ However, the credibility of the special meaning which was given to the pictures

was bound to special constellations. In the summer of 1990, as discussed here, these pictures gained plausibility only with the situation of immanent threat and the rapid weakening of the state power monopoly (Grandits and Promitzer 2001b).

A discussion of the actualisation of a traditional pattern of action, involving the readiness to defend oneself, is much more difficult (Kaser 1996: 132). A culture of armed self-defence in the sense of a social organisation of border peasant soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire could not survive after the dissolution of the system at the end of the nineteenth century. Perceptions of a tradition of taking up arms for self-defence survived as a kind of a male ideal, which in former times was bound to patriarchal–militaristic structures, and which still may have had some influence on the process of socialisation and in this form was a reference point for the use of special cultural immanent pictures (Grandits and Halpern 1994).¹⁵

Despite the fact that cultural and social expectations to take up arms could be found in wide sections of the population, this certainly does not mean that it had universal power. Many individuals refused to be mobilised voluntarily. But with the development of the conflict and the expansion of a militaristic–administrative infrastructure, these individuals were increasingly put under pressure. Withdrawal from armed resistance was soon defined as being shameful and dishonourable by the public. From the summer of 1991 many people were mobilised by force. This left little scope for withdrawal from participation in the armed conflict. This situation was reflected in an interview: ‘They have all been mobilised by the Krajina-army. If they had refused, they would have been declared as deserters and would have been imprisoned’ (‘J’ from Knin 1996: INT).

From rebellion to war: the importance of the potential of war

Until now the focus has been primarily on the local level of the conflict constellation and perception. But to understand how this conflict developed into a broader regional war it is essential to discuss how it was embedded in a broader context. As noted, the struggle for power between the centralist Serbian political elite in Belgrade and the Croatian policy makers in Zagreb, who aimed for a more federal-based sovereignty or national independence, represented a necessary precondition for the successful ethno-national mobilisation in all of Croatia. The developments in Krajina were used for, and increasingly influenced by, tactical and strategic considerations from outside powerful protagonists. The local front-lines and ambitions were instrumentalised for their political plans.

On the side of the Krajina Serbs, the Milosevic-led regime in Belgrade, and to a growing degree also the JNA, became increasingly important in the local conflict.¹⁶ The integration of the Krajina into ‘larger structures’ and the building up of a potential for war, i.e. a sufficient supply of weapons, the maintenance of

a functioning wartime economy, etc. was fundamental for securing such a precondition for war and one of the most important consequences of the 'Balvan revolution' (Orywal 1996: 40–41). These efforts were also a main reason for the incipient conflict – at both a regional and a supra-regional level – which from now on became triggered by the same actions: the repeated attempts at disarming the progressively growing armed forces.

First of all, the 'Balvan revolution' itself had been triggered by the attempt of Croatian special forces to disarm the rebellious policemen in Knin. The failure of this move was caused by the involvement of the JNA. JNA combat aircraft forced the Croatian police helicopters, which had been sent to Knin, to return to Zagreb and JNA units stationed in Krajina are reported to have marched out of their barracks. Both actions were interpreted as a sign for the rebellious Krajina Serbs that they could count on the support of the Yugoslav National Army in the future (*Tanjug* 1990; *Vjesnik* 1990d).¹⁷

This first armed confrontation shocked public life in Croatia. It also influenced the public discourse on both sides of the conflict. The argument that weapons and the organisation of defence had really become necessary because the other side seemed ready to act violently became increasingly persuasive. The following statement of Milan Babic, the radical leader of 'Serbian Krajina', illustrates this very vividly. After SDS functionaries had just handed out weapons from police magazines and from official military Territorial Defence (TO) reservist depots to the people, Milan Babic told the press:

The Croatian government wages a psychological war through its Ministry of the Interior and its Police headquarters in Sibenik against the Serbian people in Croatia. Now an ultimatum was delivered to us, that the people should return their weapons, that the barricades should be removed and that all weapons should be registered. That means that the Serbian people should be disarmed. I do not have the moral right to request from my people not to defend themselves from any form of terrorism, including when it is coming from the Croatian government. (*Politika* 1990)

In this statement, Babic denies the legitimacy of the official administration in Croatia and at the same time he refers to the fact that the Croatian Serbs have a necessity and a right to organise an armed self-defence. In the following months he devoted all his efforts to organising this 'self-defence'.

After the events of 17 August 1990 the authorities of the Croatian republic, referred to in the above quotation, tried to prevent the arming of the Serbian population in Krajina and attempted to 'restore order' and reassert their authority. Initiatives to disarm the population began. But these attempts were met with resistance and aggravated the whole situation. For example, on 28 September 1990 special forces of the Croatian police began to confiscate the weapons of military reservists, mainly in villages with a high proportion of Serbs. This resulted in demonstrations and clashes between the police and Serbian civilians (*Archiv*

der Gegenwart 1990: 35182; *Vjesnik* 1990e). The unrest and disturbances not only worsened the atmosphere in the region, but also encouraged extremists on both sides, supported by the media, to outdo each other in the creation of threatening scenarios.¹⁸ In such an atmosphere of distrust and fear, disarmament hardly became possible. On the contrary, the arming of the Serbian people in the insurgent region as well as the organisation of local combat units proceeded with the support of the JNA based in the Krajina region.¹⁹

The arming of the Croatian combat forces has to be seen in a much larger dimension.²⁰ After the HDZ took over power in Croatia, the Croatian government, as it was just a federal-component government within Yugoslavia, had only a relatively small police force with almost no heavy weapons at its disposal.²¹ Most of the heavy weapons belonged to the JNA. The JNA's supreme command was the joint Yugoslav state presidium in Belgrade, which consisted of representatives of all Yugoslav republics and autonomous provinces. Soon after the elections, the HDZ decided to expand its police force and, in addition, to secretly build up their own Croatian army. Thousands of Croatian men were enrolled in the armed forces through the first months after the HDZ took power in Croatia.²² Weapons were bought abroad and illegally smuggled into the country.

The arming of Croatia's military did not remain a secret to the leaders of the JNA and the socialist elite in Belgrade. However, for months they did not intervene. But on 9 January 1991, at a meeting of the Yugoslav state presidium in Belgrade a resolution to launch an offensive against Croatia surprisingly became the main topic. The leading commanders of the JNA together with Milosevic's people in the presidium wanted the state presidium to give an order to the JNA to react against the 'illegal and secret formation' of a new Croatian army. They called the formation of an independent Croatian army an aggressive act against the Yugoslav Federation. The resolution for a military intervention was even discussed a second time in the Yugoslav state presidency, but in the end did not get a majority. The whole initiative ended up as a compromise with further negotiations. Veljko Kadijevic, the Yugoslav minister of defence and highest officer of the JNA, and Tudjman agreed that the JNA would end their alert if Croatia followed its obligation to hand over the people 'responsible' for the smuggling of weapons.²³

At about the same time Milosevic and the leading figures in his Serbian political circle came to the realisation that the unity of Yugoslavia could no longer be 'saved' and they changed their strategy on the Yugoslav question. From now on they no longer in principle opposed the independence of Croatia and Slovenia; but they felt that Croatia should not be allowed to keep those parts of its republic which the Belgrade authorities regarded as Serbian territory. These areas 'must stay in Yugoslavia at any cost'.²⁴ Within these conflicts about the future of Yugoslavia, the rebels of the Serbian Krajina now attained enormous strategic importance in the struggles for power.

It seems reasonable to return here to the local context in the Krajina. The

uprising had meanwhile become increasingly institutionalised and its own 'official' political and military administration had been built up. Already on 1 October 1990, the 'Serbian National Council' in Knin, presided over by Milan Babic, proclaimed the autonomy of the regions under their control.²⁵ A few months later in February 1991 the declaration of independence of the 'Republic of Serbian Krajina' followed. The secession from Croatia and the building up of a new state structure were justified by Croatia's ambitions to separate from Yugoslavia.²⁶ At the beginning, the territory of the 'Republic of Serbian Krajina' encompassed only the immediate region of Knin.

The support of Belgrade for the Krajina rebels, as fighters for the 'Serbian cause' in Yugoslavia, had meanwhile been growing constantly. In return, the Serbian regime in Belgrade had gained much control over the aims and strategies of the Krajina Serbian insurgents. This was also the time when so-called 'volunteers', different heavily armed paramilitary individuals and groups from Serbia and other Yugoslav regions, increased their presence in the Krajina.

Further developments in Krajina in the spring and summer of 1991, can be characterised by two combined processes: the mobilisation and the regulation of violence. As a reaction to individual acts of violence – some of which were strategically calculated, others seemingly 'unplanned' – an increasing part of the population was won over to support the use of force. This was the time of nationalistic hard-liners and extremists claiming radical solutions. Conciliatory politicians, arguing for negotiations and non-violent solutions, rapidly lost influence. The regional authorities began to tolerate acts of violence against members of the other ethnic group. Until the escalation into war in June 1991 this development was reflected in public discussions associated with a series of bloody clashes. They dominated the media on both sides and helped to unify public opinion. Fierce fighting broke out between special forces of the Krajina Serbian and the Croatian police for the control of strategic centres.

On 2 and 3 March 1991 in the ethnically mixed town of Pakrac in western Slavonia, Krajina Serbian special forces came into the town, took over a police station and disarmed the sixteen Croatian policemen stationed there. The following night in a large-scale police operation, Croatian special police forces stormed the police building and forced out the Krajina Serbian forces (Borba 1991; *Politika* 1991; *Vjesnik* 1991a).

In Plitvice, a thinly populated tourist area about 150 km south-west of Zagreb, a similar occurrence ended with the first casualties of the conflict. In the fighting, one soldier on each side was killed and at least twenty fighters were very seriously injured. The JNA intervened on the order of the Yugoslav state presidium. JNA troops separated the fighting forces and installed a buffer zone between them. In the following weeks, the JNA reinforced its presence in the region and grew in importance (*Profil* 1991; *Vjesnik* 1991b).

As a consequence of these strategic violent events more soldiers and

weapons were sent to all areas of conflict. Smaller clashes, which followed in several places, had an effect on the conflict constellation in the region as a whole. Consequently the Croatian population in ethnically mixed or in the vicinity of predominantly Serbian areas 'sensed' danger and organised a defence against attacks from the 'Serbian terrorists' (*Danas* 1991a). Barricades were built and patrols organised. The same happened in the predominantly Serbian villages in Croatia outside the territory of the Republic of Serbian Krajina.

Particularly affected by this national panic were the Serbian or ethnically mixed villages in eastern Slavonia. One of these villages, Borovo selo, became the place where the next significant violent event broke out in early May 1991. After a series of smaller incidents – initially provoked by nationalistic HDZ radicals – two Croatian policemen were detained in the village. Two buses full of Croatian policemen moved into the village of Borovo selo to 'free' their colleagues. Their arrival had been expected and a large number of Serbian fighters waited in ambush, among them were also 'volunteers' from the Chetnik movement of the ultra-nationalist Vojislav Seselj in Serbia. They began to fire on the buses. Twelve Croatian policemen were killed and more than twenty seriously injured. The number of Serbian fighters killed has not been made public (Borba 1990; *Danas* 1990: 7–9; *Der Standard* 1990: 3, Silber and Little 1995: 158–160).

After the incident at Borovo selo was publicised, the conflict took on a new dimension. The dead bodies of the policemen were omnipresent in the Croatian media. The Serbs were collectively referred to as Chetniks or terrorists and were declared to be enemies of the Croatian state. Reciprocally, on the Serbian side, Croats were collectively labelled as 'Ustasha who were again attacking Serbian villages' and were proclaimed enemies of the Serbian people. Consequently, the chances for initiatives to reach some kind of non-violent compromise were enormously diminished.

When the war began in Croatia at the end of June 1991, after Croatia's declaration of independence and with a large military offensive from the Krajina Serbs, long-lasting preparations on both sides had preceded this escalation of violence. Supported and/or directed by their allies, the JNA as well as nationalistic volunteer militias from Serbia, the Krajina Serbian troops tried to take over those parts of Croatia they claimed as Serbian and to successively expel the Croatian population. To get an impression of the dimensions of the potential for war which was built up by the warring factions, one need only look at the list of combat troops, which were fighting each other soon after the outbreak of war.²⁷

At that time the militia of the 'Republic of Serbian Krajina' had, according to Milan Martić, 35,000 men under arms. The 'Knindze', the so-called army of the Krajina, which had partly developed out of the former territorial defence, consisted of hundreds of combat units. In addition volunteers and paramilitary units from Serbia (Cetniks, Arkanovci, etc.) also played an important role in the fighting.

The official size of the JNA in Croatia was 60,000–70,000 soldiers (it is difficult to estimate how many Croatian soldiers left the army before or after the fighting started). In addition about 20,000–25,000 JNA soldiers were transferred from Slovenia to Croatia and 10,000–15,000 were stationed at the Serbian and Bosnian borders with Croatia.

The Croatian police (Mupovci) consisted, with their regular and reservist members, of 45,000 men, the 'Zbor narodne garde' (new Croatian army), had about 30,000 soldiers but at that time still limited resources of arms. In addition, many armed civilians and several paramilitary units were also involved in the fighting.

Conclusion

This analysis has tried to show why, after the decade-long, basically harmonious, everyday inter-ethnic life of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, the 'Balvan revolution' took place in the Krajina region in the summer of 1990, and why in the course of the following year this rather amateur local revolt was able to escalate into a brutal war between Serbs and Croats.

The first section focused on the popularisation and institutionalisation of boundary-maintenance mechanisms in Croatia in 1990. The HDZ, which formed the government after the first free multi-party elections in Croatia, increasingly integrated its nationalistic position into the newly developing post-socialist state machinery. Political antagonisms, which in the breakdown of the socialist system and the following temporary power vacuum seemed inevitable, aroused national conflicts between Croats and Serbs about the form and character of the new institutions of the developing national state. These conflicts became manifest in serious disputes over the character of the new constitution and new power relations within the police. The emerging leaders of the Serbian population in Croatia feared that the takeover of the government by the Croatian nationalistic HDZ would be followed by discrimination against Serbs. They passionately demanded explicit acknowledgements of their special claims. The Croat population feared a Belgrade-organised intervention of the JNA against the new democratically elected first post-socialist government in Croatia. It was feared that this would be accompanied by a wave of repression and a return to the socialist one-party system.

Soon two deeply antagonistic positions on the 'national question' were confronting each other in political life. Masses of the Serbian, as well as the Croatian, population could in this way be won over to radical nationalistic positions. In the beginning these positions were abstract, but slowly they began to become relevant in everyday life.

In the second section, the readiness of the Serbian people in the region around Knin to participate in the so-called 'Balvan revolution' was discussed. It

was shown that the people in Krajina explained their participation in the rebellion as a necessary and inevitable act of self-defence for the protection of their rights, their property, and even their lives which they felt were threatened by Croatian extremists and by the newly elected Croatian authorities. But these feelings of being threatened and the closely connected readiness to use violence were very much caused by specific discourses of conflict scenarios and programmed violent incidents, which were often produced by political entrepreneurs.

Political leaders, intellectuals and the media not only on the Serbian, but also on the Croatian side, projected historical conflicts between Croats and Serbs into the developing situation. By this means, they were very successful in stirring up fear among the people, which pushed them to an even greater degree towards confrontational national self-definitions and prepared them for violence. In this constellation, the discursive projection and instrumentation of specific cultural images of virility, especially of traditional male role expectations, became one of the important aspects in mobilising the people for conflict. The images were taken partly from the perceived heroic history of Krajina society. This analysis of the escalation of violence has also shown the difficulty in finding the dividing line between the voluntary mobilisation of the population and the sequential social-role expectations in the use of force.

It has to be stressed that the strategic use of force and violence were probably the most important means of winning over the people to a confrontational mode that promoted the ensuing conflict. The strategic use of violence was able to powerfully transform the interpretation of the conflict in the respective societies.

However, that the 'Balvan revolution' of the Krajina Serbs could lead within several months to a large-scale war was, besides the strategic employment of violence, predominantly a consequence of the instrumentalisation of the regional conflict into a trans-regional confrontation of interest. The third section dealt with this decisive element. Only the accumulation of a potential for warfare, i.e. the necessary supplies of weapons, trained soldiers, the maintenance of a functioning war economy, and, further, the evolution of an institutional infrastructure, made it possible that this local conflict could develop into a war. Initiatives from outside, for the Krajina Serbs, especially from Serbia and from the now Serbian-dominated JNA, were of crucial importance in the outbreak of war in the Krajina region in Croatia.

NOTES

- 1 Many colleagues helped us with their comments and criticisms in the writing of this chapter. We are especially grateful to Joel M. Halpern for his work on the final draft.
- 2 On the elections, see Grdesic *et al.* (1991) and Siber (1997); for analysis on the background to the new political elite, see Dejan (1993) and Zakosek (1998a).
- 3 In the 1990 election the great majority of Serbs in Croatia did not vote for the Serbian nationalistic SDS, which had candidates in only a few electoral districts. Instead they voted for the former Communist Party, which ran under the new name SDP-SKH. For details of

- the election results, including regional differences, see *Vjesnik* (1990a). Some 581,663 or 12 per cent of the 4,784,265 people living in Croatia in 1991 were ethnic Serbs (according to the population census of 1991), see *Republički zavod za statistiku* (1992: 9).
- 4 The Sahovnica has been the symbol for the kingdom of Croatia since the Middle Ages. From 1102 this kingdom was ruled by the kings of Hungary and from 1526 it was part of the Habsburg Empire. Between 1941 and 1945 the Sahovnica became the official flag of the first Croatian national state, the 'Independent State of Croatia' (NDH). In the Communist post-war period this flag was therefore also seen as a symbol for this Second World War Croatian quisling state.
 - 5 The Second World War 'Independent State of Croatia' was governed by the fascist Croat-centric Ustasha movement. Between 1941 and 1945 mass persecution, expulsion and murder made hundreds of thousands Serbs victims of the Croatian Ustasha state (which at that time also encompassed Bosnia-Herzegovina).
 - 6 For the background of the strong attachment of Croatian Serbs to the Communist Party in the post-war period see Roksandic (1991: 157).
 - 7 This mechanism is theoretically described in the articles of Nagel (1994), Neckel (1995) and Wimmer (1995). They point out that as soon as a state distributes resources by ethnic categories, or as soon as a group does not have the same access to citizens' rights and therefore is not able to access resources, the members of the group may try to become members of the privileged group or, if that is not possible, may postulate an ethnic identity which differs from the identity of the major nation. Ethnicity, respectively, nationality may win increasing importance very fast.
 - 8 Most of the interviews with Serbs from the Krajina quoted in this text were made by Carolin Leutloff in the course of fieldwork in Former Yugoslavia on identity aspects of Krajina-Serb refugees in 1996, one year after their flight from Croatia. For results of this research see Leutloff (1998).
 - 9 The 'Krajina' encompassed the region close to the north-west border of Bosnia, large parts of the northern Dalmatian hinterland, and the regions of Lika, Krbava, Kordun and Banija. Historically these territories belonged to the so-called 'Vojna Krajina', or 'military border', which was for centuries a multi-ethnic defence zone of the Austro-Hungarian Empire against the Ottomans, until it was dissolved and reintegrated into Croatia in 1881. In 1990 Croatian Serbs tried to ideologically re-establish the meaning of 'Krajina' (see, for example, Grandits and Promitzer 1997). See especially also n. 13.
 - 10 For theoretical input see Halbwachs (1985: 35): 'The national group I belong to was in the course of my life the scene of a special number of events from which I think that I would remember them, but which I only know from newspapers or from evidence of those who were actually involved in these events. These events take a special place in the memory of one nation. When I vitalise them again I am forced to fully rely on the memory of others, which does not complete my own memory, but which are the only source of what I want to remember.'
 - 11 For the dynamic of parallel existing perceptions of official and unofficial historicisations in Krajina, see Denich (1994b).
 - 12 Compare critical reflections concerning this matter, which draw attention to the Balkans in general, in Höpken (1997).
 - 13 In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the most southerly Croatian regions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which bordered with the Ottoman Empire were organised as a separate Military Border territory (the Croatian expression was 'Vojna krajina' or even 'Krajina'). The population was attracted to settle into this dangerous region by several privileges. In return they had, as border-men, the duty to defend the Military Border. Over the centuries the Military Border society functioned according to

- military needs. It was different to the neighbouring Croatian feudal regions; armed defence was a major criterion of social organisation and this gave its inhabitants a very special identity. Only after the dissolution of the Military Border system and after the reunification of the Military Border with Croatia in 1881 did these differences began to disappear. About the history of the Military Border and its society, see especially Kaser (1997). The population of the Military Border had a different confessional (orthodox and catholic) as well as ethnic background. But the orthodox and catholic border-men were unified in the same social structure for centuries. At the end of the nineteenth century after the dissolution of the Military Border these different backgrounds began to be transformed into national self-definitions. Compare in this context Promitzer (1998).
- 14 Compare the reflections in the context of symbolic systems by Bausinger (1990) and the concepts of Erdheim (1992: 201–270).
 - 15 With respect to the modernisation of patriarchal structures in former Yugoslavia in the period after the Second World War see especially the works of Joel Halpern, e.g. Halpern (1967, 1980).
 - 16 For the connection between the state and actors level in ethnic conflicts, see Elwert and Gosztonyi (forthcoming).
 - 17 The confrontational agitation of the political entrepreneurs (Babic, Martic) may have already started after agreements with the leadership of JNA. At this point one may ask if the JNA was acting according to 'instructions', possibly from Milosevic. It can only be speculated if the leaders in Krajina only realised the possibility of the situation escalating and took advantage of it, or if the conflict was stirred up after agreement on plans developed in Belgrade.
 - 18 For the media war, see the published round table discussions of Croatian and Serbian intellectuals in Zagreb in 1993 during the war in *Erasmus* (1994). See also the contributions on the 'war of the media' in Popov (1996).
 - 19 The news magazine *Profil* (1990) describes the atmosphere of the situation at the end of September–beginning of October: 'During Friday night Serbs in different villages of Croatia attacked police stations to arm themselves. In the following hours Croatian special police forces tried to collect the arms in the police stations to prevent them from being taken by militant Serbs. Protests in Petrinja, Glina and Dvor na Uni were quashed by heavily armed Croatian police forces with tear-gas and truncheons . . . After two policemen were hurt on Wednesday, 100,000 Croats demonstrated in the streets of Split, screaming: "give us weapons".'
 - 20 See here also the detailed report of the Croatian Defence Minister of 1990–91: Spegelj (1999) and Tus (1999). For the point of view of the JNA command, see the memoirs of the Yugoslav defence minister of 1991 Kadijevic (1993).
 - 21 The territorial defence forces (Teritorijalna odbrana–TO), a people's militia in reserve, were, along with the police forces, under the command of the individual republics of Yugoslavia. However, they were mostly disarmed during a broad action of the JNA in May 1990.
 - 22 Nationality was of course very important in the recruitment of soldiers in the very beginning of this process. That the Croatian military forces were very much based on party membership was later openly declared in an interview by Spegelj, the former Minister of Defence. To give an example, during the establishment of military forces in Slavonia, about 40 per cent were members of HDZ, 30 per cent members of other Croatian parties and another 30 per cent did not belong to any party (Promitzer 1991: 20). After the HDZ assumed power, it was very difficult, if not to say impossible, for police forces of Serbian ethnicity to start a career; some policemen of Serb ethnicity were dismissed from their duties. In communist times, belonging to the Serb ethnic group had on the contrary been a decidedly significant advantage.

- 23 See the political memoirs of the last Serbian and the last Croatian president of the Yugoslav state presidium of that year; both were at that time directly involved (Jovic 1995; Mesic 1992). At that time, international pressure was exerted on Kadijevic to refrain from the use of violence (Kadijevic 1993).
- 24 This was described in detail by the then Milosevic protégé and at that time Serbian representative on the Yugoslav State committee, Borisav Jovic, in a TV interview in the documentary 'Bruderkrieg' (BBC/ORF-TV 1996).
- 25 This happened on the basis of a referendum which was organised by the SDS in the second half of August. This referendum was held in Croatian communities with a Serbian majority and in those districts with a significant Serbian population share. It was announced that 560,000 voted for Serbian autonomy, while only 144 voted against it. At the same time the Serbian population was asked to resist in all ways the 'Terror of the Ustasha-like administrations' (*Archiv der Gegenwart* 1990: 35182).
- 26 On 21 December 1990 the new Croatian constitution was agreed in the Croatian Sabor. In it, the resignation of Croatia from the Yugoslav Federation and the announcement of independence were to be proclaimed, as soon as two-thirds of its members approved and a majority of voters in Croatia agreed to this action in a referendum.
- 27 During the escalation of war in July 1991, a detailed map of the towns and villages in which fighting took place was created by the Serbian opposition weekly magazine *Vreme*. Compiled by a military expert, it encompassed a detailed list of armed forces which were engaged in the fighting in Croatia (*Vreme* 1991: 4–5). Another detailed military expert estimate of the number of troops mobilised against each other can be found in *Danas* (1991b: 18–19).

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